The Tanaka Family Reincarnates

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Choco

Illustrator: kaworu




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Lunchtime with friends!
Francesca Delacour
Catherine Simmons
Caitlyn Simmons
Marion Bell
Arthur Bell
Joshua Rothschild


"THE KITTIES SAID THEY'D TAKE US ALL THE WAY TO THE REAR ENTRANCE!"
"MROWR!"
The three siblings set off to the public district to find clues about who attacked Joshua's store!
Cat: Guan
Cat: General Kongming
Cat: Liu
Detective Tanakas, move out!

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CHARACTERS

THE TANAKAS/STEWARTS



Kazushi/Leonard

The Tanaka Family patriarch. Currently the lord of a remote region, his monster hunting skills are second to none. His sewing skills may well be a national treasure. In both lives, he's doted excessively on his daughter.



Yoriko/Melsa

Gifted with brains and beauty, Melsa is the manager of the whole family. Her father was a duke, and she's **supposed** to be the one who keeps the family in check. Her goal in this life is to someday see grandchildren.



Wataru/George

The eldest child of the Tanaka household. In this world, he is training as a monster hunter. He's his father's intended successor, but he must graduate from school first. His greatest obstacle at the moment is understanding his professors' lectures.



Minato/Emma

The Tanaka family's middle child. A researcher who loves bugs. While she was able to raise silkworms to enormous sizes to help the family's financial prospects, she is also usually the cause of any trouble the family runs into.



Heita/William

The Tanaka family's youngest child. He's the smartest of the three siblings, and also is his sister's errand-boy. Though he was reincarnated as a handsome young boy, he still suffers from the loliconosis he had in his previous life. All the girls he likes are more attracted to his older brother.



Kongming (Zhuge Liang Tanaka)

A calico cat who is especially attached to Emma (Minato). She reincarnated and grew to a massive size to protect Minato, and now she is the fluffiest ever. Her favorite food is the cucumbers she gets to eat in midsummer.



Liu (Liu Bei Tanaka)

A calico cat who is especially attached to William (Peyta). She has the power of foresight from her previous life and saw the future where the Tanaka family would reincarnate. Her favorite food is wet food.



Guan (Guan Yu Tanaka)

A calico cat who is especially attached to Emma (Minato). She reincarnated and grew to a massive size to protect Minato, and now she is the fluffiest ever. Her favorite food is the cucumbers she gets to eat in midsummer.



Zhang (Zhang Fei Tanaka)

A white cat who is especially attached to Leonard (Kazushi). His favorite spot is on Leonard's stomach. He's a sweet and easygoing long-haired cat. His face is very Japanese. His favorite food is lickable kitty treats.



Francesca Delacour

A duchess whose family supports the firstborn prince. She is in charge of performing "baptisms" on his behalf each year.



Catherine Simmons
Caitlyn Simmons

Twins from the Simmons region, an island city that is a hub of foreign trade and boasts the largest port in the kingdom. They do everything together.



Marion Bell

A duchess from the esteemed Bell family, who have been knights for generations. She is very popular with the girls at school.



Arthur Bell

Marion's older brother. He attends school as Prince Edward's personal guard.



Charles Constantine Royale

The current ruling king. A battle-hungry man who puts himself on the frontlines of any fight. A rugged and muscular silver fox (according to Emma).



Rose Alicia Royale

Royal concubine. She met the Tanakas at a party and is close enough with them that they sometimes stay over at her house. A more beautiful woman has never existed.



Edward Tholus Royale

The second-born prince. Victim of Emma's angelic smile. He's very busy with fulfilling both his royal duties and schoolwork.



Jadwiga Hall Royale

The first-born princess. Friends with Emma. She adores George for being so nice. William, on the other hand… She's very serious about playtime (especially when playing house).



Robert Lance

Son of the Lance family, of the four great duke households. He has royal blood in his veins. A selfish boy who brags about his own lineage.



Joshua Rothschild

Son of the merchant who sells the Stewart family's silk. He loves Emma so much it can drive him mad sometimes, but he's also an exceptional merchant like his father. He bought a peerage so he could attend the same school as Emma.



Harold

Lives in the slums with all the orphaned children. An artsy hipster-type heartthrob (according to Emma).

Huey

A boy who lives in the slums.

Chapter 28: The Capital at Last

A single carriage rumbled into the capital in the middle of the night. The street was pitch-black, as the lights in town had been extinguished and the moon was hidden behind the clouds. The carriage flew by like a gust of wind, turning from the main street onto a smaller road, then coming to a stop before the gates of a manor.

"Mrowr!" The horse drawing the carriage let out a strange cry as if to let the carriage's inhabitants know they'd arrived…except the beast wasn't a horse. It was a massive cat with fur black enough to blend into the night.

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"Sis, I am *begging* you to *give it a rest already*!" William Stewart moaned the phrase that had grown so common, it might as well have become his catchphrase.

"Oh, calm down, William. We made it in time, didn't we?" his elder sister Emma responded shamelessly.

"*Sure*, but only because we decided to have the cats pull the carriage *in the middle of the night*!" William groaned as he recalled their nightmarish journey. They'd nearly given up on a punctual arrival until someone had suggested letting the cats, with their superior night vision, pull the carriage through the darkness. From then on, they'd traveled day and night with hardly any rest at all, and had just *barely* managed to reach the capital in time.

They'd known it would be a long journey from the border region of Pallas, but under normal circumstances they would have arrived in the capital several days ago. They'd even left early to give themselves plenty of leeway, yet somehow it had turned into a mystical adventure of epic proportions that had them arriving with only one night to rest before they would have to hit the ground running.

"I wouldn't call this 'on time.' Do you really think we'd be up this early setting up the bugs' nests if that were true?" George, the oldest, interjected when he overheard his siblings' bickering.

If everything had gone as planned, they might have gotten to the capital in time to attend some afternoon and evening parties, thus getting to know some of the students at the school they'd be attending that year, learning about the classes they'd be taking, and most importantly, getting accustomed to the rules and conduct of high society.

Instead, all they'd "made it in time" for was a party that would be hosted that night by the royal family, celebrating the start of the school year. Unfortunately, even for this single event they still had a problem: Emma had no dress.

Who was it who'd said they could just deal with it when they got to the capital? How had no one foreseen them being this late in the first place? They had the very Herald of Hullabaloos herself in their family, and they should have expected the move would get her worked into a tizzy. They weren't even supposed to *need* a nest for the insects, but she'd suddenly pitched the idea that morning, despite the fact that she'd had a carriage custom-made for her bugs. All one had to do was remove the wheels to make a perfectly acceptable insect hut. So what had happened on the way to the capital? Or more specifically *what* had *Emma* done to cause all this?

Emma was Emma. So obviously, she'd collected a massive quantity of *new insects* on their journey.

"Look, if there's a bug I can't find in Pallas, I've gotta add it to my collection so I can observe it!"

Emma was *obsessed* with bugs. There was no way she'd act like a well-mannered lady and suppress that love as they traveled. She'd heard there were rare butterflies in the west, so she'd grabbed her net. She'd heard there were giant earthworms swarming to the east, so she'd run off, shovel in hand. She was a problem child through and through.

The capital was directly north of Pallas. It should have been a straight shot from their home, but they'd had to keep zigzagging from east to west over and over again. Normally, her parents would have turned her down outright, but one look at the scar running from her face to her torso—the courtesy of a monster attack a year earlier—made it difficult for them to refuse her.

If their mother, Melsa, hadn't wisely sent the carriage with their servants and furniture ahead, they might not have even had their own "nest" ready. Their childhood friend, Joshua, had wanted to stay alongside them until the very end, but he had a

mountain of work waiting for him at the store he now managed, so he'd tearfully said his goodbyes to the family (mostly to Emma) and went on ahead as well.

So came the morning after their painstaking journey. If things had gone as planned, they would have been able to take a nice, long rest to recover, but now the whole family paid the price of the constant detours. Melsa was holding interviews for all the new servants they'd be hiring to work in their manor at the capital, on top of frantically managing all the various chores a new home demanded. Leonard was desperately trying to finish Emma's dress for that evening. The three siblings were running around like chickens with their heads cut off trying to take care of both the silkworms that were at the center of Pallas's exports *and* the swarms of bugs Emma had added along the way.

Despite all this labor, the Stewart family were true blue aristocrats—counts in charge of the border region called Pallas. They worked themselves to the bone from morning to night—a far cry from the typically idle elegance one expected from aristocrats, though they didn't seem aware of this idiosyncrasy.

The family's obliviousness was entirely due to the fact that they had once been a family in another world. Despite the odds, the Tanaka family had reincarnated together. In their previous life, they were a completely normal family. If you looked up the word "average" in the dictionary, the Tanakas would have been there. They'd all recovered the memories of their past lives after eating matsutake mushrooms that Emma had found growing in their yard about a year ago—the matsutake's natural deliciousness was just *that* transcendent.

The Tanakas, who were the most average of joes imaginable, had their work cut out for them in an aristocrat-laden area like the capital. The biggest problem was when their daughter Emma, who had always been a bit of an oddball, combined her memories with the Tanaka family's Minato. These days, trouble followed her every step. She'd become a problem child of the highest degree.

Wherever great detectives lived, there would be crimes.

In worlds where heroes were born, there would be great villains too.

And wherever Emma was, there would be trouble.

She'd wreaked havoc in the relatively isolated border region she called home, so it was practically a guarantee she'd do the

same in the kingdom's capital.

To add to their unusual situation, all of the cats that the Tanaka family had owned throughout their lives had foreseen this reincarnation, so they *also* reincarnated—albeit at a massive size—so the *whole* family could be reunited once more. At this moment, the cats were patrolling their new home. The Stewarts' manor in the capital was so very spacious that there was plenty of room for the cats to run about and find their own personal favorite spots.

"Lord George, Lady Emma, and Lord William!" Martha, Emma's personal maid, called from outside. "Lady Melsa is calling for you! She would like you to meet her in the west wing parlor when you reach a decent stopping point!" Martha had come with the family from Pallas as well, and she was not about to set one foot in the bug haven that was the new Emma's House, even if the space was originally intended for servant's quarters. Martha was *vital* to the Stewarts, as she was the only person other than Melsa who would ever scold Emma.

"Okay, Martha! Thank you for telling us!" all three siblings replied, then hurried through the rest of their work. Martha couldn't stop wondering what she was going to do with them—they were in the *capital* now. Normal aristocrats wouldn't thank their maids, and they wouldn't be caught dead taking care of insects, but nobody ever pointed this out to the Stewarts.

The silkworm larvae William and George were fervently rehoming were a massive fifty centimeters in length, but nobody ever mentioned how weird that was either. Truth be told, the two brothers were strange in their own right (unbeknownst to them), but Emma's weirdness tended to overshadow the boys'.

"Oh, actually, Martha! Which one's the west wing?"

"Every single part of our manor here is, like, way too big."

"I'd be fine with a four-and-a-half **tatami mat** bedroom, personally... Honestly, it'd be nice to live here in the servants' quarters instead!"

"You can say that again!"

The servants had all *just* finished telling the Stewart parents that they couldn't say such strange things. Martha was beside herself with worry over how reckless the family was being here in the capital.

"I'll draw you a map to the west wing. Just wait here."

"Thanks, Martha!" the three siblings replied in earnest. All

Martha could do was droop her shoulders over what handfuls they could be.

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The Tanakas held an emergency family meeting. Using the map Martha had drawn for them, the siblings finally found the west wing and gathered in the library. Melsa had been sure to assign work for all the servants to be sure the five of them were the only ones in that part of the building.

"So. We begin our lives in the capital now," Melsa began, every word dripping with grave importance. "What's more, tonight we face the real deal. We're attending a party hosted by the *royal family*. I take it you understand just how serious this is. Right, *Emma*?"

Emma was stuffing her face with a sandwich, which she now hurriedly gulped down. She'd been settling in after the move, checking everything in their new house, taking care of the bugs...she hadn't had a moment's rest since she'd gotten out of bed this morning, so she was eating her breakfast now.

"I'm *always* on top of things, mother. I know manners and etiquette aren't exactly my forte, but I *do* have the experience from my previous life. I was a perfectly functional member of society back then, wasn't I?!" Emma puffed out her cheeks in irritation as she attempted to refute her mother. Unfortunately, with her right cheek scarred from recklessly getting involved in a monster attack a year prior, her argument didn't hold much weight.

"Do you even hear yourself, Emma?"

"Seriously, do you not remember how much trouble you caused us on the way to the capital, sis?"

Both George and William had been *begging* her to just *stay put* for once. If she'd just been catching bugs, it wouldn't have set them back this far. But *every* time she stopped, trouble wasn't far behind, and her siblings were *always* the ones who would have to bear the brunt of the consequences of Emma's eccentricities.

"Now, now, there weren't any monsters along the way, so everything worked out in the end," Leonard said. He was *always* extra soft on his daughter, so he was quick to back her up. Yet even as he did so, his hands worked at the speed of light to finish the embroidery on Emma's dress for that evening.

“Don’t be naive, Leonard!” Melsa said with a scowl. “Humans are *far* more terrifying than any other foe we’ve faced. The constant undermining out of jealousy… They’ll hurt others with wanton abandon, attacking anyone who doesn’t fit in. And that goes *double* for this school with a bunch of immature children! It’s a terrible place!” Clearly some kind of awful memories had resurfaced in her mind.

“What kind of messed-up school life did our mother have?”

“School’s not *that* bad, is it?”

“Yeah, no, I think monsters are way scarier than school…”

Melsa had come from a duke’s family in the capital, but she apparently hadn’t had it as easy as they’d thought. The three siblings were all starting to get a lot more nervous now.

“So listen up! First rule is that you don’t stand out. Second rule is that you don’t stand out. Third and fourth rules? *Don’t stand out.* And your fifth rule… DO. NOT. STAND. OUT.” The Tanakas’ goal in the capital was to lay low, and Melsa was making *damn* sure that they knew it. “Oh, and George? You *will* pass your monster studies courses. I don’t care how much you hate studying. You’re the one to carry on our family name, you know.”

“Yes, mother…” One could not take over a border region without passing their monster studies courses. It was the most difficult of all the conditions to take over land. George could only answer weakly, likely because he had no confidence he could succeed in this endeavor.

“Oh, and I am *all* for you three getting married in school. If you meet the right person, then I expect you to go for it. I’m more than happy to accept a shotgun wedding or an accidental pregnancy.”

“Mother, *ew*!”

Their mother’s desire to see grandchildren hadn’t budged in the slightest since they’d been reincarnated. But the family’s ultimate goal in the capital was *not to stand out*.

Chapter 29: The Usual High-Society Tropes

The party celebrating the beginning of the school year was hosted by the royal family themselves. The Stewart siblings would soon begin their school lives as well, which meant that they were on the invite list. William and George helped Emma off the carriage and escorted her to their first social event in the capital. She was clad entirely in white Emma silk that had been meticulously embroidered with custom purple thread, and her head was covered with a light veil to hide the scars on her face. While more revealing dresses had been the trend in the capital for years, Emma's dress was the polar opposite. Sadly for her, her chest seemed to be a bit of a late bloomer, and since she was quite gangly all over, she didn't have much to show off anyway.

George and William wore black formalwear with shirts featuring the same purple embroidery as on Emma's ensemble. Since the royal family was hosting, the boys also wore single-shouldered capelets. George had gotten taller over the past year, really growing into the sophisticated look of his formalwear. William was still the same dazzling pretty boy he'd always been.

As long as they kept their mouths shut, the three of them looked like the beautiful aristocrats they were meant to be—as long as they kept their mouths shut.

When they entered the reception hall where the party was being held, George went to look for a drink, William went off to find some friends from nearby regions, and for a moment, Emma was left on her own. Normally, they never would have left her side, but it was their first party in the capital, so they were out of their element.

But there was no way disaster *wouldn't* strike when Emma, the Harbinger of Hubbubs, was by herself.

Splash!

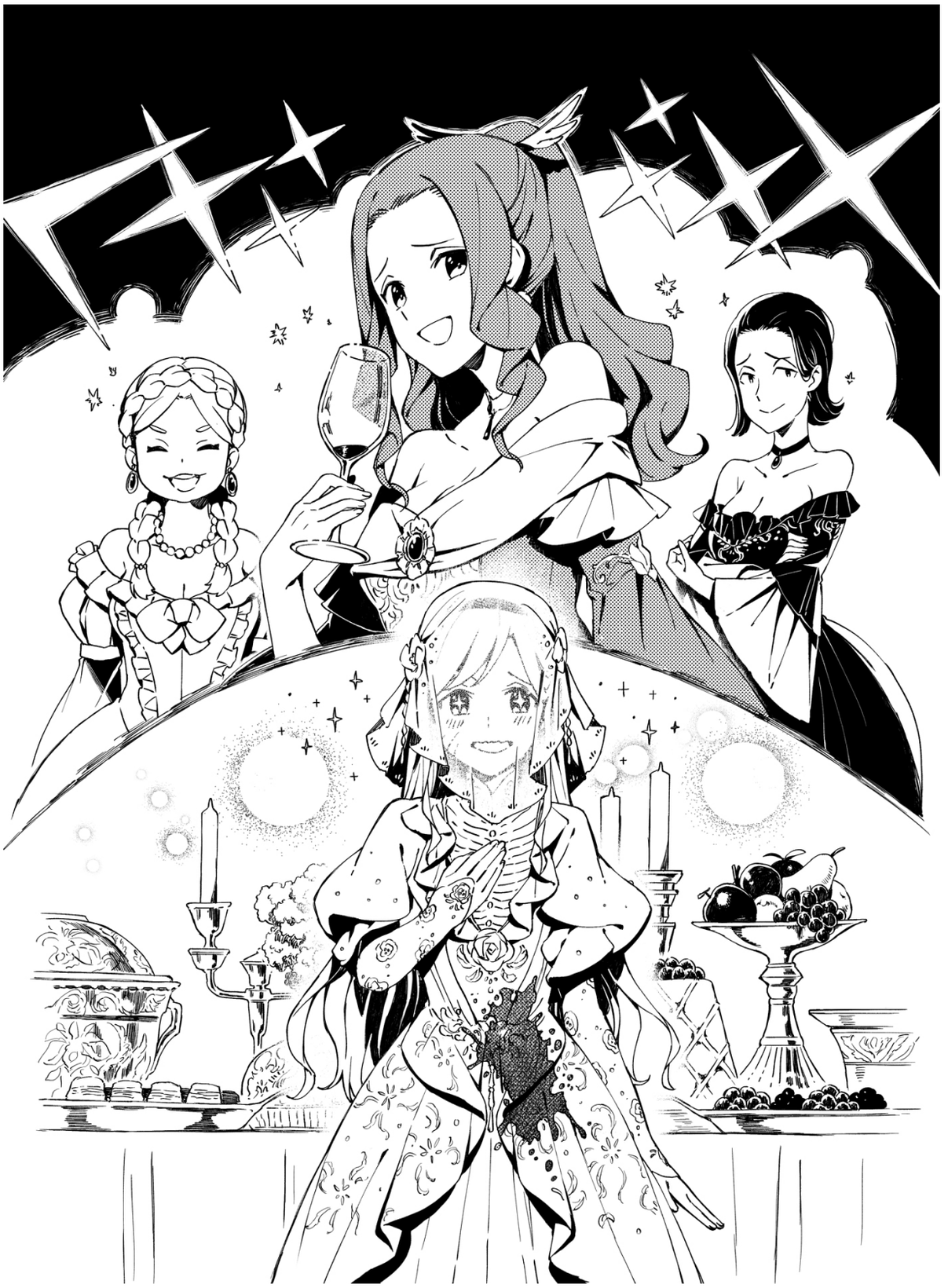
As though she'd been waiting for a moment when Emma was alone and spacing out, one of the ladies spilled her wine on Emma's dress.

"Deary me, I'm ever so sorry." Despite her words, the lady had a very *unsorry* grin on her face as she blocked Emma's path. About two meters behind her, a slightly chubby girl and a tall,

skinny girl watched the scene with sneers on their faces.

Emma *knew* this scenario. This was just like the scenes in the books she'd read in her past life where someone was accosted by the "villainess" character. She couldn't hide the excitement on her face. She was all too familiar with the concept of a girl getting wine purposely spilled on her dress at her first party, and it took all her strength to keep the big fat grin off her face.

The girl with the empty glass before her had such a beautiful smile, yet Emma thought she saw a hint of sadness in it too.



One would have expected the other partygoers to have been surprised by an incident like this before the festivities had even begun, but most of them seemed to be ignoring it. Some looked resigned and others appeared rather annoyed.

As this event was meant to celebrate the start of a school year, all of the guests were students. While there *were* adults who could have intervened, it was as though everyone had agreed ahead of time to just act like they didn't see it at all. Considering Melsa had explicitly told her not to stand out, Emma was seriously grateful for that reaction.

Maybe this is just something that happens every year? Everyone's reaction was so unnaturally cold, Emma felt like that had to be the case. As though to prove that very point, with a practiced movement, one of the waiters handed Emma a cloth to blot her dress.

"Oooh, thank you so much! That's very kind of you!" Emma thanked the waiter before crouching down to pat the stain at her feet on the carpet, completely ignoring the state of her dress.

"Wha…?" Emma's completely unexpected reaction elicited confused murmurs from those around her.

Even Lady Francesca Delacour, the girl who had splashed the wine on Emma, was standing agape in shock. "Are you *stupid*?" The most important thing to Emma should have been her dress. A royal party was meant to be an aristocratic lady's big moment. A lady could hardly make a good impression with a dress covered in wine, yet this girl wasn't wailing or crying, just painstakingly wiping the carpet instead. Francesca couldn't fathom this.

Even the servers, who normally kept a cool head, blanched at this unusual behavior and tried to get Emma to stand. There wasn't an aristocrat alive who cared more about the carpet than her own dress. Normally, the victim of such an attack would be wiping at their dress in a panic when they saw the red stain, then run home sobbing, but none of that was happening now.

This was a "baptism" from supporters of the firstborn prince that was familiar to those in the capital. It was essentially a quick, hazing ritual that would start and end before the royal family arrived. Many of the firstborn prince's supporters were people of high status, so all the poor ladies on the receiving end of this "baptism" could do was suck it up and cry themselves to sleep about it. Every year, they targeted the ladies of families

who supported the second-born prince. Their victims would either wind up leaving the party in tears or huddle together in a group, refusing to be caught alone.

Considering Emma had just been standing there spacing out, she made an obvious target. Whether the Stewarts knew it or not, rumors had spread across the capital that they were at the head of the second-born prince's supporters. That was plenty enough reason for them to be singled out. In fact, they were the favored targets.

"Did you hear me? Are you stupid or what?" Lady Francesca Delacour asked again, empty glass still clutched in one hand. Emma was still gently patting the stained area of the carpet clean.

Francesca was growing irritated by the girl's behavior, which was so unlike that of her other victims. While they certainly still had plenty of time before the royal family arrived, she wanted to finish this and retreat as quickly as possible. Speed was key in the "baptism." They *had* to start and finish it before the royal family arrived. If they were caught, there was no doubt even the highest-class aristocrat would be subject to severe punishment. Especially since it was said that the current king despised giving such insolent families special treatment.

Francesca was speaking as venomously as she possibly could, so why wouldn't this girl cry already? Emma had a veil on, so Francesca couldn't see her expression. Lady Francesca was growing impatient and annoyed that things weren't going the way they were supposed to, but more than that, she was growing anxious. She had never encountered a lady like this.

"Oh my gosh!"

"Emma, are you all right?"

"Did something happen, Emma?"

"What happened, Emma?"

Suddenly, a bunch of lords crowded between Emma and Francesca. Most of them were from the countryside and not part of any particular faction. They were all from the regions around Pallas, thus they had regularly attended the Stewart family's tea parties in the past year.

Apparently, even here she continued to be the center of everyone's attention, as she had been at the tea parties. After Emma had been injured in the monster attack, the lords seemed to see her as more delicate and frail than ever before, and it sent

their protective instincts into overdrive. Because they had this bizarre viewpoint, when they saw Emma crouching down to clean the carpet, they instead thought she was about to pass out from anemia. This was bad news.

"I'm just fine. Could we maybe have this conversation a bit quieter, please?" Emma placed a finger over her veil and shushed all the worried lords around her, desperately trying to placate them. Emma's mother had lectured her for hours on end telling her not to cause a scene, and these lords were certainly not helping. Seeing all of their concerned expressions, she felt a cold sweat roll down her cheek and hoped this wouldn't get back to her mother. There had to be a way they could resolve this peacefully. Calmly. Without standing out. Right?

"I-I think you must all have the wrong idea! I accidentally spilled my wine on her, but I was sure to apologize!" Francesca raised her voice. At the sight of such sudden reinforcements, she was starting to lose her cool.

Nobody had ever come to the rescue of anyone she'd "baptized" before. No matter—she'd just say she accidentally spilled her wine and apologized and everyone would just let it go.

But these lords were all from distant lands around the Pallas region, so they'd been completely unaware of this ritual and acted differently from all the other guests. To them, Emma was a shy, sweet girl whom they'd jump to protect at any opportunity, so their reaction had been quick as lightning.

However, Francesca's statement had them gulping for a completely *different* reason. They were very clearly shocked, and some were even grimacing.

"Y-You what...?"

Francesca's resolve started to crack at the lords' collective reaction.

"You spilled wine on *Emma's* dress?"

"On a *Stewart's* dress?"

"How much would someone have to pay for that...?"

"If it's one of Lady Emma's dresses, then it's definitely Emma silk, right? So even a hundred gold wouldn't be enough...would it?"

The lords no longer looked concerned for Emma. They instead looked at Francesca with pity.

As soon as she heard the words "Emma silk," Francesca went

pale. Emma silk was the finest silk from the Pallas region, the Stewart family's land.

"I-I apologized, though!" Francesca was sweating now. Even if she *had* a hundred gold, it wasn't the kind of thing she could just hand over.

"Is something the matter?" Joshua, an old friend of the Stewart siblings approached the commotion, having arrived late. He was the son of a wealthy merchant who had just spent an enormous sum to gain a baron's title so he could attend school with the Stewart siblings. He'd had a massive growth spurt over the last year, and the exercise he put in had given him a nicely toned body. He was no longer the spindly boy he used to be.

When they heard Joshua's voice, George and William finally realized that something had happened and came running.

"J-Joshua! Perfect timing! Do you know how much gold Emma's dress is worth?" One of the lords approached Joshua, clearly wanting to know the terrifying truth.

Joshua, who had set up a veritable information network around the kingdom, took one look at the stained cloth in Emma's hand and the expressions on Francesca's and the lords' faces and knew exactly what had happened.

"Sis, *how* many times did mother tell you not to cause a scene...?" William sighed as he started wiping down Emma's dress with a handkerchief.

"Lord William, this was not Lady Emma's doing. In fact, *you two* are to blame for letting her out of your sight!" Joshua's forgiveness toward Emma's behavior had no limits.

Joshua's attitude implied he was perfectly aware of the firstborn prince's faction and their "baptisms," and with the terrifying cost of paying for repairs of Emma silk, Francesca realized that she had completely lost control of the situation. While all this was happening, more and more guests gathered in the parlor.

"I-I should take my leave now." Realizing it would not be prudent to stand out any longer, Francesca turned to leave, when she noticed a stir among the guests. When she looked to see what all the fuss was about, she found the second-born prince of the kingdom, Edward Tholus Royale.

Normally, the royal family didn't appear until after all the guests had arrived, but for some strange reason the second-born prince had entered earlier than expected. The guests all

bowed their heads to him and he held up a hand to tell them to be at ease. He took a look over the crowd, then headed straight toward Francesca and the Stewarts. The guests cleared a path for the prince as he approached. Francesca had lost her chance to escape, and all she could do was bow to the prince as he made a beeline for them.

How long had he been there? Where did he even come from? How much did he see? Francesca bit her lip in dismay at her terrible luck. The Stewarts, Joshua, and the two Pallas lords lowered their heads as well.

"Lady Francesca Delacour," the prince coldly addressed her. "Would you care to explain this commotion? I'd heard rumors that you were responsible for harassing women of lesser means. Might they be true?"

The prince had an icy stare and the most beautiful black hair. Over the past year, he'd put in an enormous amount of work to become a man worthy of Emma's affections. He'd begun to earnestly engage with others and actively fulfill his public duties. Even the king was impressed by the prince's self-improvement.

The second-born prince had heard rumors about the "baptisms" that supporters of the firstborn prince had been performing. He'd never even wanted to *be* king, but people had been forming these factions and bickering regardless. Frankly, he was getting sick of it. After hearing that this ritual happened every year, he decided he was going to take matters into his own hands.

"I-I have no idea what you might be talking about, Your Highness."

It was obvious what was going on here, yet Francesca still tried to make excuses for herself. The prince was filled with disgust.

There was a bright red stain on the carpet near the quiet girl to Francesca's side, who had been keeping her head down. Her dress must have been in a much worse state than the carpet below her.

"Are you all right? I'll have some dresses prepared for you at the castle, so you can go get changed there." The prince felt awful thinking this poor lady would no longer be able to attend the party. She had a thin veil over her face, so he couldn't quite make out her expression. Her dress had a simple yet stylish design with incredible embroidery. It was only natural she'd be

too shocked to speak.

"Oh, don't worry about me, Your Highness. This dress is waterproof!"

Prince Edward's heart leaped at the familiar, gentle voice. It was the voice of the girl he'd longed to hear all year. "Is that you, Emma?" He knelt down to get a better look at the girl's face. She flipped the left side of her veil up and grinned at him in response.

"It's been a while, Your Highness."

The prince felt like he could get lost in those emerald eyes of hers. His face softened, and he answered her with a smile of his own. "Indeed. It certainly has, Emma."

The prince's gentleness took everyone's breath away. Nobody in this world had ever seen the prince with such a warm, tender expression.

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It had been a year since he'd seen her, and Emma was just as adorable as ever. He was taken aback by this unexpected reunion. Come to think of it, there had been rumors that the Stewart family led the second-born prince's supporters, so it was all too likely that Emma would have been one of the opposing faction's targets.

"Are you all right, Emma? That must have been horrible. If only I'd gotten here sooner..." He didn't bother with telling her to be at ease and instead held his hand out to help her stand.

"I'm completely fine, Your Highness. William wiped off my dress for me, so it's no trouble at all." Emma lifted the hem of her dress slightly to show there wasn't a single stain on it. Though the prince was distracted by the slight glimpse of Emma's slender legs (putting his heart in a vise grip), he somehow managed to hide his fluster and checked the dress as he was meant to. The carpet was a horrible mess, but there wasn't a single stain on Emma's outfit.

"Wonderful. It seems your dress is unscathed. That being said, it doesn't undo your actions, Lady Francesca. You can't argue your way out of this. Everyone here can testify that you were harassing Emma." The prince's voice dripped with venom as he chastised the young lady, whose head drooped in shame next to Emma.

Francesca couldn't stop trembling. Nobody was *ever* supposed to find out.

People in the capital had been saying that the Stewart family's daughter had gotten close to the second-born prince and was aggressively trying to get him to marry her. But everyone now saw that was nothing more than a rumor.

Nobody in the capital had ever seen the prince smile like that. So clearly, it was the *prince* who was infatuated with *her*. In fact, it was possible they'd become engaged without a public announcement. If the royal family discovered that Francesca had *deliberately* spilled wine on the prince's intended fiancée, it would put the entire Delacour family in jeopardy. She had no idea what she was supposed to do. She knew more than anyone else that she was at fault.

"Your Highness? Francesca wasn't harassing me. She just spilled her wine by accident. You don't need to be so angry with her." Hearing the prince treating Francesca as a common villainess, Emma stepped in to cover for her, despite obviously being the victim.

The prince had joined the fray to protect Emma, but now Emma was protecting Francesca instead. For some reason, the crowd watching this all came to the same misconstrued conclusion:

What a sweet, generous girl! Even after being bullied so terribly, she can't help but extend a helping hand to a terrified young lady… They say she's a shy, withdrawn girl, but here she is standing up for Lady Francesca in front of all these people! Surely, she must want to run away from such a crowd? She must be an angel! For such a delicate girl to withstand such suffering, only to sympathize with her own bully… What a strong, kindhearted girl! And that smile when she flipped up her veil was so, so adorable…

Once again, Emma's popularity skyrocketed and she didn't even know it.

"Emma… You don't need to stand up for her. I know how thoughtful you can be, but Lady Francesca has crossed the line." The prince glared at Francesca. Letting someone get away with such a heinous attack would only give them the space to lash out further.

"But I mean it, Your Highness. Lady Francesca really wasn't harassing me. Please don't punish her." Emma was genuinely shocked by the harsh glares the prince and the guests were all

sending Francesca's way. In fact, Emma really *hadn't* considered the incident bullying.

After they'd arrived at the party and George and William had left Emma on her own, she started to space out with no one to talk to. She wound up staring at Francesca as the girl ordered wine from a waiter.

God, what I wouldn't give for some alcohol right now... I wonder what wine tastes like in this world... Emma was reminiscing about the flavors of her favorite alcoholic beverages. The whole Tanaka family had loved to drink in their previous lives, and Minato had been especially fond of wine. Unfortunately, she hadn't had many friends who enjoyed wine like she had, so it was a bittersweet memory.

As Emma lost herself in these memories, Francesca firmly held out her glass to the waiter and told him the normal amount of wine wasn't enough for her. She had him pour until the glass was as full as possible and then a little bit more. Emma was positively *in awe*.

Minato had always been disappointed whenever glasses of wine were filled barely halfway. She'd fill her glass to the brim when drinking at home, but she'd never been able to bring herself to do it in public. She hadn't cared about the *smell*. She'd just wanted to drink it and drink lots of it. She'd known she was a straight-up boozer, but she had, in fact, cared about how she looked to others.

Yet Francesca had brazenly ordered the waiter to fill her glass all the way to the top with wine in front of all those people. This wasn't her home; this was a parlor in the castle at a party hosted by the *royal family*. People were supposed to humble themselves here, yet she was walking about with a satisfied look on her face and a wine glass that nearly spilled with every step.

Emma knew right then and there: Francesca was a girl who loved to drink. She *needed* to befriend her. Then, she could finally live out her dream of having a grand old wine-drinking sesh with a friend like she never had in her previous life. Just as Emma fantasized about this, Francesca grinned and started her approach.

Ah, birds of a feather... Alcohol really does bring people together. I never thought she'd approach me first! What should I talk to her about?

“I like a full-bodied wine! What about you?”

“I like both red and white wine. What about you?”

“Are you picky about the types of grapes or vineyards?”

“Oh, me? I’ll drink it as long as it’s tasty!”

Wait.

Oh no… I’m not old enough to drink in this world! Oh shoot, what am I gonna do?! What do I talk to her about now?! Alcohol? No, that’s out of the question now!

Once Emma had failed to “get the girl” in her daydream, she started to panic. With perfect timing, Francesca nearly bumped right into Emma and spilled the wine all over her.

Ah. Francesca must have been drinking before she even came over here. I’ve always thought this, but girls who love to drink pretty much always spill.

Most of Minato’s friends who’d drunk beer at her pace would get totally smashed. Spilling a drink was the least of their troubles. They’d be puking, crying, and sleeping it off without fail. Some of them had even spent nights on a park bench. One had fallen into a ditch and couldn’t move. Another had even tried to steal a Colonel Nyanders statue.

Pretty much any bar out there would have at least one table with a spilled glass or two.

Emma surmised, based on the steely expressions of those around her, that this woman must have gotten drunk and caused a scene every year. Sadly, the wine the woman specifically asked for more of had made a splash all over Emma’s dress instead. It felt like they were recreating the old trope in a light novel or manga, so Emma couldn’t help but laugh. Seeing the two other ladies standing close behind her, Emma could easily imagine them as the villainess’s sidekicks.

“Deary me, I’m ever so sorry.” Despite being so drunk she’d spilled her wine onto Emma, Francesca still apologized right away. She must have been enjoying the drink quite a bit, as she had a smile plastered on her face too.

Oh, she’s amazing! Giggly drunks are the best!

It would be quite a while before Emma was of drinking age, but she wanted more than anything to drink the night away with the woman in front of her.

Emma was enjoying the thought when a waiter softly offered a cloth to wipe her dress with. She thanked him, and when she looked down to wipe her dress, she noticed the stain spreading

on the carpet in front of her.

Oh, that could be bad.

Red wine stains would be nearly impossible to get out if they weren't dealt with immediately. Luckily, the dress Emma was wearing was a prototype that had been made with a blend that contained Violet's waterproof webbing to prevent stains. While that was lucky for her, it meant all the wine meant for her dress dripped onto the floor instead.

What should I do? Castle carpeting has gotta cost a fortune. If we cause too big of a scene, mother might hear of it too.

Oh god, this is really *bad!*

But if I get to it now, this could be a simple wine spill accident. Nothing notable.

There was no guarantee any bigwigs who saw the carpet stain would keep quiet about it. Considering the glass had been almost completely full, the carpet was in a miserable state. Emma knew she had to do *something* to alleviate the situation. Anything. Because otherwise, she had no idea what would happen to her.

You had to act quick to get a stain like this out, so Emma began her battle with the stain...

All of this is what brought them to the present moment.

No... Lady Francesca hadn't done anything worthy of the prince's ire. She'd just followed her primal instincts and drunk a bit too much. Even full-on adults could get completely wasted, so to act as though someone so young was at fault here was cruelty beyond reason. It was just too sad seeing this young lady go through this humiliation in front of all these people *and* be castigated by the prince himself. They kept going on about paying for the dress too, but it was made of a blend of Emma silk and Violet's webbing, so there wasn't a single stain on it in the first place. There was no compensation necessary.

Francesca had been trembling with her head hanging in shame this whole time. Emma helped her up, supporting her as a fellow drinking buddy. Getting sloshed was a situation she could relate to all too well. Maybe Francesca *had* gotten too drunk every year and caused a scene, but she was clearly remorseful and trembling all over. Surely next year, she would use a bit more moderation. And if she *really* wanted to drink a glass that was full to the brim, Emma would invite her back

home so she could drink as much as she wanted. Emma wouldn't be able to drink for a few more years, but she *needed* to make sure this drinking buddy stuck around. A woman who drank as much as she wanted no matter who was watching was a very rare species indeed.

"Lady Francesca, I know you were just a little bit drunk. And look, my dress is completely unharmed. You don't need to worry about compensation at all. But what about your dress? Is it all right?" While Emma definitely had ulterior motives, her concern for Francesca was entirely genuine. There was not a hint of malice in her words.

For Francesca Delacour, the only person at this party who spoke kindly to her was the girl she'd just been bullying. She couldn't believe it was real. Under these circumstances, she was sure some people might say the same sorts of things just to make themselves look better, but there was always a tell, something unnatural in their words or tone of voice spilling their true colors, making the truth hurt even more. But there wasn't a shred of deceit in Emma Stewart's voice. No, her words truly and honestly expressed that she was worried about Francesca from the bottom of her heart.

"L-Lady Emma..." Francesca happened to catch a glimpse of Emma's right cheek as the girl helped her up and saw the great scar covering it. Francesca had heard that a year prior, when the second-born prince, the princess, and their mother had gone home to the Vallery region, the Stewart siblings had been attacked by monsters while visiting their manor. The rumors embellished the story even further to imply that Emma Stewart had used the tiny wounds she'd sustained to pressure the prince into marrying her.

But the wounds on Emma's cheek looked deep. The scar was large and hard to ignore. Clearly, the rumors had no truth to them. Emma Stewart had to be the sweetest and most good-hearted person in the whole world.

But what does that make me*?* Francesca was so ashamed, she couldn't stand it.

Francesca had always had her misgivings about the baptism of the firstborn prince she had been tasked with carrying out. It was a duty that had been passed down among the young ladies within the firstborn prince's faction. It had been assigned to Francesca three years ago, and she really hadn't wanted to do it

at first. However, she'd felt her father's standing would worsen if she didn't go through with it, so she'd done it regardless.

Francesca's father worked in the capital. The Delacour family governed several lands, and her uncles governed over each of them. However, all of the lands they governed were far from the capital. Her uncles had all grown up with the luxuries of the city, so they were all resentful of Francesca's father for inheriting the family's position in the castle. It was clear from the way they acted that they would leap at the chance to take it from him.

The Delacours had been part of the aristocracy for generations, and they all supported the firstborn prince. If Francesca had turned down doing the baptism, she would have been practically handing one of her uncles an excuse to take her father down. Though she had been reluctant, to her surprise, once she'd actually pulled it off, she'd found herself leaping to the top of the pecking order. She'd even managed to get followers of her own. She was treated like a hero among the supporters of the firstborn prince.

That's when I started to get it all wrong... I started to think I was worth something.

But Emma Stewart, the kindhearted girl with the deep scars on her face, is someone who has actual worth. Even now, Emma's trying to defend a wretch like me to the prince himself without even flinching. She's so much more considerate than those "followers" who abandoned me the moment the tables turned against me.

"I-I'm so...so sorry. I was so...so very cruel to you..." Francesca was completely ashamed of herself, from the bottom of her heart. She could sit there and blame the ritual, but that wouldn't be enough. Apologies wouldn't be enough for her either. Even if she *did* feel like she had been forced into the position, none of that mattered. What mattered was that she had done something terrible, and she wanted to apologize for it herself.

"Lady Francesca, you really didn't do anything wrong. Please, don't be so hard on yourself. Besides, you apologized right after you spilled your wine, didn't you?" Emma said gently but loud enough for all to hear, as she wiped away Francesca's tears.

Emma said she had already received and accepted an apology —meaning the girl had taken Francesca's backhanded provocation as an actual apology.

"I-I don't know...how I can make this right... I'm just so, so sorry..." Francesca lowered her head once more, apologizing

from the bottom of her heart. Emma was a young girl who wasn't even old enough to drink. She'd never been to a party in the capital, so she must have been scared out of her mind. Yet Francesca had still done such an awful thing to her.

Hearing Francesca's admission, Emma quickly took her up on the offer with a smile. "Make it right...? You don't really... Oh, I know! Why don't we become friends, then, Lady Francesca? You can be my very first friend here in the capital, and you can tell me all about what it's like at school. Oh, and if you know any places where we can get some delicious cake on the way home, I'd love to get some with you too!"

Heh heh heh! We'll go from being cake buddies to drinking buddies in no time! It's pretty much guaranteed now! Woo-hoo!

As Emma was fantasizing about getting hammered with her new friend, she let loose one of her killer smiles, shining so bright that it was visible even despite her veil.

Wow... She's an angel. An actual angel. How can she not have wings sprouting from her back? Francesca's thoughts were shared by nearly everyone in the room.

"Oh, no way... Nobody's supposed to be able to see sis's face behind her veil! How is this happening?"

"Some kind of group hypnosis, maybe? I mean, knowing Emma, all she's thinking about now is how she's captured a wild drinking buddy..."

Only William and George knew what Emma was really thinking, and all they could do was give their half-hearted sympathies. Apparently, tea parties weren't the only place Emma could do no wrong.

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In the end, Francesca was not punished for her actions, but despite Emma's hope that they could enjoy the party together, Francesca promptly excused herself. The second-born prince left temporarily as well, then returned with the rest of the royal family once all the guests had arrived. He made his way to the reserved seating for the royal family, which was far above the rest of the crowd.

It was strange; though the prince had been right in front of them just moments before, William thought the boy seemed practically untouchable now. His gaze dropped from the royal

seats to Emma at his side and he heaved a deep sigh.

"Sis...that is *way* too much food."

Emma had parked herself near the buffet of sweets the second they'd brought out the food. She'd made it her mission to conquer every last type of dessert they had. "But it's all so delicious, William! Like, every single one of these! Here, try some!" She scooped some of the cake she'd been about to eat into William's mouth.

As one might expect of castle food, both the cake's aesthetic and taste were indescribably amazing.

"Wow... Yeah, that is pretty good... Agh, but you're in public, sis! That's your last plate, okay?"

As was to be expected after Emma caused such a massive scene before the party even started, she stood out like a sore thumb.

It feels like my sister's popularity just shoots up no matter what she does. She's seriously a force to be reckoned with... Or actually, maybe the guys in this world are just way too easy.

William was filled with worry as the king gave his greeting and welcomed the new student body. Everything was going smoothly, and soon the venue was filled with music. All the lords and ladies chose partners and drifted toward the middle of the room to dance.

For once, Emma actually listened to William and discarded her empty plate on one of the tables. All around her lords were slowly closing in to ask her for a dance.

"Lady Emma, why don't we go get some fresh air on the balcony now that you've finished your meal?" Joshua asked, completely ignoring the oncoming wave of lords. It was strange to say she'd finished, considering she was now being tempted with more. He lured—er, escorted Emma to a less crowded balcony with practiced ease.

"I'm coming too!" William said, clearly a bit on edge.

"Oh, me too!" George, who was snacking not far away, also tagged along. The two brothers gleefully set off after Emma and Joshua. The moment they saw a dance was starting, all four of them made a hasty retreat to the balcony.

Unlike Pallas, it was still a bit cold in the capital. Joshua handed Emma another plate of sweets and draped his jacket over Emma's shoulders.

"Aw, thanks, Joshua," Emma said, grinning ear to ear over the

plate piled with her favorite sweets. Joshua thanked his lucky stars for the gift, and though he thoroughly appreciated her brilliant smile, he was peeved that they were not alone. He glared at George and William.

"Man, you really came in the nick of time, Joshua!"

"Pretty sure I only invited Lady Emma."

"Father said there wouldn't be dancing at a student party, but here we are…" George muttered bitterly. Those who had already found a partner began to dance, and those who hadn't went searching for one. He shuddered at the sight. Emma had really stood out, so naturally there were plenty of lords waiting for their chance to ask her, and both George and William could feel plenty of ladies' hopeful gazes on them as well.

"You can't just believe such an outdated report, Lord George. These days, both the firstborn and second-born princes are excellent dancers, so many of the ladies here have devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the art in case they get the chance to dance with one of them. Once the lords heard all the ladies were obsessed with dancing, they started putting the work in as well."

Truly, the capital had been struck with an unprecedented dance craze. The ladies' dresses, in all colors of the rainbow, spun beautifully with the lords' masterful lead. Not a single dancer was out of step, misstepping, or stepping on toes. The siblings felt like they were straight-up watching a ballroom dancing world championship.

"Ugh, it's not *fair*. How can the prince be such a good dancer with such a stern face? It's so unexpected that it just makes him even *more* handsome!" William groaned as he thought back to the prince's dance earlier that evening. His lustrous black hair and handsome features had given him a cold and aloof air. A manly man who was also a spectacular dance partner would attract *all* the ladies.

Compared to him, the Stewart siblings… No, the whole Stewart family, even going as far as their distant relatives, all had two left feet. Luckily, the Pallas region wasn't one that featured many balls in the first place. Even if the Stewarts were invited, they were always able to come up with an excuse to turn it down. Their genetic lack of skill had never been a problem for them until now.

It wasn't like they hadn't *tried* to learn how to dance. Even if

they *were* on the border, they were still nobility, so the entire family had been expected to receive instruction on this matter. They knew all the different steps required for each type of dance, yet there was not a single person with the Stewart name who could claim to be even an *average* dancer. None of them had the slightest sense of rhythm. They couldn't even clap their hands to the beat of a song. There had been dance classes at the academy, including a practical exam. However, the dance instructors had been certain that the Stewarts could've chosen whichever type they wanted, they still weren't going to pass.

What's more, whether by coincidence or just plain inevitability, the Tanakas hadn't had a sense of rhythm either. Minato had once joked that she'd left her sense of rhythm in her mother when she was born. When her mother, Yoriko, had heard that, she'd placed a hand on Minato's shoulder and shook her head. "Minato... You never had any. Ever."

When Leonard had studied at the academy, he hadn't had the funds to even attend these kinds of functions. Melsa was taller than most of the lords, and since so many of them were self-conscious about their appearance, she wound up a wallflower with nobody willing to ask her to dance. For better or worse, it meant that nobody ever discovered that neither of them could dance. While this issue was never a problem in their day-to-day life, it made karaoke in their previous life and dances in this one their greatest weaknesses. Whether it was in their DNA or tattooed on their souls, they simply could not find the beat.

"Ooooh, this one's the tastiest yet!" Emma exclaimed with sparkling eyes, popping a tiny piece of a brownie into her mouth.

"Did you not hear me when I said you were eating too much, sis?!" Just as William tried to scold her again, Emma stuck a piece of brownie into his mouth just like she had before. "Mmgh... It's so good..."

"Which one is that?" Joshua asked as he peered over at Emma's plate. He always made sure to take note of Emma's favorite snacks.

"This one! Isn't it yummy?" Emma asked as she stuck a bite in Joshua's mouth as well. She grinned proudly, but found that Joshua had...disappeared. She looked down and found him crouching on the ground, covering his mouth and shivering. "Joshua? Are you cold? Did you not like the brownie?" Emma knelt down to his level and gazed at him with worry, wondering

if she should return his jacket.

"That's not it… It was delicious… The greatest brownie…in the whole world…" Joshua mustered up all his strength to regain his sanity after the sudden reward from his angel. *I must see where…the fork in Lady Emma's hand…winds up next…!*

"Oh wow, it was *that* good, huh?" George glanced at the plate, and just as Emma had done before, she picked up the last piece of brownie with her fork and popped it into George's mouth.

"AGH!"

"Hm?" George hummed as he chewed. "Oh, sorry, Joshua. Did you want another piece?"

"That's… Never mind, Lord George. Just…forget about it."

"I said I was sorry. Do you want me to go get you some more?"

"No. It really doesn't matter."

The siblings were all confused by Joshua's sudden haggard resignation.

In the end, all four of them happily ate the massive piles of sweets stacked on their plates, and just as one of them suggested getting more, the door to the parlor flung open.

"Are the Stewarts here?" The siblings all turned toward the voice and found a man wearing a different castle uniform than the ones the waiters wore. "His Majesty the king would like to speak with you. We have prepared a room to receive you. Please allow me to show you the way."

The four friends all doubted their ears. Had he just said the *king* wanted to speak with them? Not the prince? The *king*?! It would've been one thing if he'd said Lady Rose, Prince Edward, or Princess Jadwiga, but the *king*?! The siblings couldn't think of a single reason His Majesty would want to speak with them.

William looked at his sister, not missing a beat. "Sis… What did you do this time?"

Emma had absolutely no idea what it could have been, so she shook her head furiously. She really couldn't stand that they blamed anything and everything on her…

Chapter 30: The King

They were led to a room a bit away from the guest parlor where the party was being held. According to Joshua, the castle had been deliberately designed to be a confusing maze, so it would have been incredibly difficult for the Stewart siblings to find the room they were meant to go to or return to the party without a guide. Therefore, he warned them not to get distracted and to follow their guide as closely as they could so they didn't get lost.

"The king will be arriving shortly. Please wait here." With a deep and perfectly angled bow, the guide then left without a single explanation.

Now that the three siblings were alone, they all let out a deep sigh.

"H-Holy cow, I was so nervous!"

"Is it just me, or did our guide have even better manners than our etiquette instructor?"

"Yeah... There's no way any of *us* could work here."

To work at the castle, one had to graduate with exceptional marks from the academy. On the way to this room, they had seen so many types of aristocrats they never would have encountered in Pallas. Each time they passed one, they got more nervous.

"Oh shoot... I forgot to give Joshua his jacket back." Only the siblings had been called by the king, so they parted ways with Joshua on the patio. However, Emma still had Joshua's jacket draped over her shoulders.

Even though it was the start of spring, it was still cold in the capital. Emma had covered as much of herself as she possibly could, but she was still cold. She could only imagine how much colder all the girls with their trendy revealing dresses must have been. *I'll have to start researching ways to make a cold resistant dress before next winter,* Emma mused to herself. Joshua had told them a while back that horned hare was very fashionable in the capital, and now that she was here, she could see why. Horned hare furs were probably even lighter and warmer than the down jackets she'd worn in her previous life. Their long white fur was

fluffy and looked exceptionally glamorous, which was likely why it was popular with the aristocrats of the area.

Of course, she'd rather spend her winters with Kongming curled around her, hot cocoa topped with plenty of whipped cream in hand, designing new dresses for Rosie and researching her bugs. Unfortunately, it seemed like things weren't going to go her way. According to her mother, they'd be receiving invitations to tea parties practically every day. If they hadn't arrived so late, then Emma and her brothers would have attended several of them already—she would have had the opportunity to make some friends, decide which classes they were going to take, share info on what classes the boys they had their eyes on were taking, and more.

It all sounded like a huge pain to Emma. She'd rather just take classes that sounded interesting to her.

Even in her previous life, Emma remembered how all the girls had obsessed over being with someone at all times. In middle school, Minato's friends wouldn't even go to the bathroom by themselves. But though Minato had considered it a huge pain, she could read the room and she hadn't wanted to rock the boat. More than anything, she'd been terrified of being ostracized.

But she didn't have to worry about that in this world.

Even with Minato's memories, Emma in this world was still Emma. And yet she was *also* Minato. While she had been "reborn" in this world, there had still been a change in her—she wasn't simply a girl from Tokyo in a new world. Emma was once again faced with the reality and newness of her second life.

Suddenly, they heard the sound of the knob turning and the door opened.

Wha... Why didn't they knock?!

All three siblings immediately bowed reflexively, but their visitor didn't seem to take notice at all as they rapidly approached the children.

"Emma, sweetheart! It's been so long!"

Without warning, Emma was pulled into a tight hug and her face was squished against something *very* soft. There was only one thing out there with such perfect squishiness and suppleness. While suffocating there would have been bliss, she raised her head to escape that fate and found the one person she'd wanted to see more than anyone else in the capital.

"Rosie! It really has been!" Even through her veil, Emma could

see the king's concubine, Rose Alicia Royale, standing before her with the most dazzlingly beautiful smile.

"Emma!" Jadwiga latched onto Emma right after Rose.

"Oh, Princess! I've missed you!"

Jadwiga had gotten a little bigger since they'd last met. The princess grinned ear to ear at Emma. Next to Emma, William held his arms out and waited for Jadwiga to come hug him as well, but Emma shot him a nasty glare and pulled Jadwiga closer to herself.

"Emma, I'm just so glad to see you again!" Jadwiga beamed.

"We heard you'd made a full recovery, but how are your wounds? Do they still hurt?" Rose gently stroked the veil over Emma's face.

One either side of her, Emma's brothers twitched at Rose's question. Though the injuries Emma had sustained from the slime attack a year prior had healed with no trouble at all, both of the brothers now braced themselves for people to wince when they saw her scars. If Emma were a man, she could have worn her scars like a badge of honor, or to spice up stories of her heroics. But a girl with scars on her face tended to upset the people around her—even if the marks were no bother to the girl herself.

This past year, the Stewarts had been excessively nice to their injured daughter. They were still nauseatingly overprotective of her. This was especially true of her brothers, who had been there when she had been injured by a slime that had attacked during a barrier crisis. The Stewarts knew that threat all too well, so neither parent nor Emma herself blamed the boys for what had happened.

However, that didn't stop George from feeling like he hadn't been able to protect her, or William feeling like he had been completely useless. In fact, they might have felt better if someone *had* blamed them for it, or gotten angry, or punished them in some way. No matter how many times Emma told them that her scars were her own fault, or that she liked them, the boys could not be consoled.

The veil Emma wore to hide those scars was for their sake, but she was starting to reach her limit. It was driving her crazy being treated like a delicate princess for so long, and she couldn't stand it anymore. Wearing a veil the whole time she was in the capital would be such a pain, so she'd rather people just

get used to seeing her scars instead.

Emma took off her veil and showed off her scars to Rose. She mostly did this to display her lovely purple scars to her friend—though she did have plenty of other reasons. She was just in love with her fancy-looking spiderweb scars.

"Not at all. The scars don't interfere with my daily life whatsoever! Oh, but…" Just as Emma was answering Rose, an underhanded…er, *advantageous* thought crossed her mind. She dropped her gaze to her right arm where her scars were the worst and gave her best effort to look like she was merely forcing a smile. "I think…dancing might be impossible."

George and William both shot incredulous looks at Emma.

Oh, you rotten little schemer! You can move your arm just fine!

That's just wrong, sis! You can't do that!

Neither of them had to say anything out loud, because their offense was written clear as day on their faces. But Rose didn't notice the boys' expressions and simply looked down at Emma's right arm, which was covered by her modest dress.

"I can only imagine… That's why you went to the balcony instead of dancing with everyone else, isn't it? Your brothers are so sweet to keep you company." Apparently Rose assumed that the brothers had taken Emma to the balcony where she couldn't see the ball out of consideration for her. They exchanged a look, came to a silent mutual understanding, and stood up as straight as they could.

"Not at all, Lady Rose. I just did what any big brother would have done!"

"That's right! We would never leave our sister all on her lonesome!"

Both the brothers put on an upstanding and heroic front to drive this misunderstanding home. This rumor would spread and their coalition as the siblings who refused to dance would become well-known enough that others would simply let them be when they entered a party venue and isolated themselves shortly after.

Emma smirked with satisfaction. Everything was going just as she'd planned. Now, she wouldn't have to cover her scars, and since she'd used this opportunity to her advantage, her brothers wouldn't have to feel guilty any longer either. She was sick of being treated like a fragile creature. She already got enough overprotectiveness from her father. Or rather, she'd gotten *more*

than enough. In fact, she was overcapacity for it.

Rose furrowed her beautiful brow and stroked Emma's right cheek. Although the girl's skin wasn't as silky soft as it had been when they were in the hot spring together, just seeing her once-burned flesh restored again took away all of Rose's hesitation.

"Don't these scars look just like spiderwebs, Rosie?" Emma asked with a big smile—it was her favorite feature of the markings.

Rose cocked her head and seemed to realize it as well, taking a closer look at the scars. "You're right. And this purple is the Stewart family color as well."

Despite the many possible shades in the world, the color of Emma's scars almost exactly matched her father and brothers' eyes. Emma was the only sibling who hadn't inherited purple eyes, but now, completely by chance, she'd had the color engraved upon her. It was just like Rose to notice something like that. George and William both hadn't seemed to notice it themselves. It was likely that they hadn't been able to bring themselves to give the scars a good, long look.

A soft knock came at the door.

"Oh, perhaps that's the king and Edward!" Rose wondered. All three siblings bowed hurriedly and respectfully.

Rose took a calm, elegant bow next to Emma just as the door opened. "Your Majesty, these are the Stewart siblings."

Since she'd taken the liberty of introducing them, George took the lead and spoke first:

"I am the eldest, George Stewart."

"I'm the youngest, William Stewart."

"And I'm the middle child, Emma Stewart."

Emma remained in a bow until the king reached out and tilted her chin up to face him. Before her was a picture of masculinity. His hand remained on her chin as he took a good look at her face.

"Y-Your Majesty...?" Emma couldn't *not* say anything as the king stared into her eyes. Then he gave a hearty laugh.

"Emma Stewart, you are seriously adorable! Why, I would've wanted you for my own if I were ten years younger!"

"Y-Your Majesty! What are you saying?!" Edward, who had been meekly standing behind his father, in a suddenly panicked voice.



“You know, it might be fun to try and steal a girl away from my son…”

“Y-Your Majesty!”

The king kept up the light banter, amused at seeing the ever-calm and composed prince getting so worked up. Seeing this back-and-forth between the king and the prince around Emma, all William and George could do was force their smiles.

“How does this always *happen* with her? And like…is it just me, or is our king a regular *playboy*?” William whispered to his brother.

“Be strong, William. You have no idea what could happen if you make a dig at the king like that,” George replied.

After the king had gotten his fill of teasing the prince, he called out to George and William as well, but Emma kept staring at him like he was a true feast for the eyes.

“Emma, I need to talk to you about what the king… Emma?” The prince stopped short when he saw Emma’s scars for the first time. The deep and purple marks brought with them the shame and helplessness he’d felt that day. However, he never would have imagined they’d heal so beautifully.

“Emma…?” He thought it was rude to gawk and so tried to get her attention once more, but she didn’t respond. She was staring with a dreamy expression at…the king?

“He’s so…handsome…” Emma whispered so quietly that only the prince heard.

Before Emma gained memories of her past life, the only things that had mattered to her were her family and bugs. Partly due to her age, she hadn’t really taken much notice of, *nor* interest in, boys.

Meanwhile, Minato had had a rather plain face, but she had still been relatively popular with men. However, she would really thrive among older men. At work, she was constantly getting ogled by the CEOs, executive directors, chiefs, and section managers. Many of her coworkers blamed the old men’s failing vision for their obsession with her, and she’d wound up with the nickname the Fogey’s Fancy. As a result of all this attention, most of her dates had been older than her, and everyone around her treated her like she was always out hunting silver foxes.

The youngest sibling liked ’em way younger and the middle sibling liked ’em way older. The Tanaka family was unfortunate no matter the circumstance.

The man standing in front of her, King Charles Constantine Royale, was forty-eight years old. Minato's Silver Sensor (her ability to track down handsome older men) was *blaring*.

His muscular, handsome body.

His neatly trimmed beard.

His salt and pepper hair. (Maybe another ten years would make it fully gray?)

The wrinkles around his eyes when he belly laughed.

His deep voice that carried so perfectly.

Minato's Silver Sensor had come to the conclusion that this man was more handsome than any older man she'd ever seen. She thanked this new world for all of its gorgeous inhabitants from the bottom of her heart. As one might expect of the king, he was handsome enough to stand toe to toe with Lady Rose. And when he *did*, it set off Minato's beauty sensor, and she had two alarms ringing in her head at once. Her heart swelled with gratitude. The pair was such a feast for the eyes. She couldn't get enough. She felt like if she weren't careful, she might just clap her hands together in prayer.

"Emma? Who's handsome? Do you mean...the king?" the prince asked in a quiet voice, having heard Emma accidentally speaking from her heart.

When she looked at him, he seemed a bit troubled. The prince *was* awfully by the book, so he might be worried that if Emma took his father seriously, he'd have to call her his mother-in-law. Never mind the fact that most of Minato's friends had been the parents of kids in middle school, and if Minato had had kids when she was about twenty, they would have been about Prince Edward's age.

"Oh, you heard that, Your Highness? Could you keep it a secret? I-It's super embarrassing..." Emma's face was burning over her ridiculous thoughts. She hadn't even been close to having kids in her previous life. Heck, she hadn't even gotten married. Thinking back on it, Minato had just written off the whole concept of dating as just an exhausting pain. Dating cost money, and it cost her precious lazy weekends. Not to mention it cost money, and if she had someone stay overnight, it would mean extra chores. And there was also the fact that it cost money. At most, she could have dealt with taking care of them for about half a year, and it had just gotten to be more of a pain the older she got. It had been way better for Minato's peace of

mind to just be alone. It had been easier that way too.

Just as Emma was getting depressed over the annoyances of her romantic escapades in her previous life, Rose called, “Emma, why don’t we sit and chat for a bit?”

“Oh, right away, Lady Rose!”

The siblings waited for the king, Rose, the prince, and Princess Jadwiga to sit, before taking their own seats next to each other on the sofa.

After a breath, the king spoke in his (ridiculously sexy) voice, “I’ve called you all here today to give you my thanks.”

What I wouldn’t give to record his melodious tone…

“I heard how you took care of Rose and our children last year. Your family is all they’ve talked about since they came home.” He smiled in fond reminiscence…

His silver fox levels are off the charts! That expression is peak maturity! I have *to draw a portrait of him when I get home.* Emma was thanking the heavens for providing her with a new fave to gush over, and it showed clearly on her face.

“No, no. We are more indebted to your family than anything. Lady Rose hosted us at the Vallery Manor so many times!” George responded, and both William and Emma nodded in agreement.

They’d only met Rose last year at their tea party, but their base instincts had gotten the better of them when they’d seen how beautiful she was—they’d simply *had* to keep talking to her. Though she wasn’t the type to go out of her way to talk to some country kids, she’d still kindly gone along with their conversations.

“Then there’s the matter of the many unique and valuable dresses you’ve gifted Rose,” the king continued. “This red dress she’s wearing is one of them, isn’t it?”

The outfit Rose was wearing that night was George’s favorite red dress. It featured deep slits that showed off her dazzlingly beautiful legs.

“It’s the Stewart family’s pleasure to make clothing that accentuates Lady Rose’s beauty!” William said without hesitation, as though the very concept should have been obvious. They’d made dresses for her because they wanted to. Seeing Rose wear their creations at formal events like that night’s party and showering her with compliments was reward enough for them.

“And lastly, the localized barrier crisis in Vallery,” the king said,

looking right at Emma. She could hardly contain her joy at having such a handsome devil speaking with such a sultry voice looking right at her. “Though the wounds you suffered were great, Emma, you three risked your lives to defeat a threat that was capable of destroying the whole land. As king, I must give you my thanks.” And then the king, who should have always stood tall above all in the kingdom, lowered his head to them. His deep bow carried all his gratitude for protecting his concubine, his children, and his people. Rose, the prince, and the princess all lowered their heads alongside him.

“I-It was truly nothing! We just did what any noble borderland child would have done!”

“Th-This is far too high praise for us! Please, raise your head, Your Majesty! And Lady Rose, Your Highness, and Princess Jadwiga too!”

George and William panicked over the king lowering his head before them, but Emma was taking the opportunity to see if the king was balding while the top of his head was visible—there didn’t appear to be any signs of it just yet.

But y’know, I think he’d look pretty good bald too…

When the king raised his head, he smiled ear to ear with a mischievous grin.

Thank the heavens for this bounteous feast of manliness and boyish mischief… I might just explode!

“I sent a letter to Count Stewart offering a reward, but…he seems to have turned me down.” The king’s mention of a reward sent shivers down the siblings’ spines as they remembered the third Tanaka family meeting just a few months prior.

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“What are we going to do? This is a letter from the *king*!” Leonard whimpered, trembling in Emma’s House. He was holding a letter with a jet-black wax seal, stamped with the royal mark—only the king himself used a black seal.

“Mrow?” Zhang, their white cat, began sniffing the letter out of concern for his shivering owner.

“Did you do something wrong, father?” Emma tilted her head, glancing at the unopened envelope.

William couldn’t believe the words coming out of his sister’s mouth, considering she’d practically been on the brink of death

just a little while ago. “If *anyone* was going to be in trouble out of all of us, it’s you, sis.”

“Meow meow!” Kongming nodded sagely at William’s snarky comment. The cats were still worried about Emma and didn’t want to leave her side, so the whole family and the four giant cats were packed into the meeting room of Emma’s House like sardines.

Melsa, who had just finished making the tea, weaved her way through the crowd of cats to take the letter from Leonard’s shaky hands. “Look, let’s just see what it says.”

“But Melsa…it’s a letter from the *king*. Like, this would be like getting a letter from the emperor back in Japan! It feels like something we’re not even worthy of *looking* at!” Leonard attempted to soothe his anxiety by petting Zhang’s soft, white, fluffy fur. “If we were back there as the Tanakas, we would have placed it on our family altar and showed it the proper reverence.”

Leonard’s simple example helped George understand the gravity of their situation. Things of this importance needed to be reported to one’s ancestors first and foremost. Of course, the most important things the Tanakas had ever put there were things like report cards, diplomas, and acceptance letters.

“We *are* counts, after all. It makes sense that aristocrats of our status would receive a letter or two from the king.” Melsa had been born the daughter of a duke and raised in the capital, the youngest child of twelve siblings. To her, getting a letter from the king wasn’t that big of a deal.

“I know you might be used to this, but we’ve never gotten *good* news in a letter from the king.” They’d received one saying that they were to take over the fallen Passott and Lengrend regions right after Leonard had taken over as the head of a family already in the red—it had been nothing short of hellish. Leonard couldn’t go against the king’s orders, but having more regions where monsters would show up had only added more risks for him to manage. Leonard had been fully traumatized by the event.

“Well then, allow me to open it for you.” Melsa unsealed the envelope like it was the easiest thing in the world.

“What does it say, mother?” William asked, as he made his way over to Melsa, carefully making sure he didn’t step on the calico cat, Liu’s, tail. He peered over her shoulder at the letter.

“A…reward?”

The letter was filled with praises for how the Stewarts had handled the localized barrier crisis and asking what they might want as a reward.

George thought that sounded like a rather sweet deal. He knew his father wouldn't know the first thing about this, so he asked his mother instead. "As in, something the king could give us?"

"Erm… Well, he's likely offering to confer us a higher peerage," Melsa responded, still poring over the letter.

"Uh… Sorry, but what does that mean?" Leonard asked with a completely straight face.

Shouldn't the head of a household know these things…?

Melsa sighed and looked to George. "George, how about you explain it to him?"

"Er… I don't really know either… What about you, William?" George sought help from William next.

Shouldn't the oldest child know these things…?

"It's a merit-based promotion to a higher status, George…"

And he was right. The letter said that the king wished to reward the Stewarts for their efforts in handling the localized barrier crisis, and it was common for the king to confer a higher peerage when rewarding others.

Despite the fact that Heita had been the biggest loser of all of them in his previous life, as William, he had somehow ended up the smartest of all three siblings.

"That would make us…a marquess family, right?" Emma didn't sound in the least bit interested at the prospect as she sat with Kongming wrapped around her.

"Possibly even dukes. Defeating those slimes nearly cost you three your lives, after all," Melsa said, stroking Emma's cheek—at that point, Violet's webbing still covered it.

"Um…so what happens if we get this 'higher peerage' or whatever?" George asked, clearly still not getting it.

Melsa would have a lot to teach this boy before he got to the capital. Would she even have enough time? She could've sworn she'd taught him all of this before… Raising children was an exercise in patience no matter which world she was in, she thought, halfway resigning herself to her fate once more.

"Well…generally you'll get more land. It means you'll have to pay more taxes, but it gives you bragging rights in the capital. You'll also get more marriage prospects, and countless

opportunities to attend balls and tea parties and the like. If we get elevated to dukedom, people will want us at New Year's parties, harvest festivals, the king's birthday... It would also give us the opportunity to get closer to aristocrats of even higher peerage in the castle." The longer Melsa spoke, the more sour her family's expressions became.

"We really don't...need any more land than this..." Certainly, having more land would increase their income, but also came with more responsibilities and hassles. Leonard already had to deal with a three-in-one deal with the Pallas region, so he was trembling at the thought of more obligations.

"Mrow..." Leonard hadn't stopped petting Zhang for a second, desperate for the cat's healing purrs.

"We're way too young for marriage..." William complained.

"I'd rather a duel than a ball..." George hated dances, so he was distressed at the notion.

"Mya!" Guan had been languidly resting out of boredom, but his ear twitched when he heard George say "duel."

Melsa sighed. *Well, they understand now, but...these men really need to get it together.*

"Mother, are you sure this isn't some kind of punishment game? All those higher-class aristocrats are bound to be real sticklers for etiquette or whatever. Big festivals are *supposed to be* places you get to enjoy all the food stands," Emma complained, puffing up her cheeks. A festival without food stands would be like eating meat and potato stew without any meat. General Kongming started giving Emma scratchy little kisses to comfort her.

From that moment on, words like "promotion" or "reward" were to be feared by the Stewart family—words that would be used to punish them.

"Oh, I know! Father, dealing with monsters is pretty much just what people on the border regions do! So it's not something deserving of a reward at all!" William suggested.

"He's right! It's part of the landowner's duties to handle localized barrier crises, so there's no need to thank us for it!" George added.

"Father, I think we're perfect as we are right now. If we get any busier than we already are, we won't have time to play with the cats, or survey our insects, or make dresses for Lady Rose!" Emma wanted more time to play around, so she desperately

tried to convince her father to reject the proposition.

"You three..." Leonard mumbled.

While Melsa was completely dumbfounded by the siblings' solidarity, Leonard came out with his decision. And it was obvious what he had concluded.

"We'll turn down the reward! 'We only did what was expected of us, so it doesn't merit a reward!' That's what we'll say!"

And so, to conclude the third Tanaka family meeting, they all drafted a letter to the king to decline the reward he'd offered them.

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"Might you try to convince the count to accept my offer?" The king thought this was a situation where one's efforts ought to be rewarded. No one in the kingdom had made such meritorious contributions in recent years. He thought perhaps if he could convince the Stewart children, they might be able to give Count Stewart the push he needed to accept.

However, the children's united front against getting involved with such annoyances was ironclad.

"Your Majesty, as we said before, it would be wrong of us to accept a reward for what we did."

"We were only doing our jobs."

"I think my father's answer will be the same no matter how many times you ask him." One by one, the siblings flatly refused the reward.

This was unfathomable to the king. Aristocrats were creatures who thrived on vanity. None would ever pass up a chance like this, yet Count Stewart and even all of his children seemed to be genuinely humble without a greedy bone in their bodies.

If that was the case...

"Well then, Emma, would you like to marry Edward?" His son's feelings for Emma were obvious, and being engaged to the royal family would provide the Stewart family with the same sorts of advantages as any other reward he could offer. The king gave a satisfied grin. *Not a bad idea, if I do say so myself.*

But Emma didn't hesitate for a second. "Nah, I'm good." The words had reached her mouth before her brain, and she turned the king down immediately.

"E-Emma!"

“Wha— SIS!”

The king wasn’t the only one shocked by Emma’s instantaneous refusal. George and William truly believed they were about to be arrested for treason…and they also felt bad for the prince himself.

Unfortunately, Emma had just been bemoaning how annoying her love life had been in her old world, so she’d responded entirely on reflex. But the moment the words left her mouth, she remembered she was speaking to the king.

Uh-oh… I hope he doesn’t get mad. Where the heck can I get a cushion fluffy enough to soften this blow? Emma nervously glanced up to see the king’s response, and he seemed simply shocked that she would even turn down marriage. He didn’t seem upset, so that was a bit of a relief…or was it?

“Ah… Erm… Hmm…” The king scratched his head awkwardly at Emma’s completely unexpected response, desperately trying to find the words to reply. His well-intentioned offer had completely backfired. His son, who sat next to Rose, had an air of utter despair about him, and the king was afraid to even look at him. Who in their right mind would have ever imagined the daughter of an aristocrat would turn down the prince of the whole kingdom?

“Your Majesty! Have you no consideration for their feelings? You can’t simply spring a proposal on Emma like that. Of course she doesn’t know how to respond!” Rose attempted to help Emma’s case as she patted her son’s back consolingly.

“E-Er, Your Majesty… I’m always telling you just how deeply important the matter of your son’s marriage is for our country… Erm, and I know I’m saying this just about every day, but perhaps you shouldn’t speak every whim that crosses your mind…” The king’s private secretary, who had been standing back in a corner of the room, had an agonized expression while admonishing His Highness. Choosing a partner for the second-born prince was a vital part of continuing the royal family and matters of diplomacy, so it was only natural that the secretary would be flustered about it. Truly, to be the secretary of this king would be a challenging gig.

“Emma… Am I not…good enough for you?” Edward whispered with despair. To be turned down just because of his father’s whimsy was a crushing blow for the boy. Did that mean Emma was already taken? By someone who wasn’t him?

As Edward started to take in that possibility, the prince became oddly fixated on the jacket draped over Emma's shoulders. George and William still had their jackets on, so it couldn't have been one of theirs. So then whose was it? It was definitely a man's jacket, no matter how one looked at it. His brain was racked with anxiety.

Emma was desperately trying to formulate some excuse to restore her dignity as a high-class lady, but the king was just so remarkably handsome, she was way too distracted. *Come on, Emma! You've got to concentrate on this! For your sake!* She had to put every ounce of effort into forcing herself to look away from him, and she dropped her gaze as she apologized.

"Your Majesty, please forgive me for so rudely declining your offer. I have no intention of marrying the pri—er, rather, anyone at all." It was practically unthinkable to turn down marrying the prince of a kingdom, but Minato's memories and Emma's meant that neither of them were interested in pursuing marriage in the first place. Unfortunately for her mother, obtaining grandbabies was likely to be a long and hard road in this life as well. Besides, she was pretty certain there was no way the prince would want to get engaged to a bug-obsessed weirdo.

Edward had gotten really moody all of a sudden too. Poor thing. Emma remembered that back in the Vallery region, the prince had really opened up to George and William, but he wouldn't loosen up at all around her, presumably due to her lack of communication skills. The prince should marry a woman who was worthy of him, one that was far more put together than her.

For once, Emma was actually being prudent with her words, but the words she happened to choose gave the king a completely unintended and terrible shock. While she had dropped her gaze in a rather unnatural fashion simply to stop being distracted by the king's devilish good looks, he saw it as the expression of a delicate, grieving girl.

"Not…to anyone?" Suddenly, the king began to seriously reflect on the impact of his accidental gaffe.

According to the report he'd received about the localized barrier crisis, the scars Emma received weren't limited to just the ones he could see on her face, but were covering a large area of her upper right body. And the doctors had said they weren't scars that would fade over time. As she grew, the scars would likely grow in tandem with her. The sadness she had been facing

must have been overwhelming.

Rose was right… I really hadn't been considering her feelings at all… Getting engaged…getting married would mean being forced to show her scarred body to a man!

Even though she was beautiful enough to capture his son's attention, of course having scars that would never fade on her face and body would be hard on her. Of course she would be miserable over it. While she had been able to recover physically over the last year, the heart wouldn't heal so quickly. Of course it wouldn't. There was no way it could have! Yet here she was, suffering so, yet doing everything in her power to force a bright smile so nobody would worry about her… What a brave young girl!

She'd been wearing that veil to conceal her scars (or so the king assumed). The thought was finally too much for the king—he burst into tears.

"Y-Your Majesty?!" George and William started to panic as the king suddenly began weeping. *Wh-What happened?!*

The king gently took Emma's hands in his. Massive teardrops streamed down his face as he sputtered on and on. Things like, "It must have been so difficult for you," and "It must've hurt so much," and "You don't need to try so hard anymore," and "You can talk to me about anything. I'll do everything in my power to help," and the like. He'd been laughing and making small talk just a moment ago; everyone else in the room was too dumbfounded at the sudden change to even speak.

Seriously, what happened here?! Is the king okay?!

Whatever it was, the king had fully decided to be on Emma's side. Apparently, even in this world, Emma was still a Fogey's Fancy, no matter how wrong it was. She was in total bliss as the king held her hands. All of his endless praise was going in one ear and out the other as she just took in every last detail of this handsome old man. The sound of her brain taking screenshot after screenshot was nonstop. *I have no idea why he suddenly started crying, but this is amazing too! Praise the heavens for this precious moment!*

Rose made an exasperated face as she handed the king a handkerchief to help with his ugly crying. He finally released Emma's hands to take it from her.

Meanwhile, next to Rose, the prince silently seethed. If anyone should've been crying here, it was him. He'd finally been

reunited with Emma after all this time. He'd been counting down the days until he saw her again, thinking about what they would do when they crossed paths in the capital…wondering what their life at school would be like together…and the king had ruined it all. What's more, his father was taking advantage of all the confusion to *hold her hands*, and Emma looked oddly *thrilled*, which only fueled Edward's ire even more. While it was a slight relief that Emma's refusal of the proposal hadn't been because she didn't want to marry *him*, it might only be a few years before he'd have more people to defend Emma from.

Emma was so very modest; she might have thought her scars were a weakness preventing her from ever getting married, but they weren't a deterrent in the slightest. In fact, the day's commotion with the baptism had caused a massive spike in the competition, and none of them had even seen her face. The prince groaned in frustration. Anyone in the capital who saw her smile from here on out was sure to fall in love with her too.

But if Emma didn't have anyone in her heart just yet, then the prince wasn't going to give up no matter how much competition he had. He'd take on a hundred, or even a thousand other men for her. He wanted to be the one to heal the wounds in her heart. The flames of passion in his heart had almost begun to fade with time, but now they were burning bright once again.

On the other hand, Jadwiga, who had become adept at reading the room, realized that the talk of marriage was starting to slip away and came up with a great idea herself:

"Why don't I marry Lord George inst—"

"DON'T YOU DARE!" the king shouted loud enough to cut her off. "My little Jadwi isn't marrying anyone! I won't let anyone take her! You understand, don't you, George?" With tears still glistening at the corners of his eyes, the king gave George the nastiest look he could muster.

The king's response was so forceful, George couldn't get any words out. All he could do was nod fervently.

"I'm so sorry, George. The king is a little…you know…about his daughter… You understand, right?" Rose apologized while simultaneously soothing the king.

"Oh, that's quite all right. Our father is the same way, so I get it. I-It's completely okay." This sort of thing was normal in the Stewart household, but the *king* glaring daggers at him was enough to freak him out.

“Hang on! How come it’s gotta be George? I’m *way* closer to her age!” William raised his voice, clearly not that worried about George’s dilemma.

Emma muttered quietly so only William could hear. “Maybe pedocreeps should shut their damn mouths.” Meanwhile, she was gushing over the king as he continued glaring with those teary eyes.

Oh, I see how it is. I can’t go after lolis, but you get to touch old guys all you want, huh?! William cursed the world for how unfair it all was.

But really, both of them were equally embarrassing.

“Anyway…nobody’s in any hurry to get married right now, so why don’t we just move on to another topic?” The king arbitrarily decided that Emma needed time to recover as well, so he ended the discussion for the time being. He decided to simply ignore Jadwiga’s suggestion.

Just then, there was a hurried knock at the door. The king’s secretary looked quite annoyed and left to chastise whoever had knocked, but quickly returned and whispered in the king’s ear.

“Your Majesty, we’ve received an urgent report.” The secretary’s expression was most grim.

The siblings couldn’t listen in on an urgent report for the king, so they excused themselves. They were led back to the party and met up with Joshua again.

“Joshua! Thank you so much for your jacket! Er…what’s all the fuss about? Did something happen?” Emma noticed none of the guests could contain their excitement as they all were whispering, pointing, and looking at one of the doors.

“Just after the king called you all away, another young lady appeared, almost like she had come to take your place. But this girl had *black eyes*. Obviously, this caused quite a commotion, so one of the king’s servants took her away.”

“Huh? They’re making this big a deal over black eyes?” All three of the siblings tilted their heads in confusion, so Joshua politely elaborated.

“The fact that she has black eyes means it’s likely that she has some amount of royal blood in her veins. But nobody knew who this girl was.”

Apparently, that was a major scandal for the royal family, then. In this country, having black eyes was incredibly rare. The three siblings were originally from Japan, so they couldn’t exactly

share in the shock of the rest of the people around them.

“Her hair wasn’t exactly black, but it was a very dark brown, so she must be quite close to the family. Some people even think she might be the illegitimate child of the king or his brother, Prince Cain.”

It was likely the urgent report to the king had had something to do with this girl. Concubine aside, it was hard to imagine the king having an affair that led to a child…but he *was* handsome enough for it.

Come to think of it, what had Prince Cain even been up to since that whole coup d’état business? Arven had told them that there had been a gag order on talking about the incident to other regions to cover it up, and the official story in the capital was that it had all been a mock battle for the army. Emma had to wonder if she was the only one who thought that was a pretty lame excuse for the whole mess.

Either way, it had nothing to do with her, so she didn’t need to think too much on the topic.

It would be some time before any of them realized that the appearance of this strange girl was a matter they absolutely couldn’t ignore. She would appear once more, long after they’d all forgotten about her, and the impact would be *massive*.

Chapter 31: First Class

It was an early morning for the Stewart family thanks to a wake-up call from their beloved cats. The cats were unusually excited that morning, mewing and meowing nonstop, begging them to wake up, to play with them, to feed them, until finally, the Stewarts gave in.

Each cat had their own unique method of waking the family. Kongming would give Emma's cheek those scratchy kisses, Liu would cover William's nose and mouth with her paws, Guan would run around the yard with George (still sleeping) in his mouth, and Zhang would crawl on top of Leonard and start kneading.

The family now lived in the capital specifically so the children could get an education, which ate into their playtime with the cats. In order to spend time with their furry family members, the Stewart humans had to wake up early. Or to be more accurate, they were physically unable to refuse their cats' violent calls for attention.

Each morning, Leonard's ribs nearly broke under the weight of Zhang's biscuit-making.

"Melsa, do you think I can save my ribs by sleeping on my stomach?"

"Then you'll just break your spine instead, honey."

"I guess I'll just have to wake up early, then..."

Thanks to day after day of such rude awakenings, the Stewarts found themselves fully awake that morning. Emma and William went to take care of the silkworms and Emma's swarm of specimens. Leonard and George did some training for monster hunts, and Melsa checked for any invitations to tea parties or soirees, as well as tending to whatever daily chores needed to be done before breakfast.

After the siblings had changed into their school uniforms and were on their way out the door, their parents and cats all came to see them off.

"Oh, Emma... Seeing you in your school uniform like this truly is the best!" Leonard said with a self-satisfied grin.

Melsa's eyes narrowed. "You've done something to it again,

haven't you?"

The students had a lot more freedom to customize their school uniforms in this world than they'd had in the Stewarts' previous one. They were allowed to make changes such as adding their family colors or adjusting their pants or skirt lengths. Therefore, Leonard would sometimes futz with them in the middle of the night, which deeply irritated Melsa.

"Hee hee. Thank you for seeing us off, everyone! We'll be back!" Emma said as she waved goodbye to their family.

All four cats meowed their goodbyes, then went off to take naps in their favorite spots. Cats truly were creatures of independence and whimsy.

For the first week of school, they'd only had morning classes. During these, they were briefed on the over one hundred types of courses available, the conditions for attending each class, choosing one's schedule, how to pass the end-of-year tests, and more. Essentially, it was an orientation.

Today was the siblings' first full day of class. Their mother had advised them to take classes together for their first year, so George and William had the exact same class schedules. The academy didn't base entry on age—in most cases, graduation only required that one earn the right amount of credits. Most boys tended to start school at around fifteen or sixteen, while most girls started between the ages of thirteen and sixteen.

William was only eleven, but he had enrolled to support George, as the family was concerned about his academic prowess. In countries where monsters regularly appeared, the eldest sons of the rulers of each region had very strict requirements for graduation, as they needed to be able to protect their people from any potential monster attacks. They had to pass three rigorous classes: Monster Studies, Hunting Techniques, and Economics. Since George was the eldest son, he had to pass each of those classes in order to graduate. Out of the three courses, Monster Studies was said to be the hardest class in the school's entire curriculum. The current lord of the land, Leonard, had worked his tail off with Melsa's assistance, and he'd *barely* managed to pass.

The classes were divided into beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels for each subject, with each region having different requisite skills that were necessary to rule. The requirements for ruling Pallas included passing Advanced

Monster Studies, Advanced Hunting Techniques, and Beginner's Economics. Those living near the capital needed to take Beginner's Monster Studies, Beginner's Hunting Techniques, and Advanced Economics. Therefore, those who lived in regions frequented by monsters had a lot on their plates.

While Emma was taking most of the same classes as her brothers, girls didn't have any mandatory courses, so she had it much easier. Most girls tended to take classes focused on etiquette, dance, or embroidery, and it was rare for girls to take any of those required for boys. The family had initially assumed that Emma would be the kind of girl who wound up taking all male-dominated classes, but of the boys' required classes, Leonard had been worried Emma might hurt herself taking Hunting Techniques, so she wasn't allowed to choose it. Emma remembered after she'd submitted her schedule that she'd used her scars as an excuse to avoid dancing, and she hadn't thought about how bad it would look if she was taking classes with physical activity. For once, she was extremely grateful for her father's overprotectiveness.

While George and William were taking their hunting techniques course, their mother, who was worrying herself sick over this whole thing, told Emma to take one of the classes girls liked to take. Emma took the course she was least likely to get yelled at in. She had enough of her mother chiding her for her etiquette at home, and dance was out of the question, so embroidery was her only option.

The class that marked the beginning of their academic journey was the one class Emma took separately from her brothers: Embroidery.

"The building we take our hunting techniques class in is over this way, sis."

"Don't cause any trouble, okay, Emma?"

The campus was dotted with school buildings that looked identical. As the siblings parted ways, William and George stopped and gave Emma the same warning they always did.

"George, I don't know how many times I have to tell you this. I don't cause trouble. Trouble just *happens* to me, okay?" Both before and after she'd regained memories of her past life, Emma simply couldn't accept her brothers' accusatory warnings.

They'd also met up with Joshua on the way to class, and he'd immediately taken his place at Emma's side. He said his

goodbyes with a voice full of sadness. “Lady Emma, we’ll see you in Monster Studies next.”

The first day of the school week had all three of the required courses for boys. After Monster Studies was their lunch break, then Economics. The students diverged into boys’ and girls’ paths, where Emma parted with the boys. Maybe the school had scheduled all the boys’ required courses on the first day to prevent kids from getting lost or being late.

While she was a bit sad to be attending class alone, she was still sort of looking forward to her first time going to school in decades. Emma followed the flow of students and gave the other three a wave goodbye, then strolled her way to the building where her embroidery class was to be held. Classes with a large number of students tended to be held in their own school buildings, and Emma’s embroidery class was one of those.

In a student’s first year, they could only take the beginner’s embroidery class, but from their second year onward, they could choose to test into intermediate or advanced classes. Melsa told Emma that using that first year to measure one’s skills was important so one could use that when choosing the level of one’s later classes.

Emma found the embroidery building easily, glancing around the beginners’ classroom as she entered. As one might expect of their first class of the year, everyone must have come early, as the seats were nearly filled already.

There weren’t individual desks, but instead large work surfaces that about six people could share. Many girls had already made friends before setting foot in the classroom. Because of that, it took quite a bit of courage for Emma to come in alone. This was one of the drawbacks of not having attended any of the tea parties prior to school starting. Emma just had to admit this was her consequence for taking so many detours on the way to the capital.

All the girls who had been chatting up a storm quieted and stared at Emma.

“Oh, would you look at that? I believe that’s Lady Emma of the Stewart family. Remember, from the party the other day?”

“Goodness, what a large scar! She kept it covered with a veil at the party… Those rumors that she’d been injured by monsters must be true.”

“And it had to be on her face too… Poor thing.”

While they did lower their voices to some degree, it was still loud enough to hear. Emma had already gotten enough attention at the party the other day, and she couldn't hide her scars anymore, so it was only natural that people would stare. Out of the groups, one table stood out, and the girl who stood out the most of all approached Emma.

"Lady Emma of the Stewart family, I presume. I am the eldest daughter of Duke Lance, Lila Lance. Would you like to join our group for this class?" Lila smiled. She was a bit older than Emma, and had the kind of light blue hair that Minato had only ever seen in anime and manga. Emma looked to the table Laila had gestured to and found that all the girls seated there were dazzling fashionistas.

"Y-Yes, I'm Emma Stewart. I appreciate your offer, Lady Lila, but..." Emma wanted to get as far away from this terrifying group as she possibly could. She smiled awkwardly as she planned her escape. Minato's experience as a student in Japan told her that that table was for girls at the highest point of the pecking order, not someone like her. As she looked around the classroom to find a means of escape, she found a workstation that was conspicuously empty. Nearly every seat in the room was filled, yet everyone seemed to be deliberately keeping their distance from the almost empty table. A single girl sat there, and one glance at her filled Emma with relief as she gave a gentle laugh.

"I'm...going to sit over there, actually." She gave a small bow to Lila and went to sit at one of the empty seats by the window.

"Well...that's quite a shame," Lila responded, and though she was still smiling, the curve of her mouth was far tenser than when she first greeted Emma. She'd never even heard of an aristocrat who would turn down an invitation from a duke's daughter.

"Hey. Do you mind if I sit here, Lady Francesca?"

The lone girl sitting at the large workstation was none other than Lady Francesca Delacour. She'd had her head down and was staring at the desk, and when Emma spoke to her, she looked up in surprise.

"Lady Emma? Why are you...?" Her voice was slightly shaky.

"I'm new here in the capital, so you're actually the only girl friend I've made so far. If it isn't too much of a bother, could we maybe sit together?" Emma didn't wait for Francesca's consent

before (rather presumptuously) sitting next to her. If Francesca turned her down, she would be forced to go back to that menacing gaggle of girls. Emma told Francesca she wanted to sit with her only friend loudly enough to be overheard so everyone knew her reason for turning Lila down.

All the girls lowered their voices considerately (though it hardly did much), and Emma heard a mixture of sympathy and hostility whispered about her.

"I can't believe she'd turn down an invitation from Lady Lila of all people!"

"And just to go sit next to someone like Lady Francesca too..."

"She should drop the Goody Two-shoes act already."

Their voices were so quiet, it was hard to tell who was saying what, but it was obviously hardcore bad-mouthing of Emma and Francesca. Francesca couldn't stand it and could only keep her head down, until Emma smiled gently at her and began talking as though she hadn't heard any of the others. Every topic Emma brought up was a question for Francesca, so naturally she had to reply.

"They said we were supposed to bring all our own tools and materials for embroidery. Makes for a lot more stuff to carry, huh?"

"Does it...? Embroidery shouldn't require much just yet. I mostly chose dance lessons last year, and we had specific dresses and shoes that we had to wear because we'd get so sweaty, so we had to bring a change of clothes as well. I think that was far more... Wait, what in the world do you *have* in that bag?!"

Emma had said there was a lot to bring, but her bag was many times larger than the ones the other girls had brought, so Francesca couldn't stop herself from asking.

They were only supposed to be embroidering decorative cuff links, so all they really needed was a needle, some thread, a hoop, and cuff link bases. Yet Emma's bag was big enough to fit two of Francesca's in it with plenty to spare.

"Huh? They told us to bring what we'd need for class, so..." Emma tilted her head adorably. The bag looked like it was full to the brim. This was a beginner's embroidery class, and it was the first day. What could she possibly have stuffed that bag so full of? Francesca and Emma were now both tilting their heads in confusion as each question just bore more questions.

“So sorry to interrupt, but is this seat free?”

The girls looked up to see who was talking, only to find two of the same face side by side.

“I’m Catherine Simmons, and this is my twin sister, Caitlyn. This is the only desk where we’d be able to sit together.” They both had silver hair and silver eyes, as well as beautiful brown skin. They were probably about the same age as Emma, and those big round eyes of theirs were quite striking. They also had matching hairstyles, so it was hard to tell them apart at a glance.

Emma was taken by the twins right away. *They’re so cute… I love them*. Whenever Minato had played games with a character creator, she’d always made her character have silver hair and dark skin. It was her favorite color combination, so seeing it come to life with these two gorgeous silver-haired, dark-skinned beauties had her heart fluttering.

“Of course you may. Let’s learn together, Lady Catherine and Lady Caitlyn. My name is Emma Stewart, and this is my friend, Lady Francesca Delacour.” Emma showed the two to their seats while introducing herself.

“Thank you so much. We wanted to be together no matter what, so this is such a relief… Oh, Lady Emma! What a large scar you have! What happened to you?”

“Catherine! Don’t be so rude! I’m so sorry, Lady Emma. My sister can be so thoughtless sometimes. But really, what happened?” Both the twins’ eyes were gleaming with curiosity, and neither of them hesitated to ask about the purple mark. Even outside of Emma’s aesthetic preferences, the twins were objectively adorable. They were slightly too forward, but that was just another good point about them.

“Hee hee. You two are so alike. Hmm… Let’s just say it’s from the folly of youth!” Emma smiled, willing to let the cute girls get away with anything.

The twins both put their hands to their chests. “Lady Emma! Your smile is cute enough to kill a man! You even made our hearts skip a beat!”

They even spoke in perfect unison, as one might expect from twins.

“Sorry, but my heart skipped a beat first, Caitlyn!”

“No no, *my* heart skipped a beat first, Catherine!”

With the twins’ arrival, Emma and Francesca’s workstation became much livelier. Francesca seemed to be a bit taken aback

by the twins' forwardness, but she didn't seem to dislike it.

They chattered away with the fearless twins, and before they knew it, it was nearly time for class to begin. All of the students were now at their seats and waiting for the professor to arrive. Just as the bell for class rang, the door flung open.

"I-I made it!"

"EEEEEE!"

The second the student hurriedly crossed the threshold, the classroom filled with shrill squeals.

"I-It's *the* Marion Bell!"

"Omigosh, what a dreamboat!"

"Wait, does that mean we're taking Embroidery with a LEGEND?!"

Emma covered her ears to shield herself from the noise. "Lady Francesca, do you know who that is?"

Francesca looked shocked. "Don't tell me you've never heard of the great Marion Bell, Lady Emma!"

Apparently, this was someone with quite a reputation.

"Should we have heard something?" The twins didn't seem to recognize this person either.

"Well, Lady Marion Bell is the daughter of the current commander of the knight—"

"She's a *GIRL*?!" the twins asked in unison again.

Marion was tall and slender, with her brown hair tied in a simple ponytail. Her beautiful blue eyes gave her a calm and gentle air. For some reason, she wore a boy's school uniform, but it suited her frighteningly well.

I see how it is. She's one of those gorgeous girls who prefers more masculine outfits. Makes sense she'd be a hit with the ladies.

Lila, the girl who had invited Emma to sit with her, now invited Marion in a sweeter, more high-pitched voice.

"Why, Lady Lila. It's been some time. How have you been? I appreciate the invitation, but it seems your workstation is already full."

"Not to worry. I'll have someone leave," Lila responded as though it were nothing at all. Even from far away, it was clear that every girl in Lila's group was instantly struck with anxiety.

I knew that place was bad news.

"No, no. I arrived late, so it wouldn't be right for me to take someone's seat. Ah, I see an empty seat over there. Thank you so much for the invitation." Marion took Lila's hand and planted a

gentle kiss upon it before walking away. It was an entirely overblown, pompous move, yet the elegance of it suited her perfectly, making her look handsome. The girls' screams were nonstop.

"May I sit here?" Marion approached the empty seat which was, naturally, right where Emma and her friends were sitting.

"Go right ahead." Emma volunteered the seat to Marion, ignoring all the jealous glares from the other girls around her.

According to Francesca, embroidery class was split into groups by the desk one sat at, and they'd spend the whole year in that group. Some homework would be a group effort, so they would need to meet outside of class too. Because of that, girls who took this embroidery class would spend all their free time before school started frequently attending tea parties to find other group members so they wouldn't be left out of the fray.

This meant that all the people Emma would be spending the year embroidering with were the outliers. Francesca, the drinker. And even Emma herself, the insect-loving weirdo. Catherine and Caitlyn, the twins with no filter. Marion, the princely woman.

Is it just me...or is this group REALLY tropey?

Marion introduced herself, and Emma grinned. This was going to be awfully fun.

◆◆◆

Though it was an embroidery class, most of the girls there had been interested in the art form from a young age, so they just barely touched on the basics. As the students sat in silence, the teacher wrote on the chalkboard and explained how to make embroidery for cuff links.

Meanwhile, Francesca Delacour was having an internal dilemma.

How had it all come to this?

Lady Emma of Count Stewart's family, Lady Catherine and Lady Caitlyn of Count Simmons's family, and Lady Marion of Duke Bell's family were all at *her* table.

Ever since the incident at the royal party, the Delacour family had been in dire straits. The blowback from the firstborn prince's faction, the second-born prince's faction, and even the centrists had been massive, and it seemed like her father was on the

brink of losing his job at the castle. Francesca had been close to finding a suitable fiancé, but was now back at square one. She used to receive dozens of invitations to parties a week, but now none were coming at all. Her mother was always in tears, and while her father never scolded Francesca or tried to comfort her, he'd spend most of his time at work in the castle, and more often than not, he wouldn't come home. Just a few weeks ago, she'd been best friends with Lady Lila and her posse, but nobody would even look at her now. All the time she'd spent enjoying school with that extravagant group felt like a dream.

But Francesca didn't even want to go back. She wouldn't have been willing to hurt someone again just to rejoin their clique.

Francesca had been an excellent dancer since she was young, and she'd been taking high-level courses as a result. However, there was not a single lord who wished to be her partner this year. One slipup in aristocratic society always had a trickle-down effect, and she knew that all too well. Every time it had happened to someone else, she had been so relieved it wasn't her. She never wanted to be that person.

Except now, she *was* that person, and she knew it. All the same, she hated that she had to give up on dancing after so many years of hard work and practice. It hurt so badly. She'd decided to take Embroidery since she hardly had any other choice, but she'd doubted anybody would be willing to invite her to their group.

If she arrived late, she felt like no matter where she tried to sit, the other girls would refuse to share a workstation with her. Francesca was so afraid of such rejection that she came to class earlier than anyone else and tucked herself away in the corner of the empty classroom. As the students began to trickle in, not a single one of them tried to sit next to her.

"Oh, there's empty seats over there!" A group of girls approached Francesca's desk.

"Wait, that's Lady Francesca."

"We can sit over there if we split into groups of two and three."

As sad as it was, it was exactly what she expected.

Obviously, Lady Lila's group didn't even look at her, no matter how friendly they'd been only days before. They'd been treating Francesca like she didn't even exist ever since the party, and at their school, whatever Lila's group did, the rest would follow.

In the corner of the classroom, Francesca couldn't bear to look at anyone. She just kept her head down and waited for class to start.

This was her punishment—punishment for that awful baptism and all the other terrible things she'd done. She might have been reluctant to do such things at first, but before she knew it, she'd gotten addicted. The more she did, the more the others would praise her and give her all the attention she wanted. She'd been fully caught up in the accolades. She'd been convinced that the baptism was what made her worth something. She'd gone from nothing to everything, and was terrified to lose that. She'd come up with countless excuses to keep her guilt at bay, then flagrantly hurt others with pride. This fall was what she deserved. It was all her fault, after all. She'd desperately hidden the weakness in her heart by doing terrible things. Once she graduated, she'd probably join a convent and spend the rest of her days repenting.

After all, there was no place for her anymore. Not at home, and not at school.

I pray and I pray…please just protect the Delacour family. Please protect my parents.

"Hey. Do you mind if I sit here, Lady Francesca?" A voice pulled Francesca from wallowing in her own misery.

When she quickly raised her head, she found Lady Emma of the Stewart family standing at her table. "Lady Emma? Why are you…?"

Emma was beaming that carefree smile of hers. Francesca knew in her heart that if Emma sat next to an outcast like her, the others might treat them both poorly. Francesca should have turned her down immediately, for Emma's sake. But she couldn't. It was the first time someone had smiled so gently at her in so long, she couldn't hold back her overwhelming joy.

"I'm new here in the capital, so you're actually the only girl friend I've made so far. If it isn't too much of a bother, could we maybe sit together?" Emma plopped herself down on the seat next to Francesca.

Did she really mean what she said at the party? That she really wanted to be friends with the person who did that to her? While part of her wanted to hope, another part told her not to get so full of herself. Despite everything, Lady Emma was willing to speak to her with that angelic smile of hers.

Another small hope grew within her.

Maybe I can talk with her too?

Once Emma sat beside Francesca, the empty seats at her workstation began to fill.

How did this even happen?

The Simmons twins had enrolled just that year, and there were rumors that they were of a foreign country's royal lineage. They had dark skin and silver hair that was quite rare in this country, and it certainly drew attention. The Simmons region was surrounded by the ocean, with a robust trade market. It boasted the largest harbor in the kingdom and its exotic townscapes made it a major tourist spot. The Simmons family was entirely neutral on the matter of which prince they supported, and each faction was desperate to win them over to their side.

And then there was the apple of all the girls' eyes, Lady Marion. Despite the expectations of her gender, she studied knighthood, swordsmanship, hunting techniques, and more, and her physical prowess was enough to gain marks that put the boys to shame. Her family had been knights for generations, and their prestige was second to none. Her brother, Lord Arthur, also attended their school, where he served as the second-born prince's bodyguard.

Lady Emma didn't show a shred of fear when she invited such illustrious aristocrats to sit with her. Most would have been nervous or trying to humble themselves to some degree, but she had greeted the twins, Lady Marion, and even the ruined Lady Francesca with the same sweet smile.

This kind of thing just doesn't happen, does it?

Emma Stewart of the Pallas region, the most prosperous land in the kingdom, and the girl the second-born prince had set his sights on.

Catherine and Caitlyn of the Simmons region, which had the largest port in the kingdom, who were rumored to have royal blood in their veins.

Marion Bell, the androgynous beauty, the daughter of the knights' commander who was also one of the four great dukes in the kingdom.

Before she even knew it, Francesca was surrounded by people who had nearly equivalent influence to Lady Lila's group.

Among such distinguished peers, it was no wonder Francesca Delacour was facing such inner turmoil as she stood on the brink

of ruin after failing the firstborn prince faction's baptism.

Can I actually stand among these girls? Or am I going to mess this up too?

"All right, everyone! I take it you understand how to do this now? Then please take out your materials and begin. If there's anything you don't understand, please raise your hand and ask!" the chubby professor announced in a well-projected voice.

The professor's voice snapped Francesca back to reality and she returned her focus to the class. As she opened her bag to retrieve her materials and the cuff link bases she'd bought, she remembered Emma's massive bag. She peeked over at Emma and found her doing the same, but...how many bases did she *have* in there?!

"L-Lady Emma? How many of those did you bring with you?"

There were dozens and dozens of them. And then there was all the *thread* she was taking out... She just kept bringing out more and more. There were threads of ever so slightly different colors and thicknesses in front of her, and before they knew it, their workstation was covered in a rainbow of string. Was *this* why her bag had been stuffed so full?

Francesca and the other three had only prepared a single set of cuff link bases (one for the left and one for the right), and about the amount of thread they'd expect to use for such a tiny project. That should've been plenty. Maybe Emma just brought a lot more because it was her first time at the academy and she wasn't sure how much she'd need?

"Oh, well, they told me to bring the materials I'd need for about two hours of embroidery, so I thought a hundred cuff links might be enough...?" Emma asked, as though she was worried she hadn't brought *enough*. Not even a professional seamstress would need that much. Francesca wasn't the only one bewildered, as both the twins and Marion were wide-eyed at the sight as well.

"Erm... I-I think a hundred...might be too much?"

"A hundred is WAY too much! Like, that's a crazy amount, Lady Emma!"

Emma assured Marion and the twins that she'd make it work, and without even drafting a pattern, she set up her embroidery hoop, stuck her needle in, and...?!

NYOOOOOM!

Emma began embroidering too fast for the human eye to even follow.

"Sh-She's so fast! How?!"

"We can't even see her hands!"

At such a speed, a hundred cuff links...might actually be doable. They honestly couldn't believe their eyes at the completely unbelievable scene unfolding before them. The twins and Marion met each other's gazes as though they were all thinking the same thing. Eventually, one of them cracked, and all four of the others at the table began laughing uncontrollably.

"Lady Emma, are you superhuman or what?"

"I've never seen anyone embroider that quickly, Caitlyn!"

"I've never seen anyone embroider that quickly either, Catherine!"

"Ah ha ha... M-Maybe we should start calling her 'Master Emma' since she's such a professional..."

In the blink of an eye, everyone in Emma's circle was chatting and laughing as though they'd been friends for years.

It was fun.

Francesca had never *had* so much fun.

This was nothing like the fun Francesca had known before. She had never laughed so heartily before—not at the lavish cotillions that demonstrated one's status, nor the tea parties hosted by even the most popular in high society. Aristocratic life was filled with the constant fear of messing up and knowing everyone was trying to one-up each other. Every party had tension brewing right under the surface. Yet for some reason, that feeling was nowhere to be found around Emma.

This friendship Emma asked for was so much fun, and so very freeing. After laughing for the first time in so long, Francesca felt herself enveloped in such a warm, gentle feeling, as though her whole world had been cleansed.

She never thought such an opportunity for friendship could come to her so easily.

She'd been frozen by peerage and status for so long, unable to fully reveal what was in her heart. But even *she* couldn't help but joke around when Emma started stitching at the speed of light. Emma had easily slipped into Francesca's heart with all the agility of a cat, replacing that fear with something warm and gentle, and it seemed like she was hardly aware she'd even done it.

“C’mon, girls, less laughing, more stitching! The teacher’s glaring at us.” All the girls were taken aback by Emma’s warning, but when they glanced at each other, they started to chuckle again.

The rest of the table began to work on their cuff links as well, but they couldn’t help being curious about what Emma’s cuff links were going to be.

“Is that a cat?”

“It’s a little kitty!”

“Ah, a cat, I see.”

All four of the girls’ voices overlapped. Emma’s handiwork was so quick, she’d already finished her first cuff link.

“This is my family’s cat.” Emma carefully placed her calico embroidery in Francesca’s hands so she could get a better look. Once Francesca had taken it in, she passed it to Catherine, who passed it to Caitlyn, who passed it to Marion.

“Lady Emma… I’m amazed you could embroider such an intricate cat in so little time…”

“Oh, I think I see some letters too!”

“Kongming…?”

“That’s our cat’s name.”

Nyooooom!

Emma was already starting on her second piece, and rather than slowing down, she was actually speeding up. She was so fast, it looked like she had ten hands instead of two.

“This is Liu.”

Nyooom!

“And this is Guan.”

Nyooom!

“And this is Zhang!”

In a flash, she’d made another calico, a black cat, and a white cat.

“I love this sleek black cat the most, Lady Emma!”

“I love this fluffy white cat the most, Lady Emma!”

Catherine and Caitlyn were completely taken in by the completed cuff links.

“In that case, would you like to trade them for the cuff links you two make?”

“Would you really?!” the twins harmonized with unabashed enthusiasm.

“Well, if we’re going to trade for such lovely kitties, then we’d

better get to work, right, Caitlyn?”

“Yes, if we’re going to trade for such lovely kitties, we certainly should get to work, Catherine!”

The two twins began stitching away at their own projects with the most serious expressions.

“Lady Emma, I’d like to trade for one myself. Would you be so kind?”

“Of course, Lady Marion! Would you like to trade too, Lady Francesca?” Emma turned to Francesca, even though she’d been holding back so quietly next to her.

“M-Me? You would do that for me?”

“Hee hee. I can’t wait to see what cuff links you all make!”

While trading embroidery pieces with friends was a common practice in this class, trading with Emma had all of them taking this project extra seriously. They couldn’t possibly embarrass themselves by giving her something of lesser quality. They’d gone from laughing and chatting to deep concentration in no time flat.

Francesca had been terrified to take a class that required group work like Embroidery. She was sure nobody would reach out to her. She just knew she wouldn’t ever fit in again after how badly she’d screwed up. She never would have expected such a warm place could exist. The girl next to her was stitching away at the speed of light. Francesca put all of her gratitude, from the bottom of her heart, into every last stitch toward the angel beside her, Emma Stewart.

Before they even knew it, two hours had passed. Emma really had made a hundred cuff links, shocking all four of her deskmates, the instructor, and all her classmates.

“I’ve been making these since I was little, so…” Emma couldn’t help but feel a bit embarrassed by all the attention. If there had been any boys in their class, they would’ve collapsed from the cuteness. Even Francesca felt a twinge in her own heart.

“You can take whichever ones you like, Lady Francesca and Lady Marion.” After graciously accepting Francesca’s paltry gift, Emma lined all of her finished works and let her deskmates choose which ones they wanted. There were many cats and…bugs, for some reason, but Francesca eventually found one she wanted.

The design was of a spider and its web, which looked like Emma’s scar. She’d used a lovely purple color for it that

shimmered in the light. “Oh, Lady Francesca! That’s Violet! Violet’s a spider I keep as a pet. Isn’t she just the most beautiful purple color?”

Francesca wrapped the treasure in a handkerchief to keep it safe, then placed it inside her bag. *Wait…did she just say she kept a spider as a pet? I wasn’t hearing things was I?*

“I think I’ll choose this one.” Marion chose a fluffy rabbit design.

“The horned hare for you, Lady Marion? It might be a monster, but it’s still so fluffy and cute, don’t you think?” Apparently, Lady Marion liked cute things. She stroked the fluffy horned hare cuff links happily.

“All right everyone, be sure you aren’t late for your next class!” the professor advised the students—who were all engaged in trading their embroidery—before leaving the room.

Francesca felt quite depressed that she’d be all alone after such a fun class. After all, her next class wasn’t one most girls would have chosen willingly.

“What classes are you all taking next? Perhaps we can walk together if our classes are nearby,” Marion suggested as she packed away her materials, reluctant to part from her new friends.

“Er… I, um…” Francesca’s next class was not the kind of class a lady would take. While Francesca was stammering, worried that they might think strangely of her, the twins answered enthusiastically.

“We’re going to Monster Studies next, right, Caitlyn?”

“We *are* going to Monster Studies next, Catherine!”

Both Emma and Marion seemed surprised by the twins’ response. Clearly, it was because most ladies of high society would not take a class like that.

“What a surprise! I’m also taking Monster Studies. I took Beginner’s Hunting Techniques last year, but I thought it might be difficult to advance if I didn’t know much about monsters.”

Wait… Which class?

“The Simmons region doesn’t have any monsters since it’s surrounded by the sea, so we just wanted to know more about them!” the twins replied.

Francesca actually whispered to herself that she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. As it so happened, Francesca was also taking Monster Studies next. She hadn’t actively wanted to

take the class the way her new friends did. She glanced over at Emma to see her reaction. It was hard for Francesca to say she was going to be taking the same class in front of someone who had supposedly been scarred in a monster attack. She didn't want to drag up any unpleasant memories for her, so she was rather nervous about the others' conversation as well.

"I heard girls don't tend to take Monster Studies, but apparently not! My next class is Monster Studies too." Emma joined the conversation, proving that Francesca had nothing to worry about.

"What?! You too, Lady Emma?!" Francesca blurted.

"Whoa... Wait, 'too'? Does that mean you're taking Monster Studies as well, Lady Francesca?"

Apparently, all of her deskmates were taking a class that wasn't *supposed* to be popular with high-class ladies. Such a coincidence was hard to believe.

"Wow, it's almost like it's destiny, huh, Caitlyn?"

"Uh-huh! It must be destiny, Catherine!"

The twins gushed together.

"I was born in a border region, so Monster Studies is pretty vital for me," Emma explained, stroking her scar. "So why are you taking Monster Studies, Lady Francesca?"

"Er...to support my older brother..." The most common reason girls would choose to take Monster Studies was to support their brothers in some way. It was a requirement for whoever inherited a region to pass Monster Studies. Unfortunately, Francesca's older brother was not exactly the studious type. Since Francesca had lost the opportunity to get married, she was forced to take Monster Studies so she could be of use to the family. She'd been dragged kicking and screaming into it, but now she felt like she should be thanking her stuck-up brother after all, because it meant she was now able to take the same class as her newfound friends.

"Hee hee, sounds like big brothers are all the same," Emma agreed, and Francesca smiled in response.

"I've heard there's a lot to memorize in Monster Studies. Let's all work together to pass!" Marion said.

"Oh, maybe we should hold study sessions?!"

Class hadn't even begun yet, but Marion and the twins were already talking about the tests they'd be taking.

"My older brother is a real bonehead, but I think my little

brother will be a lot of help to us. Not to mention, I've heard girls are usually better at memorization. Let's all work extra hard to pass and knock everybody's socks off!" Emma was getting even more eager.

Fewer than ten percent of people who took Monster Studies passed in their first year. It usually took three years to pass on average. It was *the* most difficult subject at the school. If the five of them managed to pass in their first year, it would be completely unprecedented.

And that sounded...like so much fun to Francesca. She could even rub it in her pompous brother's face afterward.

"I'll do my very best!" she exclaimed. Francesca had been miserable leading up to her embroidery class, but now she was looking forward to it *and* the monster studies class she never wanted to take in the first place. She couldn't have possibly imagined her day would go this way when she woke up that morning.

This was so much more fun than when she was getting so full of herself with the others. This must have been what *real* friendship was like. She never knew that friends could be so wonderful. Emma accepted her for who she was, not caring about status, or what other people thought. Francesca knew better than anyone how difficult that could be in high society—she knew just how much courage and resolve it took to be that way.

If anything ever happens to Lady Emma, I swear I will protect her. That's what friends do. I'm going to help her the same way she helped me. I can't just be letting other people help me anymore. I'm going to take my first step forward.

"E-Erm, Lady Emma? Everyone else too... Would you all like to get some cake together? My mother has quite the sweet tooth, so she knows where all the best shops are."

"Cake! Oh my gosh, Lady Francesca, I would *LOVE* to join you!" Emma beamed with joy at the mention of cake.

"I love cake, Caitlyn!"

"I love cake too, Catherine!"

"Come to think of it, your mother's sweet tooth is quite legendary, Lady Francesca. This should be a real treat," Marion responded.

Everyone was all smiles at Francesca's suggestion. Before Francesca even realized it, she was smiling too. Not the forced

kind of smile she’d used before, but a completely natural one.

It was one more thing to look forward to.

So Francesca left her embroidery classroom alongside her four new friends, chatting all the way.



Chapter 32: Hunting Techniques

While Emma was making friends in embroidery class, George and the other boys were taking Beginner's Hunting Techniques. As they changed into the required clothing, her brothers—and even *Joshua*—worried about whether Emma was behaving in her class.

Hunting Techniques was similar to gym class from the brothers' previous life. Their instructor had already been waiting in the class's designated building and told them to change into clothes that were easy to move in. The whole time the boys were getting dressed, the teacher was leering at them.

"Hey, George? You don't think the teacher's like...uh...*that*, do you? He can't take his eyes off us right now..." William whispered to his brother, his expression pitying the poor man.

"Hm? Our father stares at us when we're changing before a hunt too."

"H-He does?!"

"Well yeah. You're risking your life out there. He's making sure nobody's feeling off or injured. Being raised on the borderlands, we know to report even the tiniest of scratches, but I guess the guys here in the capital have like...I dunno, a kinda knightly pride or something? And it makes them try to hide their injuries."

"Yeesh... That's not good."

There were many monsters that would go berserk if they smelled human blood. William could easily imagine what might happen if someone on the front lines had even the slightest scratch on them and a monster picked up the scent.

"It's dangerous enough just having novices on the hunting ground, let alone someone who gets worked up about not wanting to show weakness or whatever so they refuse to understand how much of a burden they'll be."

Teamwork was crucial when it came to hunting monsters. According to the Six Precepts for Regional Monster Subjugation, the rulers of border regions were required to train hunters from regions without monsters. As a result, all kinds of predicaments had arisen because of cultural differences from region to region. This was especially troublesome when hunters from near the

capital began their training, as they would be annoyed that they were being trained by some regular bumpkins, so they'd ignore important warnings from their instructors. Because they wouldn't listen, they'd wind up getting injured and the responsibility would fall on the lord of the region.

"Anyway," George continued, "any time newbies are involved, the leader will watch them starting from when they're getting dressed as a preventative measure."

"Wow, you're a veritable fountain of knowledge when it comes to this sort of thing! I couldn't be more proud of my big brother!"

"Uh, I am *not* your big brother, Joshua."

After all that, it wasn't William, but Joshua who had started pouring on the flattery.

"You will be if I marry your sister!"

"Gross, man."

Though Joshua was laughing, his eyes were deathly serious. "If Hunting Techniques wasn't a required course for boys, I'd be embroidering by Lady Emma's side right about now..." Joshua was a weirdo who was so loath to be parted from Emma, that he'd moved from Pallas to the capital just to stay with her. The little freak had gone so far as to purchase a baron's title just so he could attend the same school as her.

"So what you're saying is that the teacher *isn't* some kinda freaky shotacon? Phew...thank goodness." William put a hand to his heart in relief.

"You are the last person who should be talking about that sort of thing, William." George glowered. William suffered from a terrible case of loliconosis that apparently couldn't be cured even through reincarnation.

"No need to be mean about it, George..."

"Stay strong, Lord William!"

"And *you're* the last person I want comforting me right now..."

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Once all the students finished changing, they went to the exercise field and class began.

"Beginner's Hunting Techniques is mostly about building up stamina, so today we're going to be running." The instructor told them to follow him and then took off.

"I-Instructor? How many laps are we doing?" one of the

students asked, already out of breath.

"Two hours' worth."

"*Huh?!*"

"We're not counting laps. We're just running for two hours."

"*What?!*"

"Make sure you stay hydrated. There's a water station in the middle of the field. You're to run there to get water, then run back as soon as you're done."

"Are you kidding?!"

"Talking will make it harder to breathe. Go at a steady pace. Once you learn the tricks, two hours will feel like nothing."

School had only just started, and they were already being subject to the hellish torments of running. Every year, this was the first time many a spoiled aristocrat learned about the harsh realities of the world.

"*Huff... Huff... Huff...* This is awful... How can someone run...for two whole..."

"*Huff... Huff... Huff...* I might have...underestimated this class..."

Neither William nor Joshua could hide their bewilderment at the challenge the class posed.

"Huh? I thought you researched this school a whole bunch, Joshua? Are you saying you didn't know about this class?" George found it unusual that Joshua was unaware of how difficult the class was and Joshua replied, however out of breath he was.

"*Huff... Huff... Huff...* I only researched the classes Lady Emma was taking."

"*Huff... Huff... Huff...* How do we still have over an hour left...?"

"You two should probably hold off on talking. You'll wind up drying yourself out."

"George... *Huff... Huff...* How are you...*huff*...*huff*...not even...*huff*...*huff*...out of breath yet?!" William, Joshua, and all the other boys were clearly suffering, using every ounce of strength they had to keep running, but the task appeared to be a breeze for George.

"Oh, this? You heard the instructor—you just have to figure out the trick to it. I could run at this pace forever. Heck, this is *way* easier than when we had to sprint after Emma last year, don't you think, William?" George was puzzled, and started wondering if maybe William had less stamina now than he had back then.

"G-George... *Huff*...*huff*...*huff*... Were you a

gorilla…*huff*…*huff*…in a past life or something?" William was really starting to wonder if maybe the sequence had been Wataru, gorilla, then George.

"Oh, don't be like that. You're going to have a really hard time on hunts if this is enough to wind you." Before he'd entered school, before he'd even fully matured, George had already been a regular part of the hunting forces. He was ridiculously skilled when it came to combat.

"Hmm? That guy seems awfully wobbly… I hope he's not dehydrated. Lemme take a look!" George noticed he was about to lap a boy who had fallen behind. The boy seemed to be staggering, so George picked up his own speed to go look after him.

"*Huff*… *Huff*… Yeah… He was definitely…a gorilla…" William wheezed. George called out to the poor boy, ran to get him some water, and even ran ahead to catch up with the instructor to report what had happened. William couldn't believe they were related. His situational assessments, his leadership skills, his instincts, and everything in between were straight-up perfect. For hunters, teamwork was more important than anything else, and George's time looking after his siblings as the eldest brother certainly lent itself to that. The only weak point he had was how bad he was at studying. William could only sigh at his brother's single enormous flaw.

The Tanaka family must have been born under a most unfortunate star, and as a member of that family, William was ridiculously flawed himself. Unfortunately, each and every one of them was equally blind to their own shortcomings.

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"I'm *exhausted*!" William and Joshua shouted as they slumped over their desks.

"I never thought they'd *actually* make us run for two whole hours…" William muttered weakly, having finally caught his breath. When he looked around, there were plenty of other students who were just as exhausted as he was.

"I've never run that much in my life…" Though Joshua had been working out for the past year, he couldn't hide his exhaustion either.

"I mean, you two were pretty much just walking by the

halfway point," George, who seemed perfectly fine, replied.

Their Beginner's Hunting Techniques class had been spent running around the track for two entire hours. The only student who had been able to run at the same pace as the instructor by the end was George. As long as he didn't need to use his head, George was pretty much the best of the bunch. While the other boys in the class had initially looked down on him for being a country bumpkin, now they all gazed at him in sheer admiration.

"George, do you remember what our goal here in the capital was supposed to be?" William whispered.

"Hm? We're not supposed to stand out. Oh..."

Apparently, their mother's goal was a lot harder to achieve than they'd all thought.

"Is Lady Emma here yet?" Joshua was checking to make sure his uniform was pristine as he glanced at the entrance to the classroom.

"I just hope she hasn't gotten into trouble again..."

William's head perked up and he looked to the classroom door. "Oh, it's the prince!"

Sure enough, the second-born prince stood in the doorway. Upon hearing William, Edward walked over to the group with a very tall boy by his side. All the students in the class hurriedly stood to bow, but the prince put a hand up to let them be at ease as he spoke to the Stewart brothers. "By the looks of you, I'd say you just finished Hunting Techniques' infamous two-hour run."

"Were you in the intermediate course, Your Highness?" George asked.

"Indeed. I started school last year. I can only imagine how difficult all that running must have been for someone your age, William." The prince gave William a sympathetic look as he was the youngest in the class. Just as enrollment wasn't restricted by age, they didn't take age or gender into consideration when making lessons for each class, and naturally, social status didn't factor in either.

"You had it *really* rough last year, didn't you, Your Highness?" the boy who came in with the prince said with a mischievous grin.

"They don't need to know that, Arthur," Edward said, brushing the boy off. "Allow me to introduce you. George, William, this is my friend, Arthur Bell."

"Ah, George and William of the Stewart family, I presume. I've

heard so much about you. Though, not *nearly* as much as I've heard about the little princess of your family," Arthur continued with the same mischievous grin.

"*Arthur!*" Clearly, this boy knew just how to make the prince tick.

The Bell family had served as knights for generations, and though the academy didn't allow outsiders, Arthur served as the prince's personal guard there. The two had apparently known each other since they were very young, and Arthur was the only one in the capital who could crack the prince's cold expression.

"Oh, may I introduce someone too, Your Highness?" George asked. "This is my longtime friend, Joshua Rothschild."

Joshua had been essentially hiding in George's shadow, and he quickly gave a bow. "Joshua Rothschild. I was granted the title of baron this year, Your Highness."

The prince allowed him to raise his head. "Ah... The one with the freckles." Even after a year, the prince hadn't forgotten the name that had come up when they'd played house with Jadwiga.

"Indeed. The Stewarts and I have a most favorable relationship. I'm *especially* close with Lady Emma." The second those words left Joshua's mouth, sparks crackled between him and the prince as an air of nervousness closed in on everyone there.

Is Joshua seriously throwing down with the prince *of all people?!*

He was just a commoner until recently!

But didn't you hear? He said his name was Rothschild! If he's the heir to the Rothschild Company, then his family has a fortune on par with the whole country's!

All the students unfortunate enough to be in the classroom at the time were now conversing through panicked expressions alone. The royal party had made it abundantly clear that the prince had a crush on Emma. The rumor had spread like wildfire to even those who hadn't even attended; by now the only one who *didn't* know was Emma herself.

The languid mood of the students after Hunting Techniques had intensified instantly, and nobody could even move. Spring might have started to warm the capital, but the classroom felt like it had frozen over.

"How is our sister so dang popular, anyway?"

"Maybe we can at least get the *prince* to come to his senses..."

Joshua was young and an exceptional merchant, and the

prince was doing a magnificent job carrying out his royal duties—if it weren't for Emma, they'd have both had unlimited prospects. Joshua was a lost cause, but the brothers hoped (in vain) that maybe the prince could be saved...until Emma, the root of all the tension, came walking through the door.

"Hee hee, I think this is our class!"

"Phew! The instructor was so adamant that we hurry, I was worried we wouldn't make it!"

"I sure can't wait for Monster Studies, Caitlyn!"

"I sure can't wait for Monster Studies either, Catherine!"

"The classroom here seems big enough that we won't need to worry about finding a seat."

The sound of girls chatting was what finally broke the icy atmosphere of the Monster Studies classroom—a place no girl had been in ages.

"Oh, Joshua! How was Hunting Techniques?"

Joshua, who was facing down the prince, turned to the entrance as Emma called out in a preposterously carefree voice. The students, who were still frozen, began to converse with their eyes again.

What are girls doing here?

Is that Lady Emma? It is, right? Of all the times for her to talk to Joshua before the prince!

What's going on?! Has the first day of school ever been this tense before?

The boys had no idea what to do and their chatter was getting worse...silently, of course.

The prince turned the moment he heard Emma's voice.

"Wow, it's the second-born prince, Caitlyn!"

"Wow, it sure is the second-born prince, Catherine!"

Francesca and Marion both frantically pushed the nonchalant twins' heads down as they bowed to the prince themselves. The twins and Emma were shockingly lackadaisical about this, despite his dark hair indicating his royal status before he even turned around.

"Why, Emma! What are you doing here?" The prince's voice was noticeably more excited as he greeted her. All of his classes that day were required courses for boys, so he had assumed he wouldn't see her.

"I'm here for Monster Studies. Are you taking it too, Your Highness?" Emma asked with a gentle smile. She wasn't wearing

a veil as she had been at the party, so the large scar on her right cheek was in plain view. Yet in a room where one could cut the tension with a knife, Emma's smile was a welcome relief.

Wow...

Sh-She's so cute...

I'm in love...

Just like before, the boys spoke only with their eyes and through glances, yet many of those eyes were practically heart-shaped at that point. The boys in this world really were all too easy.

"Oh, I didn't know you and William would be here too, George. And this is...?" Emma tilted her head at Arthur. As Emma hadn't attended any of the tea parties in the capital, there were very few faces she knew compared to the other girls.

Arthur looked at the new arrivals, and as always, he couldn't hide the devilish grin on his face. He held out a hand to shake, which Emma took. "It's a pleasure to meet you, princess of the Stewart family! I'm Arthur Bell. That's my little sister, Marion, there. It seems you've already made her acquaintance, though!" As he leaned forward to kiss Emma's hand, Marion stopped him.

"Arthur, that's enough."

"Why are you stopping me, Marion? You do this all the time, don't you?" Arthur asked, looking thoroughly displeased. The aura of handsomeness between the two siblings standing next to each other was off the charts.

"No girl would be bothered by *my* kisses. But that doesn't go for you, Arthur!"

Like brother, like sister, it seemed.

"Hee hee. You two get along nicely, don't you?" Emma gave another one of her gentle smiles, and Arthur drew closer to her.

"You really are a cutie... No wonder the prince is head over—Gack!" The prince yanked Arthur back, throwing him completely off-balance.

"Would you knock it off, Arthur?! How long are you going to be glued to her hand?!" While he'd regally and nobly leaped into action to save Emma, he'd grabbed her hand in the confusion and hadn't let go.

"Your Highness?"

Joshua was screaming about him holding Emma's hand, and the prince was pointedly ignoring him.

"Your Highness?"

"..."

"Your Highness? Your *Highness*?"

"..."

"Yooooour Hiiiiighness?"

Edward could *definitely* hear, but was purposely avoiding eye contact with Joshua while keeping Emma's hand in his.

"Seriously, William... Why *is* our sister so impossibly popular?" One would have expected the prince to have been cured after a whole year apart, but apparently, the infection ran deeper than they thought.

"Maybe she just doesn't notice since she's technically in her thirties? Or she just looks at them like they're kids or something? I feel like that just makes the whole thing *worse*..." William groaned. They were all likely beyond saving.

Both brothers could only moan with their heads in their hands.

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"Could you all please just be *quiet* already?" a student sitting at the very front of the class said with an annoyed voice, standing from his seat. "Ugh, *girls*. How stupid do you have to be to attempt a class that requires *brains* like Monster Studies? The rest of us are *trying* to get an education here. And Your Highness, this class isn't even *required* for you. You're not just coming to *ruin* it for all of us, are you?"

"Lord Robert..." Francesca muttered and tried to make herself appear smaller.

Arthur shot this "Robert" person an annoyed look. "Save your snide remarks. Class hasn't even started yet."

Emma quietly asked Francesca who this little jerk—er, esteemed gentleman was. She couldn't believe anyone would have had the nerve to tell the *prince* to be quiet.

"You think I can't hear you, Emma Stewart? You must *really* be a hick if you don't even know who *I* am," Robert snapped with clear and utter contempt.

"You've gone too far, Robert!" The prince was still holding Emma's hand, and he gently squeezed it to let her know everything would be all right and he would protect her. But Emma didn't seem afraid of him at all.

"Sorry, Robert...er, Lord Robert? I've lived on the border for so

long, there's a *lot* I don't know." Emma bowed her head apologetically and used her free hand to lift the hem of her skirt slightly in a curtsy. She was obligated to because he'd used her full name. No one should know the name of some nobody girl from out in the boonies…but apparently she'd stood out more than she'd expected at the party.

"Lady Emma, Lord Robert is Lady Lila's older brother. He's the eldest son of Duke Lance," Francesca whispered from behind Emma.

"Lady Lila's brother?! He certainly doesn't look it, does he?" Lila had the most beautiful light blue hair Minato never would've seen in her past life, but Robert had dark brown hair that was nearly black. Not to mention, Lady Lila had been kind enough (in Emma's eyes) to invite her to sit together when Emma had entered the room all by herself. Lady Lila hadn't come at her with knives out like Robert did.

"Of course I don't. Unlike *her* mother, my mother is a high-class woman—niece of the king! Remember this, and remember it well: I have *royal blood* in my veins, so don't you dare lump me in with that peasant," Robert boasted, with a smirk that said, *Watch your tone around me, you rube.*

In the Pallas region where the Stewart family reigned, the rulers of the region worked alongside their people. While they might have become the most prosperous region in the kingdom despite the looming threat of monsters at hand, they'd been dirt poor for many, many years. The Stewarts had been living as minimally as possible just to get by, so they had frequently asked the people of the land for assistance. They learned how to preserve foods for the seasons when the harvest ran thin, methodically picking up whatever knowledge about saving they could get. Even their knowledge of sewing and sericulture had initially come from the common people. Pride and appearances wouldn't put food on the table in the Pallas region, and the concept of being more important just because one was an aristocrat was something the Stewart family's ancestors cast aside *very* quickly. Not to mention, since they'd all gotten their memories of their past lives as Japanese people, Robert's bragging didn't really mean much to the current generation of Stewarts.

"Uh-huh. Okay, so you're related to the prince and that's why you can take such a nasty tone with him?"

Robert sneered. “Are you thick or something?” Emma was trying to figure it all out, but apparently had missed the mark. Robert sighed and went into an explanation. “The prince’s mother is just a marchioness. Not to mention, those of the Lance family have married the royal princesses for generations. Don’t tell me you didn’t know *that* either. If we’re talking *bloodline*, I’m closer to the king than he’ll ever be.”

The prince scowled at Robert’s bragging. That had clearly hit him where it hurt. The second the Lance family brought out the bloodline topic, nobody could refute them. Even with Arthur and Marion’s high peerage, there was nothing they could say. Francesca was trembling, having seen countless people who had been brought to their knees after earning Robert’s ire, while the twins were just watching the situation with bemusement.

Emma couldn’t take Robert’s bizarre claims and finally let her true feelings spill. “Uh…but you’re *not* royalty? You’re just bragging about being in the bloodline when you’re not even doing anything particularly regal. That’s pretty cringey, if you ask me.”

Robert’s face went completely red with rage. “*What did you just say to me?!*”

“Aaaah, Emma! I-I think it’s quiet time now!”

“Oh gosh, sis, your scars really hurt, huh! You should totally sit for a second! I mean, they hurt so much, you can’t even control what’s coming out of your mouth!”

“Huh? What do you mean? My scars aren’t…”

“You’re in *so much pain*, right, sis? Total searing pain! Like they’re splitting right open! Hoo-wee, it’s just agony, huh?”

“Lady Emma, you’re incredible!”

“Joshua, please shut up! You’ll just make things worse!”

Just as George and William intercepted the situation in a panic, the bell rang to signal the start of class. For all the students who had been silently watching the train wreck unfold, that bell couldn’t have come soon enough.

Before the bell had even stopped ringing, the instructor entered, ducking under the doorframe. He was a massive man, and he shot Emma and the others a look. “Get to your seats already.”

One reason girls didn’t tend to take Monster Studies was because of the instructor, Wolfgang Garianno, himself. He was gargantuan. He was over two meters tall with a shiny bald head.

He might've even been bigger than the Stewart family patriarch, Leonard. His muscles were practically bursting out of his clothes and his face was covered in even more scars than Emma's, which often gave ladies a major fright when he looked at them.

"Yessir!" Robert replied like a total dweeb and quickly returned to his seat.

Ugh, could he get any more cringe? Emma thought as William forced her to sit as well.

"I'm Wolfgang Garianno, and I will be your Monster Studies instructor—though I recognize most of you from last year." The instructor's voice resounded through the large classroom.

Though it was a required course, it was incredibly difficult to pass, so many students had to take it more than once. "That being said, we have a surprising five girls in the class this year. I'll warn you, it's a difficult subject, so just do your best and study hard," he said, looking directly at Emma's group. The twins froze under his piercing gaze with a strange "Eep!" sound. Francesca was still shuddering, and even Marion gulped.

Only Emma responded with a grin, meeting the instructor's gaze. "All right! I'll do my best, Professor Wolfgang!"

A beefcake old man with a scary face and intimidating aura? Yeah, I can vibe with that. Her weird obsession with old men had her responding in the *completely* opposite way a normal little girl would.

"Oh? Judging by the scars on your face, you must be Emma of the Stewart family." He seemed surprised that the young girl hadn't been scared in the slightest, unlike the other girls.

While Emma thought it was pretty rich for *him* to bring up her facial scars, she really couldn't understand how her name had apparently spread to every single person in the capital.

Even after Professor Wolfgang had entered the classroom, the familiar tension in the air had the students silently conversing through glances again.

Holy... Did Lady Emma just respond to Professor Wolfgang like it was nothing?!

I mean, did you notice how she used Lord Robert's own words against him before?

Okay, but he's terrifying! That's the *Professor Wolfgang!*

It's called compassion, man! She's smiling because she doesn't want to be rude, even if she is *scared!*

You think Lady Emma's kindness can really overcome fear like

that?

Yeah, after seeing that smile of hers, I'm pretty glad I took this class.

Same, dude!

Not a single person assumed it was just because she was attracted to him.

"All right. Today, we're doing a special lesson on slimes. It's going to be a lot different from last year's lesson, so listen closely."

All the students leafed through their textbooks, trying to remember what the heck a slime even was. Since slimes were so rare, not many people knew about them. The instructor chuckled, knowing that year's class would be more difficult than most. Every year, the contents of the class changed with whatever new discoveries had been made, making most of what the students had studied the year before moot.

The Stewart siblings were taking the class quite seriously, and it was their actions that had led to such an extensive revision of the text on slimes. He felt bad for all the students who were *sure* they were going to pass this year, but it was bound to be an interesting year at least. It put a smile on his rugged face.

While Wolfgang began drawing a picture of a slime on the blackboard (ridiculously well too), George and William took the opportunity to scold Emma quietly.

"Emma... No, actually, *Minato*! You were actively trying to rile up Lord Robert, weren't you?!"

"Mina-nee, you *know* that's a bad habit! You can't be doing that to a kid! We told you not to cause any problems!"

"You heard what he said when we first came in, didn't you? He accused girls of not having brains. I've never tolerated misogynistic jerks like that and you know it." Emma giggled, but it was tinged with hatred. In this world, Emma had only met boys who were nice to her, but it seemed the capital wouldn't be so kind. There would definitely be other misogynists like Robert.

Minato had always been a lot more forgiving of women than she was of men, but she was *especially* spiteful toward men who got it in their heads that men were somehow more capable than women.

"Emma... Please go easy on him, would you?" George was getting a seriously bad feeling about Emma's openly antagonistic smile.

“Seriously, sis… I’m begging you not to cause a scene…” William warned her, though he knew it was pointless.

“Enough chitchat over there! Emma Stewart! What happens when you cut a slime?” Wolfgang shot the question at Emma, having completed his drawing of a perfectly bouncy slime on the chalkboard.

“Well, Professor Wolfgang, cutting a slime will make it split into two. The more you cut them, the more slimes will be generated,” Emma answered without missing a beat.

Wolfgang responded that she was correct (with some level of shock). The sound of students flipping through their textbooks was replaced with oohs of admiration instead. The only one unimpressed was Robert, whose face was twisted with resentment. But Emma was blissfully ignorant. Melsa had begged them not to stand out. Just get through school *safely* and *without problems*. But unfortunately for her, the battle between Emma and Robert had already begun.

Chapter 33: Robert’s Counterattack

Grrrrr…

Grrrrrrrrrr…

Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrr…

“Just a little bit longer, Lady Emma!” Francesca soothed. Once their two-hour monster studies class was over, it would be their lunch break and they could all get to the cafeteria.

Grrrrr…

The grumblebug in Emma’s tummy had been groaning up a storm since the halfway point of their class. The Stewart siblings, Joshua, all of Emma’s new embroidery buddies, the prince, and Arthur were all close enough to hear it loud and clear. Hunger didn’t care about gender or social status.

Grrrr… Grrrrrrrr… Grrrrrrrrrr…

The second the bell rang and the instructor left the classroom, Emma was up in a flash.

“Let’s get to the cafeteria, everyone!” Her stomach growling made her desire quite clear even before she opened her mouth, so everyone was quick to put everything back in their bags and leave the classroom with her.

There were countless buildings that all looked similar lined up on the campus, but if one kept walking, they’d find an even more extravagant edifice. It had been built before the school had even been founded, and its massive grand hall was now used as a cafeteria for the students. There was a bit of distance between the monster studies classroom and the cafeteria, and Emma’s tummy grumblebug whined with every step. Apparently, it was just as energetic as Emma herself. She kept trying to quiet it, but it was impossible. She could only follow its lead straight to lunch.

Grrrr… Grrrrrrr… Rrrrrrgh…

“So…hungry…” Emma’s hunger had her staggering on her feet, and George and William had to hold her up from either side.

“We made it to the cafeteria already, sis.”

“You wouldn’t be so hungry if you weren’t picking fights with Lord Robert.”

The massive hall was equipped with enough tables to seat

every student at the academy. It was even larger than the monster studies classroom, which was the most spacious of all the classes, so it would still take a little while to find a table where they would all fit.

"Lady Emma certainly does have the *cutest* little tummy grumble, though, doesn't she?"

"You should know better than to point out a lady's stomach growling, dearest brother," Marion scolded.

"We've never met anyone who gets *that* hungry before, have we, Caitlyn?"

"No, we've never met anyone who gets *that* hungry, Catherine!" The twins giggled, clearly enjoying themselves.

"I'll be sure to bring us snacks from here on out, Lady Emma," Joshua promised with a smile.

The prince had returned to the castle during the lunch break in order to fulfill his royal duties while enjoying a light meal, so they had gone their separate ways as soon as they left the classroom. He clearly hadn't wanted to part from her, and the look of sadness on his face had certainly left quite an impression on Emma, but he smiled through it and encouraged her to get something to eat when her stomach started growling again. He truly was too kind...

The menu at the cafeteria changed daily, and while you weren't allowed to choose what to eat, Emma had heard the menu was both delicious *and* nutritious. The anticipation made her even hungrier.

The first week of classes at the school had only gone until noon, so this was the first time the Stewarts and the twins had ever seen the cafeteria. Apparently, it was pretty much the same as the school lunchtimes in the Tanakas' past lives. They got a whopping two hours to eat, so plenty of students would go home or out to eat.

Once Emma finally arrived at an empty table, she sat around it with all of her friends. She didn't see anybody else from her monster studies class, presumably because they'd all hurried ahead while she was staggering her way over. She was fine with that, though, because she didn't have the energy to put up with Robert's BS if he tried anything.

Once seated, cafeteria staff would bring the student's food to them without a word, so Emma watched as they lined up her lunch set with a stew as the main dish. The staff then placed a

basket of fluffy bread in the middle of the table before taking their leave. George told them not to give in to gluttony and to wait until the staff left before digging in, but that's when Emma's stomach reached a fever pitch.

She had a whole swarm of grumblebugs now.

GRRRRR! GRRRRRRRRR! GRRRRRRRR!

George could give all the warnings he wanted, but the waitstaff could *definitely* hear Emma's stomach.

"All right, let's eat." After he'd finally given them the signal, all the students put their hands together to give thanks, then dug in.

Emma took one bite of the stew and the tender meat practically melted in her mouth. "It's amazing!" After that singular compliment, she went dead silent and focused entirely on the meal before her.

Meat in border regions like Pallas usually meant monster meat. However, in places as far from the border as the capital, you were more likely to come across cows, pigs, chickens, and other familiar livestock from the Tanakas' previous lives. While she did enjoy the gamey texture of monster meat, you really couldn't beat good ol' beef. She had to retract her comparison to a plain old cafeteria lunch; this had superior ingredients, presentation, flavor—it was better in every way.

"Today's meal is a lot fancier than usual, isn't it?" Marion mused with a smile as she assessed the meat chunks floating in her stew.

"It certainly is. I'd heard the quality might vary based on how much the school received in contributions, but this might be the first time I've ever seen such high-quality meat," Francesca agreed. And it wasn't just the stew—the salad was fantastic, there were plentiful side dishes, and the bread was fluffy and fresh out of the oven. It was completely different from what they'd been fed the previous year. Overjoyed chatter was coming from the students all around them. Whether one was an aristocrat or a commoner kid, lunchtime was something every schoolkid could enjoy.

"And it's not just the ingredients either. The seasoning is way better than last year. They're using some relatively expensive spices pretty generously." Arthur then looked from Emma pigging out on the meat to Joshua, who was grinning with satisfaction.

Rumor had it that the Rothschild Company had recently made some major contributions to the academy. Arthur thought back to poor Edward, who had gone back to work on his royal duties alone. If the Rothschild Company's contributions were all going toward Emma's food, then Joshua might have been an even bigger threat than they'd previously thought.

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As Emma and the others were drooling over the food they'd been waiting for all this time, Robert seethed with rage in the monster studies classroom.

"What. The hell. After all that, she doesn't have a single apology for me?" Robert had barely been able to concentrate during class with how upset he was. He waited until the teacher's footsteps had faded before turning around to deal with Emma.

But she wasn't there.

"You there! Where did Emma Stewart go?!"

The meek boy shuddered but gave Robert his answer: "U-Um! She left the classroom right after class ended."

"Hmph. So she was too afraid to face me?"

"M-Maybe? She was looking pretty unsteady on her feet... Maybe she wasn't feeling well?" the boy responded, thinking back to how Emma had been before she left.

"See, this is why women shouldn't take Monster Studies. They can't handle all the blood and gore we have to study on a daily basis." Slimes caused massive casualties whenever they appeared, and the class hadn't skimped on the grisly details.

Women are such a pain. They'd be fine if they'd just shut up and do as they're told.

"She's gotten cocky because she's got the second-born prince's attention, but she's just a weak little girl when it all comes down to it." To put it another way, Robert might've even offered to protect her if she sucked up her pride and begged him. No, no. She had talked down to *the* Robert Lance. She had to be punished, and it had to be good.

Several boys stood up when Robert began bad-mouthing Emma. "I-I-If I may, Lord Robert!"

"Emma isn't cocky at all! She's a kind and purehearted angel!"

"She's not weak either!"

Robert's eyes narrowed. "Sorry, are you *stupid*? She was

literally staggering out of the classroom, wasn't she?"

"Y-Yes... Her brothers were helping to hold her up..." Just before leaving the classroom, Emma had doubled over and her brothers had lent their elbows to help her walk. She'd looked quite agonized as well. Before class, her younger brother had cut in and suggested her scars might be aching in order to stop the fight, but maybe she actually *had* been in pain. The boys were trying to explain their position to Robert with hushed, rapid-fire mumbling.

"I-It's because..." Despite their desire to protect Emma, the boys were having trouble saying much more to Robert.

"What'd I say? She's *weak*." Robert grinned smugly, proud to have won the argument.

That was when the boys slipped up.

"The scars on Emma's face are from a slime! She nearly died when a slime attacked her a year ago! Today's class just brought it all flooding back. *Anyone* would have felt terrible after that!" The majority of the boys who were standing up for Emma were from border regions near Pallas, so they knew a lot more about monster attacks than those in the capital, who hardly ever had to worry about such things. While there were rumors that she'd received her scars from protecting the prince, not many knew that monsters had been involved. Obviously, reports had gone out that a localized barrier crisis had occurred, but the people of the capital were largely uninterested in monsters, so not many people read them. Even though most boys would rather not spread rumors about how a girl got such a massive scar on her face, their desire to protect Emma was enough to loosen their tongues.

A horrible grin crossed Robert's face. "Oh? A *slime* gave her that nasty scar, huh?"

The boy who'd let it slip covered his mouth once he realized his mistake, but it was too late. He'd told the one person who should never have known about Emma's trauma.

"Hey, Brian! *Brian!*" Robert kicked a nearby desk and violently woke a boy who'd been fast asleep since before class started.

"Hm? Oh, Lord Robert... Did class start yet?" the boy—Brian, apparently—said in a sleepy voice. But once he saw Robert, his blood ran cold. Robert had a smirk on his face that Brian had learned to recognize over the years. They'd been friends since they were young, and only Brian knew what such an expression

meant.

This was the face Robert made when he'd found a new toy. And once Robert found a new toy, he'd play with it until it broke.

So who was the poor soul he was going to try to break this year?

Robert hurried Brian out of the classroom alongside him. "Let's go. I've got a great idea."

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"This building actually has a courtyard in it too, Lady Emma. Would you like to see it now that we've finished our lunch?" Joshua suggested. Emma was rubbing her stomach, looking totally full and satisfied. Since the large building of the cafeteria used to be a royal manor, the courtyard was likely to be quite majestic.

"Oh, it's *got* to be amazing if you're suggesting it, Joshua! Let's go!" Joshua knew every last one of Emma's interests, so she trusted him wholeheartedly.

"A courtyard sounds lovely, doesn't it, Caitlyn?"

"A courtyard certainly does sound lovely, Catherine!"

The twins' eyes twinkled with curiosity. They all left the cafeteria and headed to the courtyard, all the while formally introducing themselves to each other.

Like Emma, the twins were both thirteen and starting school this year. They were bundles of curiosity, and since they hadn't gotten a good look at their extravagant surroundings on the way to the meal hall due to Emma's extreme hunger, they were now gawking at it all.

Francesca and Marion were both seventeen and in their third year of school.

Arthur was eighteen and in his fourth year. According to him, it was very rare for anyone to choose to take Monster Studies in their first year.

"It's the most difficult class, so most people tend to take it in their second or third years, after they've gotten used to the school," he explained. The hunting techniques class was meant to build stamina, so it was required every year. On the other hand, as long as one passed their region's required monster studies classes before graduation, it didn't matter when they were taken.

“I-I had no idea…” George seemed shocked at the concept.

“Mother said you should take it as many times as possible because she wasn’t sure you could pass.”

“I’d like to pass Beginner’s Monster Studies in my first year if I can…”

Emma and William dealt a one-two punch to George. William was the second-born son, so he only had to pass the beginner’s level, and Emma didn’t even have to take it in the first place.

“Why did *I* have to be the oldest…?”

“Sounds really rough, man…”

George bemoaned his fate, gaining Arthur’s sympathy. He was also meant to inherit his family’s estate, but he only needed to pass the beginners’ class since the Bell region was close to the capital. However, since he hardly ever had any contact with monsters, he’d failed the class two years in a row.

“For real. Maybe it would have been better if I were born earlier and as a boy?” Emma said, thinking about the massive hurdle ahead of her poor brother.

“So you could ruin the Stewart family name forever?”

“The Pallas region would be cooked if you took over, sis!”

Her brothers weren’t having it, though.

“This is the place!” Once there was a break in their friendly banter, Joshua pointed to the door to the courtyard. There were servants in front of it, and once they noticed Emma’s group approaching, they deftly opened the door.

“Wow! It’s so much bigger than I thought!” The courtyard was even bigger than they’d imagined, even for a building as massive as the one they’d been in. The courtyard was filled with greenery as far as they could see, and a gentle breeze tickled past them. It was dotted with tropical trees and gazebos with what seemed to be tables and sofas made of woven rattan.

“This is totally just like Bali!” Emma blurted, remembering the resort destination from her previous world. There were bright cushions lined up on the sofas, making them stand out as a single pops of color among the more muted tones of the gazebo.

“Oh, it sounds like Lady Emma knows about Balitu, Caitlyn!”

“It certainly does sound like that, Catherine!”

The twins both chirped.

“Balitu is an island nation far, far away from this kingdom, right, Caitlyn?”

“And because it’s an island, there aren’t any monsters to worry about, right, Catherine?”

Francesca gasped. “Goodness, there are countries without any monsters?”

“I heard it’s safe because monsters can’t come out of the ocean, right, Caitlyn?”

“But even if it’s safe, they don’t let people move there because there’s not enough room, right, Catherine?”

Apparently, this world had a place called Balitu, which was similar to Bali. The friends all sat on the sofa and listened to the twins talking about this foreign land. The Simmons region where they grew up had a massive port, so they were naturally quite well-versed in foreign countries. The kingdom the siblings lived in and the empire were both on land, so they used the resources gained from the vast land and monsters they hunted to greatly expand and flourish. Island countries didn’t live under the constant threat of monsters, so their people’s demeanor tended to be a lot more easygoing. There weren’t any trade routes that reached farther east than Balitu, and none of the maps in the kingdom had anything charted that way either.

“Wouldn’t it be nice to trade with countries farther east than Balitu, Caitlyn?”

“It sure would be nice to trade with countries farther east than Balitu, Catherine!”

Since the twins lived at what was essentially the front door to all the foreign lands, they excitedly chatted about how they wanted to take all of the foreign language classes offered at the academy before they graduated.

The conversation started to subside once the servants brought out some tea for the students. Apparently, tea was free to anyone who used the courtyard. Though Emma should have been full from lunch, she lamented the fact that there weren’t any sweets to go alongside her black tea.

“I’ll be sure to bring some for you tomorrow,” Joshua promised.

“Oh, that reminds me! Here, Joshua.” Emma reached into her bag to find a pair of cuff links she’d made during her embroidery class. She pulled out the pair with the most detail—the ones that had taken her the most time of all—and handed them to Joshua.

“Thank you so very much! Wow! Look at how beautiful they are! I’ll treasure them forever, Lady Emma!” Joshua attached

them to his sleeves right away, grinning ear to ear.

Arthur took a look at the cuff links and gasped. “Whoa, what in the world? This embroidery is so detailed! *Too* detailed, even.” The cuff links Emma gifted Joshua featured a lion, which was the Rothschild family crest. “I see a lion, a unicorn, and…an arrow? There’s so many little details.” Arthur kept staring at all the embroidered elements on the tiny cuff links.

Since the Bell family had been knights for generations, their family crest was a sword. The Delacour family crest was a quill, the Simmons’s was a boat, and the Stewart family had recently changed theirs to a cat. All of their crests felt relatively simple compared to the Rothschilds’ crest.

“Our crest certainly is bursting with merchant spirit. They just packed it full of whatever lucky charms they could think of, huh?” Joshua gave an awkward chuckle as he stroked the cuff links lovingly.

“I wanted to thank you for selling me all those cuff link bases so cheaply, so I made you some with your crest.” Since Emma was using more than everyone else in her class combined, she’d known it was bound to be difficult to get so many cuff link bases, so she figured it’d be easier to just ask Joshua. After promising to give him a gift, he cut the price by a ridiculous eighty percent.

“We never really had any embroidery on our cuff links,” George said, showing Joshua the plain cuff links on his uniform as he looked at Joshua’s. The Stewarts had pretty much sold all of their decorative items when they were in the red, and they hadn’t gone out of their way to replace them. It wasn’t just George either. Both Emma’s and William’s sleeves still had the default buttons. While they’d made plenty of tapestries to hide stains on the wall, tablecloths to cover scratches on their tables, and clothes for the servants and themselves, they hadn’t really bothered to make accessories until they started making dresses for Rose.

“Oh, I’ve got some for you and William too, George.” She figured since she went out of her way to make them, she’d like it if they got some use. She handed George some cuff links that featured their black cat, Guan, and William some featuring their calico, Liu.

“You’re…really good at embroidery, huh? You seriously made all of these in only two hours?” Arthur was bewildered. Joshua, George, and William’s cuff links were all very difficult, meticulous

designs. Normally in the time their class took, people would only have the time to make something for themselves, something to trade with their friends, or something to give to a boy they liked. Arthur, being the tall and handsome son of a duke he was, was constantly gifted cuff links from girls every year. But not a single one of them could have held a candle to Emma's works. They were so impressive, he couldn't believe they'd been made by a thirteen-year-old girl. He'd assumed Emma wouldn't have a knack for girly things like that, but he had been proven oh so wrong.

But Emma fervently humbled herself. "I'm not *that* good! I like doing the designs and such, but George and William are way better and faster at embroidering than I am." The Stewart family products were mostly designed by Emma, while the others would do the actual sewing. Therefore, as Emma said, George and William were much better than she was when it came to sewing and textile arts.

Arthur's head was filled with questions as he looked at George and William. Why would two boys in a count's family be embroidering? Wasn't that mostly a girl thing?

The twins, Marion, and Francesca couldn't even fathom any embroidery better than what they were looking at.

"No, no... I mean, my stuff's nothing compared to father's lacework."

"Yeah, our father is the best out of all of us when it comes to needlework."

George and William weren't used to getting so much attention, so they blushed and modestly waved away the compliments. But that modesty only led to more questions in everyone's heads.

But...why was Count Stewart doing lacework in the first place?

The longer they had spent in poverty, the better their skills became.

"Would you like a pair too, Lord Arthur?" Emma asked, pulling out a fourth pair of cuff links. They featured a ladybug and clover, which at first glance might have seemed a bit too cutesy, but the embroidery was realistic enough that it didn't feel off for a boy like him to wear.

"Are you sure?! Er...wait a second. How many of these did you make, Lady Emma?" Arthur was about to accept the cuff links, but the offer left him with even more questions. Emma giggled,

and then perked up as some familiar voices called to her.

“Emma, are you quite all right?” Several boys were looking at Emma with worry. The Pallas boys, who had tried to stand up for Emma after Monster Studies, were happy to have finally found her.

“Oh, Lord Chris, Lord Glenn…and goodness, there’s so many of you! What seems to be the matter? I’m doing just fine,” Emma replied, now that her hunger had subsided. She couldn’t tell why they were asking.

“We just wanted to apologize for not standing up when Lord Robert was being so rude to you.” They had all thought someone should do something, but in the presence of the prince’s black hair and Robert’s *nearly* black hair, they had been too afraid to openly try to help. Even if school was a place to put peerage aside, standing up to someone with a *duke’s* title was daunting. One after another, the boys came to apologize.

“You don’t need to apologize. My sister shouldn’t have been picking a fight with him in the first place.”

“I think it’d be in Lord Robert’s best interests to stay away from her, to be quite honest.” William and George deferred to the lords, truly feeling they had nothing to apologize for. If the boys had tried to stand up to Robert and he decided to take it out on them, they’d have been dragged into a much worse situation. Apologies wouldn’t suffice after that.

“Yes, but…we didn’t mean to, but we accidentally told Lord Robert about Emma’s scars…” the boys confessed, on the verge of tears. They were certain Lord Robert was planning to do something terrible to her, and it would be their fault if he did.

“The ones that were from the folly of youth, right, Caitlyn?”

“Yes, the ones that were from the folly of youth, Catherine!”

The twins were the only ones in the school who’d lacked enough discretion to ask Emma about her scars, so they were all ears to hear more about them.

“I heard you got them from a monster attack while you were with the prince…” Francesca hesitantly said.

“Oh? I heard she sustained her wounds from defending the prince.” Marion had heard her fans gossiping about it herself.

“Er… Yeah, that’s not what happened…” Apparently, the rumors about her had spun wildly out of control. “I’d been playing with Jadwi—er, the princess and Lady Rose when I happened to spot a localized barrier crisis… And after we got the

prince and his family to safety, I was assessing the monsters that came out of the crisis point. That's when they got me," Emma admitted bashfully. She said it in such a cutesy way, but it was such a violent topic that it didn't come off as cute at all. For someone in the capital, being attacked by monsters was unthinkable, and the size of her scars made it clear how bad the wounds had been.

The conversation had gotten unexpectedly heavy, and her friends could only sit in silence. Realizing how awkward it had gotten, Emma tried frantically to reassure everyone that she had made a full recovery and was totally fine now. In doing so, she tried to roll up her sleeve to show off the rest of her scars, but William stopped her.

"Sis, don't even think about it."

"Bwuh? Why not?"

"Use your head, would you?"

"Hmm... Oh, because you can't take your clothes off outside?"

That is not *the problem here!*

Emma grinned, having no idea that everyone was internally facepalming at her.

"It's not like I'm trying to keep my scars a secret or anything, so I really don't mind." Emma was sure to smile to let the Pallas boys know not to worry about it, as they still looked like they were about to be crushed under the weight of their consciences. She couldn't understand why they were so worked up about it in the first place.

"B-But...we even told him that the monsters that attacked you were slimes..." Slimes—horrific, fiendish creatures that caused massive casualties anywhere they appeared. The very ones they'd learned about in class that day. They were certain the class must have reawakened Emma's trauma. While she looked calm and her complexion was normal now, they'd seen how miserable she'd looked when she left the classroom. She must have been unable to enjoy her lunch and decided to rest on the sofa in the courtyard instead. They were so worried about her, it was making them sick.

Of course, none of that was true. She'd definitely eaten her fill in the cafeteria. Heck, she'd even ordered seconds.

"I'm really okay. You don't need to worry about a thing," Emma said kindly, beaming her gentle smile. Once more, the boys were convinced that Emma was an angel.

“You’re so kind… Too kind…”

“Even when you’re suffering, you face it with a smile so nobody worries…”

“She’s an angel…”

“She truly is…”

She had no idea when it had happened or what had them so touched, but once again, she was being misunderstood in some ridiculous fashion.

Arthur, Marion, Francesca, and the twins were all astounded by Emma’s conversation with the boys. Emma had in fact been attacked by the fearsome beast they’d learned about in class, but right after that gruesome lesson, she’d gone straight to wolfing down her lunch like a woman starved.

“There goes sis with her killer smile again…”

“They just had to show up now of all times… She’s just in a good mood because she had a good meal…”

Emma’s brothers looked on at the poor lovestruck boys, utterly reeling in befuddlement.

“Emma… Here. You should have some of this!” Each of the boys handed Emma cute bag after cute bag, because it *couldn’t* be good for a person not to eat. There were cookies and chocolates of all different types, each from some of the most famous stores in the capital. Once Robert left the classroom, they’d all booked it to each of the stores to get sweets for Emma, knowing about her sweet tooth. It was what they’d all decided—even if Emma couldn’t eat her lunch, surely her favorite sweets would convince her to eat *something*. None of them suspected she had inhaled her entire lunch the way she had.

“Goodness, it all looks so delicious!” Emma picked a creamy chocolate and popped it into her mouth. It was a much higher-quality chocolate than what the Stewart family tended to eat—the kind she’d only ever eaten when Joshua brought them to her. “Mmm! It’s so good!” In a devastatingly cute gesture, Emma put a hand to her cheek as she savored the food.

Poor Joshua suffered a mighty blow at this, since he’d thought *he* was the only one who would get to see such a face.

The other boys blushed as they watched Emma enjoying her food and put their hands to their chests in relief.

“Oh, I have an idea! Why don’t you all take some of the cuff links I made during embroidery class as thanks?” Emma suggested, whipping out cuff links one after another and

handing them out to each of them. All of the boys were practically clicking their heels together with joy as they left, having received a gift from the angel herself.

Emma reached out for another cookie with a big smile, waiting for the attentive waitstaff to pour her another cup of tea. “What a spectacular day! Who would have thought we’d get dessert too? Let’s all have some together!”

You still have room for that? Francesca and Marion silently questioned, looking at Emma’s slender frame and wondering where that dessert was even going to go.

“Then let’s dig in, Caitlyn!”

“Yes, let’s dig in, Catherine!”

The twins happily picked out some cookies of their own.

Poor guys… George and William thought, looking out toward where the other boys had left.

Joshua was privately plotting to find better sweets so Emma would smile like that at *him* again.

“Oh, by the way, Lady Emma…” Arthur had to ask again, for the second time that day. “How many cuff links did you make, exactly?”

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“Heh heh heh…” Robert was carefully carrying a box and looking quite pleased with himself. After class, he’d rushed to have this ‘gift’ made, placed in a box, and barely made it back to school in time. While the errand had used up more than half of his two-hour lunch break, he had no regrets. Forcing a professional to make it for him had resulted in a perfect product.

He entered the cafeteria, where most students would be spending their lunch break, and began searching for Emma, to no avail.

“Oh jeez, lunch is just about over!” Brian hurried to sit at a table.

“Brian! What do you think you’re doing?! We have to get this to Emma Stewart!” Robert snapped at his far too easygoing friend, but Brian had already started munching away at the food that had been brought to him.

“We only have about twenty minutes before lunch is over, Lord Robert. You’re gonna miss your chance to eat… And today’s lunch…is *really* good!” After that, Brian refused to answer him

because he was too focused on his food.

Guess I'm on my own. Robert thought and went to the courtyard in search of Emma.

Emma had been feeling sick because of the slime lesson, so of *course* she wouldn't have been in the cafeteria. Once Robert found her in the courtyard, he was *certain* he was on the right track after all.

"Ough... I can't eat another bite..." Emma groaned, having eaten every last treat the lords had brought her.

"Of *course* you can't! Why did you eat them all in one sitting?!" George groused in utter bewilderment.

"Erm...'cause it was there?" She blurted out, sounding just like a certain famous mountaineer.

The twins had started out snacking on a cookie or two, but they'd finished soon enough. Arthur didn't really like sweets all that much, so he hadn't taken any at all. Francesca and Marion had both taken a cookie each, but they became too engrossed in the conversation and were unable to eat any more. Joshua had been more engrossed in lovingly watching Emma enjoying her snacks, and while George and William were caught up feeling sorry for the poor saps who'd given Emma the snacks in the first place, Emma had eaten the whole pile. In the end, most of the mass of snacks had disappeared into Emma's stomach.

"Why don't we start heading to our next class?" Joshua suggested. The bell rang every fifteen minutes during the break, and this was the seventh bell, which meant the next would signal the beginning of class. Next up was Beginner's Economics for the boys, so everyone would be split up once more. For classrooms that were farther away from the cafeteria building, one would have to leave at the fifteen-minute warning bell or they likely wouldn't make it.

Just then, Robert appeared with a box in hand. "You don't look so good, Emma Stewart!" He smirked, looking down his nose at Emma groaning over how full she was. He looked like he was already boasting about his victory over *something* as he set the box down on the table in front of Emma.

"Robert. You here to pick a fight again?" Arthur sighed, clearly annoyed by this.

"Why, how could you even insinuate such a thing! I came here because I was *worried* about dear Emma Stewart!" Robert plastered on his most worried expression as he looked to Emma

again. “You must’ve had a *really* rough time during Monster Studies.”

Emma gulped, unable to respond. To be honest, it really *had* been rough. She hadn’t thought she could *get* that hungry. But Emma’s silence made Francesca and Marion worry that maybe the class really *had* been distressing for her.

“You weren’t even able to fill up on lunch, were you?” He couldn’t hide the wicked grin creeping on his face as he…missed the mark entirely.

“Huh?” The rest of the group was confused. Emma had eaten two servings of stew, two pieces of bread, then chowed down on the cookies and chocolates she’d gotten from the lords. Who would think she hadn’t filled up? (On top of that, she’d also washed it all down with four cups of tea.)

“Well, here’s a present from me to you!” Robert said as he opened the box he’d brought with him.

“Agh!”

“What?!”

“Eek!”

Arthur, Marion, and Francesca couldn’t hold back the sounds that came out of them when they saw what was inside, and their faces were twisted with disgust.

“What a horrible thing to do! Isn’t it, Caitlyn?!”

“It really is a horrible thing to do, Catherine!”

Even the twins, who took practically everything in stride, were glaring at Robert.

After recovering from the initial shock, Arthur couldn’t contain his bubbling rage and finally cracked. “Do you seriously not have a *single* shred of decency in you?!”

Just moments ago, they’d been eating cookies together while the twins asked more about the scars on Emma’s cheek, so they knew what had happened during the localized barrier crisis.

They learned how even though she’d only gotten splashed rather than taken a direct hit of a slime’s caustic blast, it still melted her flesh down to the bone in some places, and she’d nearly bled out.

How they’d tried washing the wounds with water, but it had just caused the skin to slough off even more.

How after three days of a high fever, she’d lost consciousness and didn’t wake up for an entire month.

How the scars weren’t just on her face, but on her entire

upper right side.

While she'd seemed completely nonchalant about the whole thing, there had been a moment at the very end where she'd stammered quietly that she "c-couldn't dance…anymore…" George and William had been listening quietly up until that point, but could only look away at that. Their tightly clenched fists had trembled. Their friends had felt terrible not knowing what to say, so it was only natural that they'd all stopped eating the cookies.

And now, the very same girl who told them her tragic story was face-to-face with a slime. It was as if the drawing Professor Wolfgang had put on the blackboard had come to life. It could even have been about the same size as the one that had hit Emma with its caustic blast. Robert callously shoved the replica of the very thing that had scarred her so deeply right in front of her.

Arthur couldn't let such vile, disgusting, cowardly behavior slide. Following his knightly upbringing, he stood to challenge Robert to a duel. Since his family had been knights for generations, etiquette had been hammered into him before he could even speak. Therefore, he knew all too well that one couldn't call a duel on a whim, but Robert had taken things too far. As a knight, he wasn't about to stand by while someone induced such cruelty on a poor, delicate young lady. Arthur took a step toward Robert, but was stopped by Marion seconds after.

"Arthur, you mustn't! Contain yourself!"

"Don't stop me, Marion! I've had enough of this bastard!"

Robert flinched at Arthur and Marion's fury. "Th-This has nothing to do with you, Arthur!" he shot back.

Oh, so he can dish it out but he couldn't take it? Cringe. Emma thought.

"You can't do this, Arthur. If you soil your hands here, it will affect the whole Bell family. As the youngest daughter, I should do it instead!" Marion said, standing in front of Arthur and pointing directly at Robert's chest to incite the duel herself.

"Hang on! I just said it's none of your business, Marion! This is between me and Emma Stewart!" Robert was shouting at Marion to stop, panicking now that Marion was clearly seconds away from declaring a duel. Put plainly, he didn't think he could win in a fight against Arthur *or* Marion. A duel *should* be between two people who were wronged. After all, he could definitely take

Emma Stewart in a fight.

Robert was *unbelievably* cringe.

“Don’t be ridiculous! I— Wait, Lady Emma! Are you all right?!” Arthur was boiling with so much rage, he hadn’t actually looked to see how Emma herself was handling it until Robert said her name. He should have disposed of the slime in front of her before attacking Robert. She was probably trembling and crying…or…

Not?

Maybe it was just Arthur’s imagination, but it looked like Emma’s eyes were…twinkling? *Am I seeing things?*

“L-Lord Robert… Is this really…?”

No, her voice is definitely trembling. Maybe I was just seeing things, Arthur thought as he went back to glaring at Robert.

“A slime gelatin, yes! Ha ha ha! What do you think? Looks pretty good, doesn’t it?” Once Marion had stopped pointing square at his chest, he got the wind back in his sails and grinned cockily at Emma’s shaky voice.

“I knew it! So I can eat this?!”

“Huh?”



Unfortunately, Emma's twinkling eyes *weren't* just in Arthur's imagination.

Emma had been suffering for so long. In Monster Studies, Professor Wolfgang had drawn a picture of a slime at the very start of the class and left it up for his entire lecture. And the whole time, Emma hadn't been able to stop thinking about how it looked…

So…

Very…

Delicious.

You couldn't follow the class if you didn't look at the blackboard…

But the picture had looked so damn tasty.

But Professor Wolfgang's lesson was very fascinating.

But that cool, jiggly, yummy-looking slime picture was right there…

Of *course* she was going to get hungry with that staring back at her. Even if she'd tried to withstand her hunger, it had been impossible as long as the picture stayed up. That's when the grumblebug in her tummy had started to cry.

Had she ever faced such agony before?

"Is it…okay if I eat this?" She'd had *dreams* about eating slimes before, and now it was right there before her eyes. She completely forgot how full she was. She was just overjoyed that the thing she'd wanted to eat *so badly* during Monster Studies was finally there.

"Uh… Yes? It's from one of the Lance family's personal patisseries, so it should taste quite… Huh?"

Robert wasn't the only one who was taken aback. Arthur, Marion, Francesca, and the twins were as well. Emma didn't hesitate to take the spoon she'd used to stir sugar into her tea and stab it right into the middle of the gelatin dessert. It wobbled like crazy at the attack. Then, she took a big scoop of it and the whole thing wobbled even more.

In the game of Emma's life, she hadn't chosen FIGHT or RUN. She'd chosen MAKE A TASTY MEAL of the slime instead.

"Well, don't mind if I do, then, Lord Robert!" She put the spoon in her mouth. "Mmmm! It's sooooo good!" It was cool and slippery on her tongue. She'd expected a lemon-lime flavor, and that's what she got. Her smile was as big as it possibly could get.

"*She's so cute!!! She's more celestial than the angels in heaven!*"

While everyone else was dumbfounded, Joshua was writhing in agony over Emma's smile in a completely inappropriate manner.

"You can't...be serious..."

"Sis... Food is the only thing you care about, huh...?"

George and William were supposed to have been *used* to Emma's eccentricities, but even they were taken aback.

"You know, actually...it kinda maybe does look a bit tasty, doesn't it, Caitlyn?"

"Yes, it...actually kinda maybe does look a bit tasty, Catherine."

Neither of the twins had much of an appetite after hearing what had happened to Emma, though, so they just watched in shock as she swallowed spoonful after spoonful of the slime.

"Wh-Why are you eating it, Emma Stewart?!" Robert shrieked. *Why is she taking this so well?! This can't be happening! She was supposed to be trembling and crying in fear! And then she'd apologize and beg me to save her! It was the perfect plan!*

Instead, Emma was blissfully munching away at the wiggly slime. No tears, apologies, fear, or begging at all. She was wiggling happily with every spoonful she ate.

Grrrrrr...

Robert's stomach growled. And it wasn't the cute kind of growl Emma's stomach made—it was so loud and obnoxious, the whole group heard it. After working up a sweat in Hunting Techniques, he'd gotten in a few spats during Monster Studies, then ran all the way to the pastry shop off campus. Naturally, he still hadn't had lunch, so of *course* he was hungry. Given that he was eighteen years old (the same age as Arthur), he certainly had the appetite to match.

When Emma heard Robert's stomach growl, she took one of the spoons the servers brought for the group and held it out to him.

There was no such thing as friend and foe before an empty stomach. Emma remembered just how much it hurt when she was hungry too.

"Do you want some too, Lord Robert?"

Robert couldn't refuse. Starvation was a powerful motivator, especially among aristocrats who had never had to worry about food.

"W-Would that be okay?" Robert took the spoon from Emma so timidly, nobody could have imagined he was the same jerk they'd been dealing with all day. He hesitantly took a spoonful

and put it in his mouth.

It's incredible*! Not like I'd expect anything less from my family's pastry shop!*

He'd worried more about its appearance than anything else, but the patissier had definitely made sure not to skimp on the flavor. Not to mention, an empty stomach made *everything* taste even better.

He took a bite. Then another. He was completely focused on eating. The slime wobbled to and fro with every spoonful taken from it. And he simply could not stop himself from eating more and more.

Robert took the last bite of it at almost the exact same time as the bell signaling the start of the next class rang. Once he came back to reality from his food high, he looked around and saw Emma Stewart, and every other student there, had left him behind.

Of course they had. Class had just started.

Robert's next class was Advanced Economics. As a duke's son, he *had* to pass that class if he were to become the head of his family. What was worse, the professor was notoriously strict about punctuality ("Time is money, after all"). They never gave in to bribes or social pressure, so students could only pass with hard work alone.

Robert finally realized just how screwed he was, and he could practically feel the blood drain from his face.

He'd failed Advanced Economics two years in a row. He had to pass this year, no matter what.

But now...he was late. On the very first day.

The waitstaff, as efficient as always, had given Robert a napkin, which he balled up into his fist. His rage was boiling over, and the blood he'd felt drain from his face rapidly shot right back up.

"*Emma Stewaaaart!* You'll regret this!!!" Robert shouted a final threat as he made a mad dash for his advanced economics class. He could only pray that the teacher would think his tardiness was better than skipping outright.

He never even used the napkin the waitstaff gave him, instead tossing it wastefully on the courtyard ground. He was remarkably late due to how far the classroom was from the cafeteria. But before the professor even started on how late he was, Robert was humiliatingly told to "wipe the gelatin off his

lips” in front of the entire class.

Chapter 34: Let’s Go Home

After Beginner’s Economics, the three siblings and Joshua exited the classroom. Emma still suffered from her fullness, as digestion hadn’t been able to keep up with her at all. The price for pushing one’s stomach to its limit was great indeed. Every little step she took was painful.

They’d be able to take one more afternoon class once they’d reached their second year, but three subjects was the maximum course load for first-years. They met up with the twins (who were also first-years) as they were leaving, so they decided to head home together.

The twins had been taking a class on Sun Klothian, the mother tongue of a nation called Sun Kloth that did trade with their home region.

“Sun Klothian lessons sure were fun, weren’t they, Caitlyn?”

“Sun Klothian lessons sure *were* fun, Catherine!”

Foreigners didn’t tend to show up in the Pallas region, so the siblings didn’t see the use in taking a language course.

“How would you say ‘hello’ in Sun Klothian, Lady Catherine?” Emma asked, the twins’ enthusiasm having captured her interest.

“You’d say ‘lakkuru’!” Catherine responded happily.

“Okay, then how would you say ‘thank you,’ Lady Caitlyn?”

“It’d be lakkuru too, Lady Emma!” Caitlyn responded just as happily.

“It’s the same?”

“That’s right! Lakkuru could be translated as ‘Hello,’ or ‘Thank you,’ or ‘Understood,’ or ‘Sounds good,’ or ‘That’s amazing,’ and all sorts of other things!” Both the twins responded, somehow in perfect unison, despite the length of the sentence.

“That sounds…convenient, I suppose? What about ‘I’m sorry’?” William asked.

“That would be ‘lokkuru.’ Lokkuru can be translated as ‘I’m sorry,’ or ‘Goodbye,’ or ‘No, I don’t want that,’ or ‘That’s the worst,’ or ‘Have you put on weight?’, and all sorts of other things, Lord William,” the twins explained.

What kind of language is *that?* George had been an utter

disaster when it came to English in his previous life, but even his interest had been piqued by Sun Klothian. “Okay, so then, how would you say ‘Have you lost weight?’ in Sun Klothian?”

“That’d be lakkuru as well, Lord George! We’d always wondered what ‘lakkuru’ and ‘lokkuru’ meant because Sun Klothians were always saying it. Apparently, you can hold a whole conversation with just those words alone!” The twins were delighted to have finally had this mystery solved for them.

“Come to think of it, the Sun Klothian I was taught was basically just ‘I’ll buy’ and ‘I won’t buy,’ and those were also both lakkuru and lokkuru.”

“Of course Lord Joshua would already know that much, right, Caitlyn?”

“Indeed, of course Lord Joshua would already know that much, Catherine!”

Joshua then went on to tell everyone that he’d been exporting Pallas’s silk products to Sun Kloth. Naturally, because the Rothschild family took care of it all, the siblings had no idea.

“I guess you could say Pallas silk is lakkuru, then, right, Caitlyn?”

“I guess you *could* say Pallas silk is lakkuru, Catherine!”

It *sounded* like the twins were complimenting them, so the siblings all said their lakkurus (thank yous) in return. As it turned out, just using one of the two words when they seemed appropriate did seem to help them get by. Joshua was even muttering to himself about how he might be able to fire his interpreter to save on expenses.

Once they exited the campus gates, they saw several carriages stopped at the front. The entire purpose of the massive space in front of the school was to accommodate these carriages, as—according to Joshua—carriages were not allowed on campus grounds. Apparently the carriages were there to pick up students of high peerage or who lived far away.

Joshua’s shop was only ten minutes from school on foot, and the Stewart family manor was a mere ten minutes from there, so they could easily walk home. In their previous world, the Tanakas absolutely would have taken a car rather than a twenty-minute walk, but amazingly enough, their young bodies could handle this walk with ease. When they thought about how much work would have gone into preparing a carriage, the choice was obvious to them. The Stewart family only had their personal

servants and the newly hired servants from the capital, which was a considerably small number compared to the fleet employed by many other aristocrats. The siblings would've felt bad about increasing the poor servants' workload any more. Their father had whined that he would've gladly done the job himself, but they politely turned him down.

"We live in the dorms, so I suppose this is goodbye, right, Caitlyn?"

"Indeed, this is goodbye since we live in the dorms, Catherine."

The twins stopped before the intersection. Emma and her crew would be continuing straight down the main street.

"Well then, we bid you all lokkuru!" The twins curtsied and Emma understood that they meant "goodbye," so she did the same.

"Lady Catherine, Lady Caitlyn, lokkuru to you as well!"

"Be careful on your way home, lokkuru!"

"See you tomorrow, lokkuru!"

"Lokkuru!"

They said their various lokkurus, then parted ways. It seemed to come naturally to them once they started using it, which made it all the more fun.

They continued down the main street, careful of crossing carriages, entering a shopping district lined up and down with fancy shops. Both Robert and the lords from Pallas had come here over lunch to get their respective presents for Emma. The district was especially popular with the aristocracy, and students of the academy were regular patrons of it. The store Joshua had taken over was in a prime location on the main street, and the three-story building was soon in sight.

"The store's really coming along now, huh?" George's expression was slightly uncomfortable as he gazed at the storefront. It was still under construction, but the first two floors were being used as a store while the third floor was Joshua's living quarters. Originally, it was supposed to sell Pallas silk and horned hare pelts and the like, but once Joshua was in charge, the store and all its products had made a complete turnaround.

Its grand reopening had been scheduled to be before school started, but Emma once mused, "If there were a nice café with lots of sweets on the way home, I'd probably go there every day! Tee hee!" So Joshua had *insisted* that a café space be added to

the second floor right away, so the store was still under construction. Their grand reopening was now set for the following week.

Joshua must have been up to his eyeballs with work, but he still asked if they wanted to come in for tea. He was apparently on the clock from the moment he arrived, so the three siblings (having memories of being working adults) politely declined, not wanting to get in the way of his poor employees, who were surely waiting for instruction from Joshua.

“Well, that’s a shame. But you’re welcome to come by any time. We’ll have plenty of tea and snacks available for you.” Joshua smiled and waved, with a “see you tomorrow” kind of lokkuru.

While Emma had been looking forward to going out to eat on the way home from school each day, she was still full by the time she’d said goodbye to Joshua, so the siblings decided to go straight home. They kept on down the main street, then exited the shopping district, and finally entered the residential district with all of its massive, gaudy manors. Lords and ladies who worked in the castle without a region of their own, or those who ruled the lands near the capital, all had their manors here, spread far apart from each other.

From the main street, they walked along a path bordered by a huge fence that seemed to extend on forever. It kept going until they reached a majestic gate, where all the siblings came to a stop. One of them heaved a sigh. The wall was so tall, one couldn’t see in from the outside, but once they passed through the gate, they saw a manor and a yard that was noticeably expansive even among all the aristocrats’ manors.

“Sure is big.”

“Yeah, it is…”

“Too big, really…”

The manor that had been bought for them was fancy enough to match the Stewart family’s income. While their Pallas manor had a large yard, the building itself was quite snug, and they’d sold pretty much anything that could have been sold in their poverty days. It was practically like scavenged ruins, and they still couldn’t get over how different the palatial building in front of them was by comparison.

Even after the Rothschild family brought them back from the brink, the Stewart family still kept a frugal lifestyle. They’d been

poor for too long to even think about living lavishly. Even all the things they'd cried over selling had been stuff they never even used…and they hadn't bothered to buy most of it back.

And yet…

They sighed, looking up at the magnificent gate before them.

"No matter how many times I see it…it's still impressive."

"You think we'll ever get used to it?"

"I dunno. Kinda doubt it."

Originally, Leonard Stewart had asked to board his family at Joshua's store, but Joshua's father, Daniel, had told him he was being utterly ridiculous. Although the third floor was the only one reserved for living quarters, it had plenty of spacious rooms to spare. It used to be used as employee housing, but since school had started, Joshua was the only one using it. Leonard had been sure they wouldn't refuse him.

"Why's it so ridiculous, Daniel? We'll pay whatever you want for rent and living expenses."

"Lord Leonard, you *promised me* you would never say you'd 'pay whatever someone wants' ever again. Besides, in what world is it acceptable for a rich count to lodge in a merchant's store?! 'Paying rent' isn't the issue, my friend! You want me to find you a place with 'cheap rent' in the capital? Do you even *hear* yourself? You're living in the capital! You need to *buy* a manor like a proper aristocrat! Goodness, are you really an aristocrat? Where's your pride? Your sense of vanity?! Ugh, what do you *mean* 'stuff like that won't put food on the table'?! Uuuuggghhh! *Fine!* I'll take care of everything! Just give me the money and I'll do it! Oh, what do you *mean* 'find you something cheap'?! *Were you even listening to me?!*"

Daniel had known Leonard for so long, he had a tendency to forget decorum, but Leonard didn't really mind. He had just sat quietly and listened to Daniel's lecture.

In the end, Daniel had wound up being stuck with the job of finding the Stewarts a place to live that wouldn't bring them shame in the capital, because the Stewarts didn't like spending more money than necessary on basic necessities. *Well fine. If you're gonna be that way, I'm gonna force you to get the best and fanciest place ever,* he'd thought—only half out of spite.

"Erm… D-Daniel? I feel like this has three more zeros than necessary…"

“Lord Leonard, where in the *world* do you think you’d find a manor for any less? The capital is quite expensive.”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t mind living on the outskirts or something…”

“It would make it much more difficult for poor Lady Emma to get to school if you were too far away.”

“All right, Daniel. That one’s close to the school, right? Then we’ll take it.”

“You see what I mean? It’s a lovely place, isn’t it?”

“Er, but… I like how close it is to the school and all…but now that I take a closer look, it’s…*really* big. There’s only five of us, you know.”

“Ah, but think about it, Lord Leonard: The cats would be *thrilled* with a manor and yard this big, wouldn’t they?”

“All right, Daniel. I’ve decided. Let’s go with this one after all.”

Leonard was too easy, and Daniel knew it. All he had to do was mention Emma or the cats, and Leonard would shell out any amount necessary. And so, Daniel—who knew the Stewart family funds even better than Leonard—had been able to acquire a manor that boasted the largest plot in the capital. Since they’d decided on it based on a map of the capital and floor plans they’d ordered while Leonard was still in Pallas, Daniel had gone in Leonard’s stead to the capital to finish all the paperwork and the like. When Daniel first laid eyes on the place, even he couldn’t help but think, *Oh shoot. I might’ve overdone it, huh?* But he kept that to himself. It really was just *that* fancy and massive. The one saving grace was that it wasn’t all that conspicuous since it was a bit of a ways away from the main street.

The siblings knocked, not on the large door at the main gate, but the smaller door for staff. The door flung open so quickly, you could practically hear the responsible party saying, “You’re HEEERE!”

“Mrow!” As always, the massive calico opened the door for them with her front paws.

“We’re home, General Kongming!”

“Mrow!” Emma flung herself around Kongming’s neck and buried herself in her fluffy chest fur.

Lately, the cats had been coming to greet the siblings at the gate when they came home from school. It was nice; it reminded the siblings of how Kongming used to wait for them near the

entrance to their house when Minato was still in school in their previous world. At first, the gatekeeper had been alarmed by the massive cats, but even he was won over. Now, he just watched affectionately as Kongming opened the door for the siblings and *only* the siblings.

"Welcome home, young masters." The gatekeeper smiled, but the siblings looked none too pleased.

"Evan, could you *please* stop calling us that?"

"Hoh hoh hoh! But you all *are* youngins to me." The gatekeeper, with his striking white hair, chuckled and brushed off the children's protestations as he locked the gate tight.

The gatekeeper had been born of aristocratic peerage, but the economy in his region had collapsed and he soon was wasting away in the slums until the Stewart family found him about ten years ago. Initially, he had been working as Arven's coachman in the capital, but it became too difficult to care for the horses in his old age. Deep down, he had been worried Arven was going to let him go.

"Hey Evan, could I ask you to take over gatekeeping?" Arven had suggested it casually.

Evan had accepted, being overjoyed at the thought that Arven had bought a small house or something, allowing him to continue to work.

"Er...but a gate at an estate like this...is a bit..." He had shuddered once he actually *saw* the place. He'd thought he'd just have to fend off children pulling pranks or the like, but a stately manor like this seemed like the kind of place where he'd be fending off massive raids instead.

"Oh, you'll be fine! We have cats who can help out!" Leonard, who had traded places with Arven and was now living in the capital instead, had responded confidently.

All Evan could think was that cats were worth a ton, which would have just *increased* the risk of burglars trying to break in, but once he'd seen the cats, he understood all too well. Could they really still be called cats? Watching one rubbing up against Emma like that, it certainly *seemed* catlike, but the creatures were just too enormous. Regardless, the way they gallantly came running to the gate as though they knew what time the children would be getting back was so adorable, it didn't take him long to get used to. And he was quite fond of their fluffiness.

"You wanna come take a nap with me, General Kongming?"

The cat gave a happy meow in response. It had gotten nice and warm, so Kongming was happy to accompany Emma to the hammock she'd pointed to in the yard. Kongming noticed that something odd had attached itself to Emma, but it wasn't anything the cat couldn't deal with. A single meow was all it took to blast Emma's troubles away.

"Huh... My stomach feels better now! Well, I guess that means I can eat dinner tonight!" Emma mused. Kongming had curled up around her atop the hammock.

"Mrow!" Kongming gently wrapped herself around Emma so that her favorite naps with her favorite person in the whole world could go on forever and always. That one meow seemed to say, *We'll be together forever.*

Side Story: Papas

Isaac Delacour had been keeping and managing the royal historical archives for many long years. He'd been buried in work, what with the coup d'état a year prior, the localized barrier crisis, and countless groundbreaking reports on how to handle monsters all suddenly being pushed onto him at once. Day and night, he sat at his desk with pen in hand so the next generation would know everything that happened in the kingdom.

"Archivist Delacour! Count Stewart has arrived!"

It was beyond his abilities as a recordkeeper from the capital, where monsters never appeared, to understand things like localized barrier crises and other monster-related details, so he decided to contact the person who'd been submitting all those numerous reports to ask for further information.

Count Leonard Stewart. He ruled over the borderland known as Pallas, and had amassed the greatest fortune in all the kingdom.

"It's been about twenty whole years since I've been to the castle," the count said when he arrived.

"I give you my thanks for taking the time to meet me." Isaac went to greet Count Stewart, even though he was quite intimidated by the man's tall, muscular frame. He'd heard Count Stewart had been working as a hunter as well. "I am Isaac Delacour, assistant to the director of the Bureau of History."

"Delacour...?" Count Stewart furrowed his brow when he heard the name. It was only natural that the man would recognize it. After all, it was Isaac's daughter who'd made a fool of Count Stewart's daughter in the firstborn prince faction's baptism at the royal party. "Are you Francesca Delacour's father, by chance?" he asked in a low voice.

Francesca's "baptism" had been an utter failure. Word about it had spread devastatingly fast. For the past several weeks, even Isaac had been subject to shame at his own work. He'd been prepared for those in the second-born prince's faction or the neutral factions to be disgusted by him, but he received the most horrific castigation and abuse from the firstborn prince's faction, who were supposed to be his own allies.

You were the ones who ordered Francesca to do your stupid baptism in the first place!

They'd had no use for her after she'd failed them, so she'd been completely ostracized and ignored by the girls who had always been by her side. Everyone talked behind her back. Not a single invitation to a tea party had come since. And on top of it all, his wife had told him in tears that even the engagement she'd had lined up for their daughter had been called off. And all Isaac could do was sit and listen. He felt ashamed that they'd been put in this situation because of their station, and he couldn't offer a single word of comfort to his wife or sobbing daughter.

Even now, talking to Count Stewart was part of his official duties. It didn't *have* to be Isaac in this meeting, but that was just how things went for an aristocrat working in the castle. First, the petty nobles had given him nowhere to run, and then they'd set this whole meeting up just so they'd have something to talk about. They were probably yukking it up about how entertaining it would be for the parents of the victim and perpetrator to meet face-to-face. Even without eyes on the back of his head, he could tell his colleagues were grinning over the situation.

It would feel so good to tell them to get to work if they have that much free time on their hands…

"Yes, I am Francesca's father." Isaac was a professional, and he wasn't about to lie to someone he was seeing for work. He was fully prepared to get a face full of fist from the brawny man before him. He didn't know the first thing about defending himself, so he was sure he'd lose a couple of teeth. After all, Count Leonard Stewart's love for his daughter was legendary.

"Is that so?! Well, she's been taking extra good care of my Emma!"

"Right… Sh-She has?" Isaac was prepared for whatever jabs might come at him on account of his daughter's failure, so he raised his head and…the count was grinning ear to ear.

"My daughter's so adorable, but she's got a little shy side to her, so I was a bit worried she might not be able to make any friends at school. And what's more, her first class on the first day of school was the only one she didn't have with her brothers! I was so worried, I couldn't even sleep at night! It was *awful*! But it turned out I totally didn't need to worry, because Lady Francesca was taking the class with her. She joined the same group as her

and everything. Emma was just over the moon about it when she brought it up at dinner that night! She told us they'd traded cuff links, then went to Monster Studies together, and spent their lunch break together as well! I'm told Lady Francesca reached out to Emma at the royal party before school started. You see, my little Emma is so cute, I could just *die*. But she was raised on the borderlands and may have gotten the teensiest bit spoiled. I was so, *so* worried she'd have a hard time fitting in with the aristocrats here in the capital, I couldn't even eat. I was really struggling! Emma was so happy when she told us that Francesca helped her learn all about the school and people she didn't know. I seriously owe Francesca a lot!"

Why does it sound like you're the victim here?! Isaac, his sneering coworkers, and even the other bureau members who just so happened to be in the room all had the same thought.

"Wait... M-My Francesca was being friendly with Emma?" The *focus* of Leonard's ridiculous rambling about his own daughter was news to Isaac. He'd been so busy the past few days, he hadn't even gone home. Even if he *had* gone home, he and his daughter didn't exactly have the kind of relationship where they'd talk about that sort of thing.

"You don't know?" Count Leonard balked, his eyes wide. Leonard gripped Isaac's hand as he began another impassioned speech. "That's no good, Sir Delacour. You can't go on like that. Children grow up before you even know it. Just think of how much you'll regret it if you don't take note of every last moment of their childhood! I know you're at an age where your responsibilities at work are piling up, and I know how important it is to work for your family, but the time you get to spend with your daughter is...it's painfully short."

"Uh...huh..."

"This is an emergency, you know. For a father not to even know what's happening to his daughter..."

"Well, I mean... Francesca is quite a bit older than Lady Emma... I figure I don't really need to get that involved, so..."

"What are you saying?! Age has nothing to do with this! It's a father's lifelong duty to look after his daughter!" Leonard was staring right at Isaac with genuine enthusiasm. His love was overwhelming. "Hrm... Well, I suppose there's no other choice. *I'll* tell you what Lady Francesca is up to at school."

"Wh-What?"

“So first off, in Emma’s embroidery class group, there are three other girls as well. One of them is Lady Marion Bell. Emma told me she’s a very tall and dignified young lady.”

“Wait, what?!”

Lady Marion Bell? Of the four great ducal families?! Is he serious?!

“The other two are twin sisters, Lady Catherine and Caitlyn Simmons. Emma tells me they have silver hair and tanned skin and are quite adorable!”

“*What?!*”

Simmons? Like the Simmons family who owns the kingdom’s largest port?! The ones people think might have royal blood from a foreign land running through their veins?!

“And in Monster Studies, she’s studying with a longtime friend of my children, Joshua Rothschild.”

“I-I see… Wait, Rothschild?!”

As in, the wealthy merchant who bought a baron’s peerage?! His son was there?!

“That’s right. And I think Emma said she was taking Monster Studies with Marion’s older brother too. Then they all went to eat lunch together.”

“As in…Arthur Bell?”

“Yeah, that’s him! He taught Emma a lot about the school too.”

Wait wait wait… If Arthur Bell is there, then…

“And then there’s Prince Edward!”

Of course *the prince would be there!*

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What kind of group *is* this?!”

“I told you! They’re all friends Lady Francesca made at school. My children included.” Leonard shot him a look that said, *Pay attention, man! This is your beloved daughter we’re talking about,* but Isaac was still reeling.

The children of one of the four great ducal families, the Simmons twins—daughters of the family that owns a massive harbor that all political parties are dying to get their hands on, a wealthy merchant, the prince, and the children of the wealthiest count in the kingdom?! This is a million times more influential than the girls who’d been buttering Francesca up for the baptism last year! What’s going on?! How did this happen?! Francesca!

After hearing all this, even the stone-faced Isaac couldn’t hide his shock.

“I know just how you feel, Archivist Delacour,” The count suddenly grabbed Isaac’s hand again with a pensive expression.

“With a mixed-gender group, the chances that they might pair up is through the roof.”

“Uh. What.”

“Especially with Emma. She’s so, so cute, I’m just worried sick about it…”

“What…?”

“Though it’s not like I’m planning on handing her over anyway.”

“Eek!”

The count had a *wicked* smile on his face. He always had a fierce look to him, but this expression was the most terrifying Isaac had seen yet.

At this point, Isaac had no idea how to even respond. The one thing he could say was that the count’s love for his daughter was…well, overwhelming.

“Oh dear, I completely forgot what I came here for! This wasn’t supposed to be a Papathon. Go ahead and ask me anything. I’m happy to help.” Leonard had switched into serious work mode, but the surrounding staff were shuddering, thinking they never wanted to get on Leonard’s bad side. The ones with sons were especially frightened, and swore they’d tell their sons to stay away from Emma no matter what.

Without knowing it, Leonard was getting in the way of poor Melsa’s dream of holding her grandbabies in this world.

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I’m going home early today. I don’t care about this mountain of work anyway. I’ll give it to the bastards who had the spare time to set up this stupid prank in the first place, Isaac thought after seeing the count off. He’d pick up some tea (the one the staff had been raving about) and his wife’s favorite sweets, then hurry home.

He wanted to talk to his daughter. To Francesca. It had been many years since he’d done so, which was a bit embarrassing, but he had to know more. He *needed* to. How had she gotten into the situation the count had described? He had to find out. Isaac couldn’t suppress his excitement and broke into a run.

“So then, Lord Arthur and Lady Marion were so furious at Lord Robert’s bullying, they nearly challenged him to a duel.”

Francesca was rosy-cheeked and fully immersed in telling her parents about what had happened at school. Sometimes she would even throw in gestures and change her voice when mimicking other people.

Seeing her work so hard to tell this story really is adorable… I think I'm starting to understand how Count Stewart feels now.

"That sounds awful! A duel isn't something to scoff at…" Isaac gasped.

"But making a gelatin snack in the shape of a monster really is in bad taste," his wife murmured.

"All right, pop quiz! What do you think happened after that?"

"Oh jeez! Hmm… Someone called for a teacher?"

"Surely some of the waitstaff stepped in to stop it?"

Francesca shook her head with a mischievous smile as Isaac and his wife made their guesses.

"Hee hee! You won't believe this, but Lady Emma *ate the monster snack* like it was the tastiest thing ever!"

"Seriously?! But it looked exactly like a *monster*!"

"My, my… And she *enjoyed* it?"

"I wish you both could have seen Lord Robert's face when she did. And that's not the end of the story either!"

From that day forward, conversation at the Delacour household increased dramatically. Isaac significantly reduced the amount of time he spent holed up in the castle with work, and he was sure to bring home tea and his wife and daughter's favorite sweets. Listening to his daughter talk about her day at school nearly every evening was shockingly fun. Before he even knew it, Isaac's heart was filled with warmth as he saw the way his wife and child smiled. *These small moments must be what true happiness is.* Isaac thought, thanking the count deep in his heart.

Chapter 35: The Little Detective II: The Grand Opening Crisis

The incident occurred at Joshua's store, shortly before its opening. Someone showed up in the middle of the night when nobody was around and splashed the whole storefront with red ink.

"Eugh… They really got you good." The three Stewarts cast a sidelong glance at the employees, who had been scrubbing tirelessly since that morning.

They had come to see the awful scene at the store. The white walls and stone pavement were now covered in red. No matter how one looked at it, it brought to mind a river of blood. It was enough to make one think a murder had happened right there.

"We've gotten our fair share of harassment while remodeling, but this one's a lot worse than the others." Joshua grimaced, holding a push broom in one hand. They'd been trying everything they could to get the stains out since the employees spotted it early that morning, but nothing was working. Joshua's store was targeted at aristocratic ladies, so it would mostly be selling accessories and other trinkets, but with a storefront like this, it was doubtful any young ladies (or anyone else, for that matter) would be interested.

"So you haven't caught the guy who did it?" George took the deck brush from Joshua and started scrubbing as hard as he could.

Joshua shook his head in resignation. "They did it in the middle of the night, so there weren't any witnesses. Not to mention, it was likely someone from the firstborn prince's faction, so even if we *did* know who did it, it's doubtful we could go after them."

The firstborn prince's faction had a lot of the old guard. Even though the Rothschild family had bought a title, they were still newly peered aristocrats. Even if they tried to sue for damages, here in the capital, it was unlikely anyone would take the case. Joshua had hoped to use the day off from school to let people try out his café's dessert menu, but that clearly wasn't going to

happen now.

“Well then… I’d say it’s my time to shine!” William chirped confidently. “After all, I have the body of a child, but the brain of __”

“A NEET?” Emma and George cut in without missing a beat. As always.

“Ugh, you guys are the worst!” William fell to his knees in disappointment, and Joshua asking what a NEET was just rubbed salt in the wounds.

“Joshua, I don’t think this is coming off,” George said, having scrubbed the storefront thoroughly. He’d been scrubbing and scrubbing, but the ink was still as present as ever.

“What are we going to do…? We can paint over the walls, but the stone pavement is the real problem. We could sand it off or remove it entirely, but either way, it will take a lot of time and money.” This harassment was especially badly timed because renovations were almost completely finished.

“It’s not every day you see ink this stubborn, so we should look into it more!” William was fully in detective mode now, so the siblings decided to learn everything they could about the ink right away. The shopping district in the capital had such a wide selection of various goods, there wasn’t a single thing you *couldn’t* find there. Joshua was ever so reluctant to part with Emma as the dessert tasting turned into an ink search party instead.

“So how are we supposed to find this stuff? There’s tons of stores that sell ink here,” Emma asked William.

“I think it’d probably be pretty tough to get that much ink at one time too. Ink usually comes in little bottles, you know. Even if they went around to each and every shop and got as much as they could or they wound up ordering in bulk, it’d be easy enough to track them that way.”

The employees and Joshua had tried all sorts of methods to get rid of the ink before the siblings got there, but it was still as bright red as it had been when they’d started. An ink that wouldn’t come off no matter what had to have some kind of special properties. Considering they had enough to cover the whole storefront, the fact that the perpetrators *hadn’t* been caught was odd. The siblings thought it wouldn’t be too hard to pinpoint the ink in question, so they searched the shopping district up and down…only to come up with nothing.

“Weird… I couldn’t find anything but black ink no matter where I looked.”

“So I guess there wasn’t any red ink in the first place…” George and William were both quick to complain. They’d assumed red ink was normal in this world because of their memories of their past life, but it wasn’t even being sold.

“This world’s dyes don’t tend to make colors that vivid, so I thought for sure it was ink. But maybe I was wrong?” If it were paint, most of the color would have come off with water, so Emma was *sure* it had to be like the ink you’d use in a pen…but now she was folding her arms and trying to figure out what else it could be. She’d tried all sorts of experiments to improve the dying process for Pallas silk, but she’d never once seen a dye that could produce such a vivid color. She’d tried mixing all sorts of pigments together over and over again, but it was harder than it seemed. Honestly, if there was something she could dye once and it wouldn’t ever come out, she wanted it.

That was exactly why it was so damaging to Joshua’s store. Anyone who passed by and saw it would recoil at the bloodred stains all over it. If any nasty rumors started up because of this, it was easy to imagine just how bad it would be for the store’s reputation. They needed to solve this, and fast.

“Well, if it’s not here, then there’s nothing we can do.”

“Go figure that little NEET would give up right away.” Emma grinned at William, who was hanging his head in despair.

“Oh what, do *you* have any good ideas, then…sis? Okay, I really don’t like that look on your face…” William looked up at Emma and was *certain* whatever she was plotting couldn’t be good.

“Why don’t we just get some lunch and get changed, okay?” Emma responded, claiming that she’d worked up an appetite from all the walking they’d done.

The three returned to the Stewart family manor, and after nearly an hour, they’d gone home, eaten lunch, and changed just like Emma had suggested…but George and William were clearly unhappy.

“Emma…”

“Sis…”

The clothes she’d told them to change into were the clothes they wore when they played in the yard with the cats. There was no regard for what was fashionable or trendy—they were just

the simplest commoner clothes out there. They were comfy and easy to move around in, so the whole family liked to sit around in them when they didn't have any guests coming.

The brothers thought they might be doing something that was bound to get their clothes dirty when Emma showed up in a pair of pants with her long hair hidden under a large hat. She didn't look quite as good as Marion did in men's clothing, but her slender limbs and her flat chest made her look just like a boy from a poor village.

The boys had their all too familiar bad feelings about this.

"Now call me crazy, but...you're not planning on going to the public district, are you?" George reluctantly asked, considering Emma's hidden hair and men's clothes.

The capital had the castle in the center with the area around it neatly divided into the school, shopping district, aristocratic district, and public district.

The public district was where the commoners lived. It wasn't the kind of place an aristocrat would generally walk into without a carriage or an escort.

"Well, we couldn't find it in the shopping district, right? So our only choice is to look in the public district!" Emma grinned, clearly enjoying herself. George and William's hunch had been correct. "In these clothes, we can just use the back entrance to get there!"

The Stewart family manor's grounds were massive, and the back entrance (which was furthest from the castle) faced a street that bordered both the aristocratic and public districts. She'd heard all the servants who came from the public district would use the rear entrance when they came to work.

"Mrowr!" General Kongming, Guan, and Liu were all waiting behind Emma with ribbons around their necks.

"The kitties said they'd take us all the way to the rear entrance!" Emma hopped onto Kongming's back with a grunt you wouldn't expect from a thirteen-year-old, and she grabbed hold of the ribbon around the cat's neck. Since Zhang was the only longhaired cat, the family had taken to putting ribbons around the others' necks when they were riding the kitties at high speeds to make it easier to hold on. Emma had asked Zhang to keep an eye on their parents, so their bases were all covered...probably.

"Do you have *any* idea how bad of a plan that is?!" William

argued. Did she even hear herself?!

The public district was *far* more dangerous than the other places around them.

"Why? It's not like anyone ever said we *couldn't* go there," Emma replied, completely unruffled by William's argument. George and William were exasperated. The reason nobody ever told them not to was because it was too damn obvious they shouldn't. "Besides, we really owe it to Joshua for all he does for us."

It was hard to refuse after she threw that at them. The two brothers knew Emma, so they knew that if they doubled down and told her she couldn't go, she'd wind up going by herself anyway. In the end, they'd had no choice but to fold. The two reluctantly hopped aboard their respective cats and put on the goggles they always wore when riding. They told the servants that they'd be playing with the cats in the yard, then headed straight for the rear entrance.

Their yard was so big, it would have taken them a little under an hour just to get to the edge if they hadn't had their cats with them. With a yard that big, the siblings were sure nobody would worry if they didn't see them for a while. They still hadn't gotten used to how massive their new home was, but for the first time, they were grateful for it.

The servants waved to the little kitty-questrians with a smile and told them to hurry back soon. It was a sight one could only see in the Stewart family manor. Naturally, the staff had been shocked the first time they saw it, but the kitties' cuteness was enough to melt their hearts. There wasn't a soul who would complain about them. One couldn't find massive cats like that at any other job anywhere else in the capital, and the more cat-loving servants among them were willing to work for the Stewarts 'til the day they died. What was more, the Stewart family provided *welfare* for their servants—a concept that was nigh unheard of—the wages were great, and they had holidays as well. As such, all of the servants were happy to work for them.

If only Lady Emma didn't have all those bugs...

It was their one complaint, and it had them heaving the *deepest* sighs.

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Though the entire area was called a public district, some areas were much more dangerous than others. The closer you were to the aristocrat district, the more opulent the houses. These residents may live a life not unlike an aristocrat. However, the farther from the castle you got, the more dangerous it became. One section had even become a straight-up slum.

The Stewart siblings were walking right into the middle of that area.

"Y'know...this place is pretty relaxing, huh?" George said, stretching as he walked. Ever since they'd gotten to the capital, they'd constantly been the center of attention (mostly because of Emma). Yet here in the public district, they didn't have to feel the piercing gazes of the masses everywhere. The capital was a large city, and they were constantly having to deal with royalty and the aristocracy, their ostentatious manor, and a life they just couldn't get used to. This "commoner's vibe" was comforting them to an extreme degree.

While most aristocrats would be found out immediately regardless of their disguise, the three siblings blended in so naturally, most people just assumed they were from the area. Considering in their previous lives, the three of them had been super plebs from way out in the sticks where the population was rapidly declining, it wasn't hard to see why. They honestly didn't know how to feel about the fact that they felt these clothes suited them better than any of the formalwear they'd had to use for all the balls and tea parties.

"Hey, something smells *great*," Emma said, sniffing the air. The cluttered street was lined with restaurants, with large hunks of meat spinning on a rotisserie out front, and the smell of freshly baked bread coming from a kiln that jutted out into the street to entice passersby with the scent.

"It sure does," George agreed. They'd normally be having a snack around this time. They'd strayed quite far from the aristocratic district, so George was just about to suggest stopping somewhere to eat when something hit him from behind. "Hm?"

"I-I'm so sorry!" A boy even smaller than William had run right into George. He bowed his head and then hurriedly rushed off.

"Oh, it's fine. Don't worry about it!" George casually raised a hand in response, but the child had already turned the corner and was out of sight.

“He seemed like he was in a hurry. Maybe he was on an errand?” William wondered, looking in the direction the boy had run off to.

“Hrm… If this were a manga or light novel or game or something, you totally just got pickpocketed,” Emma said, looking in the same direction. In Emma’s previous life as Minato, she had been a regular otaku, so she was quick on the uptake for these kinds of scenarios. George and William didn’t look like they thought it was a big deal, but it still bothered them enough to check if they still had their wallets as they fixed their crooked hats.

“The wallets are still here, though?” William said, rummaging around in his shirt. All three of the siblings’ wallets were inside William’s shirt so nobody could see them. They were still securely hanging from his neck. Both the brothers refused to let Emma carry their wallets no matter how much she reassured them it’d be fine.

“Oh no… It’s gone!” George hadn’t had a wallet in the first place, but he still looked pale when he checked his pockets.

“Huh? Wait, you mean that kid really *was* a pickpocket?”

“I have all of our wallets, so…what the heck could the kid have taken from you, George?”

They never tended to carry all that much money in their wallets, so even if the boy *had* taken them, George wouldn’t have looked this panicked.

“Our monster karuta cards…” George responded lifelessly as his shoulders drooped.

“Oh *yikes*.” Emma and William couldn’t stop themselves from letting their feelings show.

The monster karuta cards had been handmade by the siblings, so they were one of a kind. Over the course of a year, Emma had drawn and colored the monsters on each and every card, while William had written the descriptions. The cards had taken a *lot* of time and effort to make, so they were loath to lose them. George had kept the finished products on him at all times so he could work on memorizing them whenever he had a free moment.

“I *wish* he’d taken my wallet…” George’s future in Beginner’s Monster Studies was looking awfully grim. And he couldn’t inherit the family name if he didn’t pass *Advanced* Monster Studies.

“It’s over... There’s no hope for me now...” George muttered, crouching down with his head in his hands. It was likely the little boy was also now realizing with disappointment that he hadn’t stolen a wallet.

“We can get it back, you know! Let’s chase after him!” Emma said, patting her older brother’s shoulder. But the boy had already turned the corner and had run off somewhere they couldn’t see. George raised his head to tell her it was impossible, but Emma wore a smile brimming with confidence. She lifted the large hat she was wearing to hide her hair just a tiny bit to reveal...

Her brothers gasped. On the inside of Emma’s hat was a beautiful, massive purple spider—Violet.

Once Violet had noticed the pickpocketing in action, it attached a transparent string to the boy right as he bumped into George. The spider inside her hat had suddenly started moving, so Emma looked up in a panic to see the spider’s webbing shimmering in the light. Violet wouldn’t do something like that for no reason. You’d have to really, really, *really* be looking to see it, but a clear web was continuing down the path the young boy had run off to. Neither George nor the boy himself had any idea Violet had attached this web, and it was likely still attached to the boy. If they followed the web, they’d probably find the boy.

Once again, Violet had saved the day.

“Nice thinking, Emma! Thanks, Violet! Let’s go after him, then!” George thanked the spider for giving him hope, then carefully grabbed onto the clear web.

“I think this web is strong enough that you could just pull as hard as you want and yank the kid back, George,” Emma said, touching the web coming out of her hat. It was a pretty violent solution, but it was the quickest one.

“Come on, we don’t want to *hurt* the poor kid, do we?” He was right that yanking the boy back when they had no idea where he was would be dangerous, but the fact that he was worried about someone who’d just pickpocketed him was proof of how kindhearted George was.

“Well, we still haven’t found our ink yet, so we may as well start looking for the monster karuta cards for now.” While they’d found a few promising stores in the public district, none of them carried the red ink they were looking for. They didn’t have any hints of where to find their ink, but they knew where to get the

monster karuta cards. Therefore, the three siblings decided to follow the hard-to-see thread and track down the boy.

They turned the corner where the boy had disappeared, passed by an apothecary, then continued down some extremely narrow alleyways. Soon, the buildings were too close together to have any gaps between them, and it seemed like they'd haphazardly added more space by building *up* instead. Since the Stewarts were originally born in Japan, an earthquake-prone land, and they had lost their lives as the Tanakas in an earthquake, this seemed like the most dangerous place in the world. Yet they could tell there were people living all throughout the rickety buildings.

"This place is way too dangerous... Earthquakes are one thing, but if one of these places caught fire, it'd spread to the next building in seconds. It'd be a real mess trying to put it out," William said, anxiously staring up at the buildings. The tallest around them looked like they were about to collapse, and were practically pressed right up against their neighbors. The streets were far too narrow as well, so it was natural he'd be concerned.

The siblings hadn't realized it, but they'd already gone past the public district and straight into the slums. They'd been so focused on following the web that they hadn't noticed they'd stepped right into the most dangerous place in the capital. They didn't know to worry more about their *own* safety than any earthquakes or fires. But the web trail they followed led them even farther into the slums, where the buildings got even higher and even more packed together. Though the sun was still fully out, they found themselves walking farther into a dimly lit area.

Chapter 36: The Aristocrat and the Slums

Nobles with a peerage of marquess or above were required to help hand out food to the poor on a rotation. While it was something that their ancestors had done voluntarily many years ago, before anyone knew it, the act of service had become a compulsory custom instead.

“Ugh, our ancestors really screwed things up for us.” Robert, the eldest son of the Lance family, looked out upon the plaza of the slums with marked irritation. He’d been complaining for some time now, though it was the Lance family servants who were doing the work while Robert stared out at them from his carriage. There was a larger location just a bit farther down the road, but the narrow streets were too small to accommodate Robert’s luxurious carriage. He wasn’t about to step one foot into the filthy, stinking slums, so he’d stopped the carriage in a smaller location and had his servants start handing out food from the plaza instead. It was just a meal, yet people kept crawling out of the woodwork to make a line that extended far past the small square.

Robert sighed, wondering when he would finally get to go home. Brian, who was sitting across from him, was glaring at Robert, completely fed up with him.

“Why did you have to bring *me* out for this too? Our family did all this just last week,” Brian complained.

Normally, Robert’s sister Lila would have come along with him, but she’d had a tea party she couldn’t miss, so Robert had to come alone. He couldn’t stand the thought of coming to a place like *this* by himself, so he’d called Brian immediately. This was a duty that the heir to the family title had to fulfill, so Robert still *showed*, but he had no intention of working. It was like he’d never even heard of the concept of “noblesse oblige.”

“Lord Robert, you have my deepest apologies. We’ve run low on bread and soup, so we’ll need to return to the manor to replenish our stocks,” one of Robert’s servants announced from outside the carriage.

“Like hell we are! If there’s none left, then we’re done. We’re leaving!” If they went to get more food, it’d be even longer

before he got to go home. Besides, if his attendants left his side to get more food, he'd worry for his safety. The slums were terribly dangerous.

"That won't do, Lord Robert. We're supposed to give a meal to every person waiting." The servant who'd actually been giving out food had seen the emaciated bodies of the tiny children waiting in line and it made his heart ache. He insisted they couldn't possibly stop now, but Robert wasn't about to change his mind.

"Oh yeah? And who's watching to make sure we do?" Robert sneered, then shouted to his servants that they were going home.

"But what if these people go out and report you, Lord Robert?" While Brian was nervous about Robert's violent temper, he still asked out of worry.

"Is there something wrong with your head too, Brian? You seriously think anyone's gonna believe these plebs?" *I'm the damn heir to the Lance family name!*

Robert was the only one convinced by his own argument, but he ordered his servants to start cleaning up. Naturally, there were plenty of complaints from the long line.

"No! Is it over already?"

"I haven't gotten any food..."

"I'm so hungry..."

There were a lot more children in the slums as of late, and once they'd learned they wouldn't be getting anything to eat, a bunch of them began to cry or beg their attendants to do something.

Despite everything, Robert saw the scene before him and *still* had the nerve to complain. "Hmph. Gutter trash."

Screams and wails erupted from the line as the meal distribution suddenly came to an end. A man rushed out of the line and began pressing Robert at his carriage for answers.

"This isn't how it's supposed to go! Why are you stopping when there are still people without food?!"

Robert didn't respond. *I'm coming out here out of the goodness of my own damn heart. You should be thanking me, you scum,* he thought, but really, he was too scared of the man's anger to respond.

The man forced himself to swallow his rage and lowered his head to Robert. "Please! Can't you at least let the youngest

children eat?" If the people didn't get anything during this distribution, they'd have nothing to eat until the next week. Children wouldn't make it that long.

Brian, at least, sympathized with the man's desperate plea. "Lord Robert... Don't you feel bad for them? At least give the little kids something..."

"You can't be serious. These idiots would bow their heads any day if it meant they'd get a free meal out of it. They don't have a *lick* of pride. You help one of 'em, and they'll never stop coming." Robert had been in a terrible mood as of late. He was still holding a grudge over the humiliation he'd faced at school. He'd run crying to his father to write a sternly worded letter to the Stewart family, which he had. The letter they'd received in response was long and wordy, but the gist was simply, "Huh? Why's that my girl's fault?"

The apple didn't fall far from the tree. A count shouldn't talk back to a duke, yet Count Stewart had anyway.

Just thinking about Emma Stewart's stupid face infuriated him...but when he thought of how happy she'd looked eating that slime dessert, his heart skipped a beat.

Tch. If she'd just apologized, we might've become a bit closer too. Stupid girl.

He kept thinking about Emma Stewart talking to Arthur. Emma Stewart talking to the second-born prince. Emma Stewart talking to that freckled merchant's son. No matter how much time passed, these thoughts had him angrier than he'd ever felt in his life.

Unfortunately for the people of the slums, Robert's irritation was at a boiling point. Normally, Robert would have chickened out and given more food after the man yelled at him, but not today.

Robert flung the door open and screamed. "There's no food for dregs like you! Now get lost!" His servants, all the people who had come for food, and the man who'd lowered his head all stared at him in shock.

Yet even though the lord had gone out of his way to reveal himself in his fury, the man still persisted. In the cycle of aristocratic food distribution, these two weeks were notorious for the exceptionally shoddy quality and quantity of food. Other aristocrats might have brought biscuits and other foods that kept for long periods of time, but that never happened during

the Devil's Weeks, as they'd come to be called.

In the slums, there was no guarantee one could access quality food outside of the food distribution system. If they were to be cut off here, the children really would die.

"I-I never said I wanted it for free! I can trade you for some specialty ink! Something you can't get anywhere else! It's bright red and won't come off no matter what!" the man pleaded.

"Psh, *ink*? What use would I have for...wait a second." Robert's signature nasty smirk crept upon his face. He'd just remembered that the freckled merchant was just about to reopen his store again.

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"It's connected to that building now, George!"

The three siblings had followed the web and found themselves in a place where the rickety buildings could collapse at any moment.

"C'mon, monster karuta cards... Please say you're okay..." George prayed as he looked toward the building Violet's web was connected to. It was made of brick as many of the buildings in the kingdom were, but the doors and windows that had likely been made of wood must have rotted away, as they were all wide open. Even the roof was crumbling away in places, and drafts in the house were the least of their worries when it was unlikely it'd be able to keep any of the rain or wind out.

Guess that means we don't have to knock, huh? Emma thought nonchalantly, when the boy they were looking for came rushing out. He didn't seem to notice the string was attached to him as he yelled out in a rage.

"Why isn't this stupid thing a wallet?!" The boy threw the thing in his hands hard at the ground. "What am I going to do?! If I can't get money, then...!" The boy collapsed into tears, apparently not noticing the siblings were there.

George had wished the boy had stolen his wallet too, but it didn't seem right for him to say anything while the boy was in the middle of a breakdown. He quietly watched over the boy, who was now beating his head and calling himself the biggest idiot in the world in an over-the-top pity party. It was getting harder and harder for them to get his attention.

Just then, Emma quietly walked over to the boy, crouched in

front of him, looked right into his tearstained face, and spoke to him in a gentle voice.

“Hey. Do you think you could give us those monster karuta cards back?”

There was being unable to read the room, and then there was Emma.

The thing the boy had thrown to the ground was without a doubt the monster karuta cards they were after. The siblings were relieved it wasn’t a rainy day so the cards were still in decent shape.

The boy jolted back when Emma suddenly appeared before him and turned to run, but George and William blocked his way.

“H-How did you know I was here?!” the boy stammered, wiping his tears away.

“Because no bad deed goes undetected.” George started gathering up the cards scattered on the ground, counting them out loud and sighing with relief. “Thank goodness. They’re all still there.” The relief in George’s voice was palpable.

George then looked at the boy. This was the first time in either of his lives that he’d ever been pickpocketed, and he hadn’t even realized it until Emma said something. It took some major skills to be able to get one over on George, considering how much he’d trained as a hunter.

“What’s with you people?! What part of the slums are you from?! ’Cause you’re totally invading someone’s territory right now!” The three siblings looked a bit puzzled for a second, not quite understanding what the boy was saying. “You can walk in the public district all you want, but I know better! Only a kid from the slums would be wearing clothes as ragged as yours!” he said, quite proud of his reasoning as he stood up energetically. The child from the slums implied that the three siblings’ casual wear was too tattered for even a regular commoner.

Come to think of it, the cats *did* occasionally catch their claws on their clothes when they were playing together. And with the cats’ size—while the siblings could play with them as much as they wanted—all that fluffiness came at the price of torn clothes. Especially in the past half a year, as they’d been riding the cats nonstop and had been thrown right off of them quite a few times.

Even when their clothes got a bit torn, they’d figured they could just sew them back up and still wear them. They wouldn’t

want to throw out perfectly wearable clothes over a little tear, especially since the only people who would see them were the servants in the manor. Given how long the Stewart family had been in poverty, buying new clothes was unthinkable too. They didn't really care about making sure their patches matched the color or pattern of their clothes, instead just using whatever fabric they had left over after making one of Lady Rose's dresses. They'd had plain outfits at the start, but now they were covered in brightly colored patches. Beautiful needlework wasn't enough to cover up how mismatched that looked. Their appearance certainly did lend an air of credence to the boy's claim.

When they really needed to make something look nice, they were certain to do so. But if they didn't have to, just getting the job done was good enough.

Though come to think of it, the patches were Emma silk, so even these raggedy clothes could probably fetch a nice price...probably.

"Er... Yeah, we're not really from the slums, actually." George was mortified at the thought that when he'd said the public district was relaxing, everyone around him thought the three of them were kids from the slums.

Actually, he'd only just realized they'd wound up in the slums too.

"Whatever. Look, I won't ask any more questions. Sorry for stealing. You can have this back, so just lemme go." The boy gave a half-hearted smile, but George and William still felt rather uneasy.

"Hey, what were you crying about?" asked Emma, the tactless wonder. It was as though she hadn't noticed how quickly the boy had wiped his tears away so nobody would see.

"I-I wasn't crying! Hey, uh...those scars on your face are pretty nasty." The boy was about to argue until he got a glimpse of the scars on her right cheek. "You get attacked by one of them nobles or somethin'? Do they hurt?" The boy stared at the deep scars carved into the adorable face of the kid in the hat. He thought calling the kid cute might actually make them feel worse about it too.

Some people would lash out and didn't care *who* they were hurting when they did it. The boy thought this kid looked older than him, but was definitely still a kid. *They've really been through the wringer with scars like that...* the boy thought, coming to his

own conclusions and pitying Emma for them.

"You gotta be careful when those nobles come around with the food and stuff. Some of 'em are nice, but others can be real awful." The boy wasn't great with words, but kindly explained that they were especially likely to target someone thin and frail like Emma.

"Wait… The *nobles* do that?" The three siblings weren't exactly knowledgeable about how things worked in the capital, so they tilted their heads questioningly. They'd thought handing out food was a volunteering sort of thing the nobles did, but it sounded like that might not have been the case. The fact that this child's first thought upon seeing Emma's scars was that a noble had done it to her rather than getting caught up in some violence in the slums was odd.

"Yeah, you shoulda seen what happened yesterday. This is the week the worst slimebag takes charge, ya know? And he had the nerve to just take off before everyone had gotten their food! My brother even offered up his greatest treasure just to make sure everyone got a bite to eat 'cause he knew some of us would starve if we didn't, but…" The boy had said he hadn't been crying, but his eyes were starting to water again.

The three siblings didn't know much about the food distribution duty the highest-peered aristocrats were required to do. Wasn't it a given that you had to stay until everyone that showed had gotten something to eat? Otherwise, you were just asking for a brawl to break out between people who'd gotten to eat and people who hadn't. They weren't *trying* to make things less safe, were they?

The siblings' heads were tilting more and more as the questions piled up.

"Wait… What's this about treasure?" Emma picked up on the word immediately. It almost looked like her eyes were sparkling. *What kind of treasure do they have in the slums? If it was money, they would have used it, and if it was food, then they wouldn't have had to go to the food distribution line in the first place.*

"Well, he took the treasure all right, but he still left anyway!" The boy was trembling with rage and gritting his teeth at the memory.

"Wait, but…that's just plain robbery." That was a horrible thing for *anyone* to do, let alone a noble. But also, they were curious what in the world this treasure could be that someone of such

high peerage would be willing to steal it.

"My brother tried to stop the lowlife's carriage as he was taking off and…they ran him over…" The tears were slowly starting to spill over as the boy told his tale.

"So it's straight-up *mugging*, then…?" The siblings exchanged looks as one of them handed the boy a handkerchief. They felt terrible for the poor boy, who seemed to be facing one misfortune after another. Could the nobles really get away with something like that? The siblings only knew about how things had worked in Japan from their previous lives and in the borderland of Pallas, so they couldn't understand.

"Is your brother okay after that?" William asked, but it only made the poor boy cry even louder. Apparently, he was not.

Emma gently patted the boy on his back, telling him to take his time as she pressed for more information.

"He's been unconscious ever since. Just totally out cold, and his leg won't stop bleeding… I knew I needed to get him some medicine…but I don't have any money…!"

So that was why he'd been pickpocketing. He'd been desperate.

"I tried going to an apothecary, and…that's when I realized I hadn't taken any money."

The siblings weren't about to just sit back and do nothing after hearing all that.

"Well hey, we've got some copper. We'll go to the apothecary with you." The sun was starting to set, and it was getting late enough that any parent, let alone a noble, would be scolding their children for being out. The three siblings were mentally around thirty and forty, though. And they couldn't leave a little boy all on his lonesome like this, even if it meant Melsa would get mad at them.

"Are you sure?" The boy looked up at the siblings like they were his saviors. This kid's clothes were even more tattered than theirs, but he was willing to use the meager copper he could get to help his brother… He was truly a pure spirit.

"Hmm… You know, why don't we go take a look at your brother's wounds first? We'll go to the apothecary after."

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"Watch your step, 'kay?" They entered the dimly lit building as

the boy led them to his injured brother. They carefully climbed the stairs, which creaked with every step.

“Why isn’t he on the first floor if he’s injured?” George wondered aloud, considering it must have been difficult to bring him up the stairs.

“You can’t see anything at night on the first floor. The top floor has some cracks in the roof and the walls, so it’s a bit brighter up there,” the boy responded. The three siblings didn’t think that was exactly a good thing, but they followed regardless.

While the staircase was made of the same brick as the walls, each floor was made of wood and there were plenty of holes where it had rotted away. The siblings followed exactly where the boy walked to find their footing.

“We’re coming in now,” the boy called out once they’d reached a room on the third floor. There was no response, but the boy entered regardless. Just as he’d said, it was a bit brighter on this floor than the lower floors. There was a big hole right in the center of the ceiling that revealed the evening sky

A man was lying down completely unmoving, as though he were sleeping. Emma rushed up to him to get a closer look at his wounds.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Careful or the floor’ll give out!” the boy warned her as George and William carefully made their way over.

The man was still lying perfectly still, even as Emma touched him.

“He was talking and everything until yesterday. He even came up here all by himself.”

It looked like they’d attempted to stop the bleeding with a cloth that looked less than hygienic, but it didn’t seem to be working well as it was soaked through with red. The siblings removed the cloth to get a glimpse at the wound up close, and went quiet.

“H-Hey… What’re you all quiet for? Is he gonna be okay?!” The boy started to worry, but Emma gave him a sweet smile.

“Don’t worry. The wound isn’t that deep, and the bone’s not broken either.” As long as they’d washed the wound and kept it from getting infected, it should have gotten better in no time, yet he was still bleeding.

George and William nodded in agreement. They weren’t doctors, and they didn’t have much knowledge about medicine from their previous lives either, but they were from Pallas, where

monsters regularly appeared. They had plenty of experience examining wounds and performing first aid. This wound wasn't bad enough to warrant sobbing over.

"B-But then…why isn't he getting better?" With the siblings' reassurances, the boy still couldn't believe it. The man was completely still and unconscious. Even with four people surrounding him and examining his wounds (which should have hurt), he still wasn't moving.

"I think…maybe he's just hungry?" Emma suggested. The man's legs were thin and his skin was bone dry. It was clear to them that he was malnourished.

You couldn't move if you were too hungry. Emma knew that all too well.

Losing so much blood in such a state also might have caused him to be dehydrated as well.

"When was the last time he ate?" William asked, shocked at how thin the man was.

"Uh… Well, we had the food distribution yesterday, but he always eats last, and they didn't have enough for everyone, so he didn't get anything. Other than that…the volunteers came out the week before, but they didn't bring any of those biscuits they usually give us…"

At best, the man hadn't had any food for a week, and based on his appearance alone, it looked like he hadn't had anything substantial for over a month.

"Well, that's a much bigger problem than his wound!" William shouted.

"H-He always gives any fruit he finds to the kids here, and he shares his portion of food during the food distribution too…" the boy sputtered. They all knew that wasn't enough for an adult man to get the nutrients he needed. It was amazing he'd made it this long. Here the siblings thought the slums were a violent place, so they'd never expected to find such a caring young man.

"Anyway, what we're gonna need…" Emma began as she fished through her wallet. They were worried about proper hydration, so… "Water…salt…and sugar, I think?"

The boy balked. "Salt and sugar are way too expensive!" There was no *way* they could afford that.

"Don't worry! We don't need a whole lot. We'll get it by weight for one copper each, then use the rest on something that's good for digestion… Like rice porridge? No, no… Does oatmeal soften

up if you boil it in milk?" Emma didn't know the market price in the capital, but in Pallas they could get one hundred grams of salt and fifty grams of sugar for one copper each.

"Well, then I'm gonna run and go get it!" George said, taking his wallet from William and dragging the boy with him.

Meanwhile, Emma and William began a brainstorming session to try and jog their memories of their past lives.

"So, William... Do you remember how much salt was in a regular sports drink?"

"Uh, no?"

"I feel like I saw it at some point... And I thought they were kinda sweet, so I said we needed some sugar too, but now I'm not sure."

"I dunno either. Good luck trying to remember, sis!"

"Ugh, you are seriously no help at all, Peyta."

"How am I supposed to remember outta the blue?!"

"It's probably less salty than seawater, and that's like...three percent salinity, I think? Ugh, I can't remember for the life of me!"

"Well, I don't know either! I just know what does a body good!"

"I'm not asking about milk, Peyta!"

George came back alone carrying several bottles of water, some salt, and some sugar during what was more of a braindrizzle than a brainstorm.

"I brought back the stuff for rehydration first. We were bringing the oatmeal when the kid got caught up with some of his buddies. They were all little kids too, so I figured he'd be fine." Guessing the boy would be up in a little bit, George opened one of the bottles and began pouring in some salt and sugar. Emma and William both shouted, making George stop shaking the bottle to mix it all.

"What? What's up, you guys?" George asked.

"George... Do *you* know what the salt concentration is supposed to be?" William asked fearfully. The two of them hadn't been able to figure it out, so they were shocked at how George hadn't hesitated when pouring.

"It's two or three grams of salt and twenty to forty grams of sugar per liter of water, right? I remember looking it up on Mewgle when one of our construction workers passed out in the heat way back in the day."

"Bro... You are the *best*." George was the *last* person they

expected to have known that, but their older brother *had* been the foreman of a construction site. For once, Emma and William were filled with admiration.

Later, George horrified them all by telling them that there hadn't been any vending machines around that day, so he'd just mixed some tap water, sesame salt from his lunch, and some simple syrup, and he'd had no idea if it would actually work.

Isn't sesame salt mostly just sesame?!

William took their impromptu rehydration fluid and slowly spoon-fed it to the man while George and William carefully washed his wound.

"All right. Before the kid comes back… Violet, can you give us a hand?" Emma gently took the spider out from under her hat and placed it on the floor. Even in the dark room, its eight adorable little eyes sparkled.

Gosh, no matter how many times I see you, you are just the prettiest purple I've ever seen. And you're cute as a button too!

Just like Violet had done before to Emma's wounds, it shot its webbing onto the man's.

"Thanks, Violet."

Violet saluted Emma with its front leg, as if to say, *You can call on me any time.*

What a guy! Emma thought, before remembering that Violet was a girl spider. Violet crawled up Emma's arm and into her hat just as the boy returned.

"How is he?" he asked. Behind him were a bunch of children even smaller than he was. "These are some of the other kids from around here. They just kinda tagged along…"

The children timidly approached the man. Each step creaked under their weight, and everyone worried the floor might give out.

"He's going to be okay. We're all done treating his injury, and he's keeping water down just fine. Let's make something to eat so he can have some when he wakes up." Emma soothed the children while taking the oatmeal and milk from the boy. The kids' faces all lit up once they heard food was in store. Yes, food truly was the greatest, Emma thought.

She asked if they had a pot to use, and the boy retrieved a large pot and ladle from another room.

"Some of the nobles forgot these when they were handing out food a while ago. We were glad to have it, but we didn't have any

food anyway, so we've never used it."

"Wait, does that mean you can't cook here?" Emma asked. While oatmeal was perfectly edible in milk, it was way better warm.

William pointed toward a fireplace. "What if you used that, sis?" There wouldn't be any problem setting a fire there, and they could probably make a place to set the pot on using some of the loose bricks lying around.

"All right! Then we just need some good wood... We can probably use the flooring from over there. They're probably gonna light the streets of the public district right about now, so I'll go get us some fire." George was still full of energy as he left the room and descended the stairs again.

In the capital, there were torches along the main streets so people could see on their way home from work once it got dark. George heard from the shopkeeper he'd just seen that the commoners would get fire from the torches for cooking.

"Man... We really underestimated his survival skills, huh?" William said. George made sure to know exactly how to get whatever fire and water one would need for being outdoors, given how long he'd been going along on hunts in Pallas.

"Now if only he could just get better at studying..." Emma replied.

The Tanaka family really did always fall short.

None of the siblings would even entertain the thought of leaving an unconscious, injured man and a bunch of tiny children behind. They might have looked like kids themselves, but they had the minds of thirty- and forty-year-olds. They couldn't possibly abandon the kids now.

But this was likely the first time in either of their lives that any of them had stayed out overnight without permission.

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Once the water in the pot had boiled and the oatmeal had softened, they added the milk and leftover salt. It was hard to really call it cooking when all they'd done was boil it, but the salt helped with the flavor. It was a lot like the creamy rice porridge they had in their previous life. As the night drew on, more and more children had gathered. They added more water to portion it better for the newcomers, which had wound up making it a bit

mushy.

“All right, it’s done!” Emma turned around to see the children all politely lined up with cups in hand behind her.

“Come on, guys! This ain’t a charity! This is for our brother!” the boy scolded his friends, but they stubbornly stood their ground. They were all hungry, after all.

“Don’t worry. There’s plenty for everyone!” Emma said. She took the cup from the child in the front of the line and filled it with the oatmeal mix. “Be careful. It’s hot.”

The children all nodded and blew on their oatmeal. The smell of the oatmeal must have awoken the injured man.

“Huh…? Who are you? Are you new?” The man tilted his head at the three siblings, whom he’d never seen before.

“*Bro!*”

“Hugh? What are you— Owowow!” The young boy hugged the man tightly.

“You’re such a stupid idiot! We were all so worried about you!” the boy said, thumping his fists on the man’s chest. The man in question apparently had no idea what was going on, but he soothed the young boy as he took the painless assault.

“Calm down a sec, Hugh. I don’t know what I did, but I’m sorry.”

“We thought you were gonna die, man! You big stupid fartface!” The boy really *had* been worried, as he wept while fully atop the man now.

The man finally recalled the incident with the carriage the day before. Strangely enough, there was no pain, and his wounded leg was covered in something purple. He stroked the boy’s head comfortingly.

“Do you think you can hold food down?” George asked, holding a cup of the oatmeal out to him.

The man gulped, but didn’t try to take it. “Where did you get this? Hugh, you weren’t pickpocketing again, were you?”

“N-No! They bought this with their own money!” Though the man wasn’t *entirely* off the mark. The boy twitched and started shivering, which just made the man doubt him even more.

“Eat up before it gets cold. You can think more about it later,” George said. After a week without food, the man couldn’t refuse.

“This is great!” he said, bringing spoonful after spoonful to his lips.

“Take your time and chew your food. You don’t want to send

your body into shock," Emma said as she helped dish out seconds to the children who were asking, but it didn't seem the man heard her.

Once the massive pot of oatmeal had run dry, William finally explained the day's events to the man.

"So you *had* been pickpocketing," he said and bonked the boy on the head with his fist. He faced the siblings again. "Sorry about that, you three. I look after this young man like a brother, but he was a regular pickpocket before he met me. Any time he gets into trouble, his first thought is to go back to it, even though *that's* brought him plenty of trouble too."

The man's apology hardly sounded like one you'd expect from someone living in the slums, but the siblings all laughed and told him not to worry about it.

"I really don't know how I can thank you all. Despite all that, you still made food for us and treated my wound. Frankly, it was a huge help. I'm Harold, by the way. I just sort of started looking after the kids of this area."

"It's really fine. It wasn't anything we couldn't handle. I'm George, and those are my...er, two brothers, Emma and William." Since Emma was dressed as a boy, George decided to say she was his little brother.

"Oh, I'm Huey! Just call me Hugh, though," the boy said with a grin, rubbing his head where Harold had bonked him. Now that Harold was awake, Hugh was finally getting his smile back.

"It's weird, though. I feel like there are a *lot* of little kids around here..." George noted. He'd been going back and forth between the slums and the public district all day. At a glance, it looked like the only kids around were even smaller than Emma and William, and once he got to the slums, he hadn't seen any adults. The only one he'd seen was the man before him now.

"It's because there's a lot of opportunities for work right now. Once you come of working age, there are lots of places that'll hire you even if you come from the slums, so they all leave once they're all grown up."

Because of the coup d'état, there was an abundance of jobs that required grunt work, like the demolition or rebuilding of crumbling buildings. Harold seemed rather proud while explaining all this, but the siblings didn't understand why he was still in the slums if he was of working age.

"Anyway, I guess luck wasn't on my side yesterday. I went and

got myself hurt and made all these little guys worry about me," Harold said, ruffling the hair of all the kids gathered, clearly sorry for leaving the kids on their own.

After they'd filled their bellies, the kids must have been overwhelmed with relief that the man's wound was better, as sleep soon took them.

"You all should stay here tonight too," Harold suggested. "Nothing good can come of you wandering around outside at this hour."

While the siblings had on-and-off conversations with him into the night, soon, they too had fallen asleep. The siblings really were built different, as they were able to sleep soundly even without a soft bed or warm futon.

The next day, Emma woke up without the cats for the first time in a long time. The place where she'd fallen asleep was directly in the light of the morning sun as it shone down from the hole in the ceiling. It was so bright, it woke her up.

"Mnngh... Martha... It's too bright... Hmm?" Emma realized her usual soft bed wasn't beneath her and opened her eyes. Seeing George and William huddled up next to her reminded her she'd stayed overnight in the slums.

But the man they'd helped was nowhere to be seen.

His injury hadn't been terrible, but it still should have been a while before he was ready to move around. Emma stretched and got her stiff body moving before standing up to find where Harold had gone.

"Ow!"

Apparently, she'd accidentally stepped on one of the children who'd been sleeping nearby. "Oh, sorry!"

"What're you doing?" the boy she'd stepped on asked, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"I just saw Harold wasn't here."

"Harold? Oh, he's probably painting next door or summin'..."

"Painting? What's he painting? Er... Hello?"

The boy wound up falling right back asleep again, so with no other options, Emma decided to go see for herself.

There was far more light coming in through the entrance of the room next door, and Emma had to squint to see in.

"Whoa...!"

The ceiling of the room in front of her when she entered had

been demolished, along with the wall that faced the outside, so it was only natural it would be bright. The blue sky stretched out before her.

“Uh-oh, did I wake you?” Harold noticed Emma had entered and turned around to face her.

“Whoa, what is this?! It’s incredible!”



The wall behind Harold was painted with bright, vivid colors. It was so realistic, it felt like she'd walked right into a botanical garden. All the fine details showed that this was definitely not the work of an amateur.

"Heh heh. Pretty great, huh?" he boasted, presenting the wall he'd been using as his canvas.

"It is! It seriously looks like the real thing! The perspective is super impressive, and your shading feels natural too... And overall, the colors are just amazing. I've never seen such vivid pigments over here!"

"Uh... Y-Yeah..." The man stared at Emma, totally flabbergasted. He hadn't expected such expert praise. Hugh had mentioned these kids were from a different slum, but based on the conversations he could remember from last night, it was clear that they were quite educated. It almost felt like they were grown adults who could think for themselves.

"Who...are you?" Harold asked, staring at Emma quizzically.

Emma seemed fully satisfied as she returned the man's gaze. It was just as she'd thought. While Hugh called him his "brother," the age difference between Hugh and Harold was more like a father and son, or even greater. In the dimly lit room the night before, Emma was likely the only one who noticed because she'd had her spider on her head. Though, even without Violet's dark vision, she might have known anyway based on her special ability.

The man was rail thin and had orange eyes that told of his intellect. His hair was scraggly and an even more vivid shade of orange than his eyes. Now that he was standing, she could see how tall he was.

Yeah. He was quite the handsome old man.

The king was a manly, rugged type of silver fox, but the man before her was more of the artsy intellectual type. Even in this state, he was still quite handsome.

"Hey, lemme see you paint."

What Emma didn't know was that the colorful wall before her was painted with the same kind of pigment that had been splattered all over Joshua's storefront. She'd found what she was looking for and had no idea. No, Emma was far more focused on watching a handsome old man concentrating on his painting instead.

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“So let me get this straight. Someone splattered your friend’s storefront with this ink?” Harold asked. Once George and William had woken up, they began discussing their ink hunt.

“Yes, it was bright red ink. No matter how much we scrubbed, it wouldn’t come off, so we had no idea what to do. Do you have any idea how we can fix it?”

“Red, huh? That’s the same color I gave that noble kid who was distributing our food. I’m so sorry to say, there really is no way to get rid of that ink. I used it for this mural, and it isn’t fading or running at all,” Harold responded, gesturing to the painted wall. One of the outfacing walls of the building had crumbled, but even though the painting should have been getting battered by wind and rain, it was still in perfect condition. The siblings had hoped there would be some way to get rid of it, but it really did seem like it was impossible.

“Let’s see. This person skimped on food distribution, stole some ink, and then splattered it all over Joshua’s store. There’s only *one* person I can think of who would do something like that,” Emma said. She’d recently met someone that maliciously cringey, after all. George and William seemed to have the same thought.

“Where do you buy this ink, anyway?” one of the siblings asked. They hadn’t been able to find it in the shopping district or the public district, so it was a shock to find it in so many colors there in the slums.

“I didn’t *buy* it anywhere. I made it myself,” Harold boasted, showing off his collection. The colors were all in simple containers, and each was just as vivid as the next.

“You *make* this stuff?!” the siblings exclaimed.

There was no way. That ink was far too high-quality to just be homemade. They’d never seen ink that could retain such brilliant colors for so long, even in their previous lives.

“I used to work as a wandering painter, but my supplies were more expensive than what I was earning, so I started experimenting and making them myself. I guess I got a little obsessed with it. I wound up trying every last little thing I could. Of course, I’m not really wandering anymore and I just kinda doodle on this wall here while looking after the kids.” Harold laughed, acting like it wasn’t a big deal, but considering how

anyone else of working age would have left the slums because of the sudden economic turnaround, it was likely he couldn't stand to abandon the kids who had been left behind. A man living by himself shouldn't have gotten *this* skinny, but according to Hugh, he was so kindhearted, that he'd been trying to save all of the kids in the slums. He put their needs before his own.

"If you three have nowhere to go, you can stay here. You're just about working age, and I can teach you how to read and write." Noticing the sibling's patchwork clothing, Harold was about to take them under his wing too.

"No, no! We're totally fine!" George responded in a panic.

"You sure about that? You don't have to push yourselves…"

Yeesh, do we all really look that *impoverished…?* It wasn't just Harold, but all the kids had been telling them they could take all they wanted. Maybe the stink of poverty hadn't washed off them after all these years. All the siblings exchanged looks as they thought long and hard about it. They were starting to get worried that their friends at school thought they were destitute too.

"Huh?"

For a split second, the light coming through the crumbled wall went dark. Then came the sound of something landing light on its feet. Realizing something had invaded their space, everyone turned to see what it was.

There stood a massive beast fully blocking out the light from the outside world.

"What…?"

"I-It's some kind of monster!"

"*Eeek!* A-A monster?!"

All the children screamed at the gigantic creature. It would have been impossible for a human being to jump over three floors to where the wall had crumbled away. Even if they were in the slums, children of the capital had never encountered such a colossal creature. They wanted to run away, but they were frozen to the spot.

"Mrowr!" The great beast made a beeline for the three siblings as though it had been hunting them down. Despite the creature's size, it could jump nearly soundlessly.

"L-Look out! It's coming this way! Run!" Harold realized where it was heading and reached a hand out to the siblings, but he was too late. In an instant, it landed before the three, who all

stared at it in shock.

"G-General Kongming?!"

"Mrow!" The creature rubbed up against Emma and purred. It was, of course, the Stewart family cat, Kongming.

"What are you doing outside?" Emma petted Kongming as the cat began licking her cheek with her sandpapery tongue, but there was no answer. She only fawned over Emma after having found her.

Gosh, she really is the cutest... Emma thought.

"H-Hey... Are you three okay?" Harold asked cautiously. At a glance, it didn't *seem* like the beast was trying to attack Emma, and the other siblings were smiling and petting it.

"Huh? Why wouldn't we be? This is our kitty, General Kongming," William responded, introducing the cat to Harold as the man inched closer and closer. Kongming, realizing they were talking about her, stopped licking Emma and faced Harold.

"Mrowr!"

"The general's saying 'nice to meet you!'" Emma translated as if she were fluent.

"The pleasure's all mine... Wait, that's a cat? Hang on, hang on. Since when are cats that big?! But...it *did* meow... But it's way too big!" Harold's shock and confusion were perfectly understandable.

I suppose, now that they mention it...it does look *like a cat...and it meows like a cat...but it's so darn big! It's way too big!*

"Hey, what's a cat?"

"A kitty?"

Since cats were such a luxury, the children of the slums had never even heard of them and they stared at Harold for answers. They were brimming with curiosity and looked like they were dying to touch the animals.

"Cats are the most expensive kind of animal a wealthy person can own," Harold explained. "It's said you could buy a house for the price of one, but...they're really not supposed to be this big. Or maybe I just never knew?" The cats that Harold had seen were small enough to hop up on someone's lap, but the thing in front of him was way bigger than even Emma herself.

"It's expensive?! Woooow!"

"You could buy a whole house with an animal?! Rich people are so weird!"

With the children's anxieties abated, they were unable to

restrain themselves from getting closer to Kongming to touch her.

“H-Hey! That’s dangerous, guys! Don’t get so close to it!” Harold still couldn’t believe the thing before him was a cat, so he tried to stop the children, but they had already surrounded Kongming.

“Wow! It’s so fluffy!”

“It’s rumbling too!”

“It smells like the sun!”

“It’s sooooo big and cute!”

Kongming quietly allowed the children to pet her; she’d always been great with kids.

“But if a cat’s such a luxury, how do you all have one? Did you steal it?” Hugh asked. Even after they’d said they owned a cat, it seemed he didn’t realize they were from a count’s family. He likely thought they were still as poor as he did originally. William couldn’t help but laugh awkwardly at the fact that Hugh found it more realistic for them to have stolen a cat than for them to be rich.

“General Kongming used to be a stray. We have three more,” William replied.

“A stray? Like how there are stray dogs?” In the slums, stray dogs were quite common. In this world, people often brought dogs with them on hunts. They were normal pets for commoners as well.

“Anyway, how did you get here, General?” one of the siblings asked. It would have been simple enough for Kongming to open the door to the manor and jump the wall, but she’d promised not to go outside on her own. It would have been different if the siblings had been in trouble, but the siblings were all perfectly healthy and in no danger at all.

“Oh…” George had a bad feeling. If Kongming wouldn’t come out there all by herself, then that meant someone had brought her. And there was only one person he could think of who would come all this way.

A voice came from the entrance to the room. “I brought her here, George.”

“Urk…”

“Ah!”

“Father!”

Following Kongming, Leonard had ascended the stairs. His

brow was furrowed and it was clear he was quite angry. “George! William! You went and stayed overnight somewhere without saying a *word* to your mother or me. Do you have *any* idea how worried we were?!”

“W-We’re sorry!” Both George and William stood up straight as they apologized. Leonard then smacked them both on the head. The blows landed with dull thuds, so they must have hurt quite a bit.

“What would you have done if something had happened to Emma?!”

“W-We’re sorry!”

“Don’t you worry me so much either, little Emma!” Leonard scooped up his daughter and gently scolded her. The difference in treatment between the siblings was truly unbalanced. While the brothers thought the way he spoiled Emma was one of the reasons she was so irrational all the time, neither of them had the courage to bring it up to their father.

“I’m sorry, father. There was just so much that happened.” Emma hugged her father tightly.

“There, there. You didn’t run into any trouble, did you? I was so worried I couldn’t even sleep. That’s why I had General Kongming bring me here first thing in the morning.” Leonard hadn’t been hugged by Emma in quite a while, so he was gushing happily over her. He had no idea that Emma wore an impish grin at the same time.

“Erm… I take it you’re these three’s…father?” Harold timidly asked Leonard.

Blond hair and purple eyes.

There was no way Harold could have known they had any parents at all, but the size of the man before him had him terrified. Harold would certainly lose if they got into a fight. Though his clothes seemed quite casual, they were of a quality a commoner could never hope to obtain.

“Indeed. It looks like you were looking after them this past night, right? I’m Leonard Stewart.”

Leonard… Stewart…

Harold nearly jumped out of his skin when he heard the familiar name.

“S-Stewart? Like…Count Stewart of the Pallas region?”

“Hmm? Yes, that would be me. We all came to the capital so my children could attend school.”

Harold had been wandering the kingdom until recently, so he'd heard plenty of rumors about the Stewart family. He'd heard that they'd been forced to rule over three whole regions where monsters regularly appeared right after Leonard had inherited the family name. How after just a few years, his silk manufacturing had become such a success, that the Pallas region was now the most prosperous in the whole kingdom. How his love for his daughter was bordering on a sickness. How he'd named the highest-quality silk they manufactured in his region after his daughter. That's right, the name of that silk, with a price enough to knock one straight onto their butt was...Emma silk.

So the boy Leonard was cradling in his arms...was the count's beloved daughter, Emma Stewart?!

"I-I'm so sorry! I can't believe I let your precious children stay in such a filthy place...!" A chill ran down Harold's spine. No noble would allow their children to stay in the slums. *What are they going to do to me? Am I going to jail? Or getting whipped?! Or just straight to the guillotine?!*

"Oh, don't worry about it. They seem fine, so it's not a problem at all. And if they weren't, well...it would've been you-know-what for you." Leonard laughed, but the chill running through Harold only intensified.

"Father, Harold makes the most incredible ink here! I want to try using it on our silk!" Emma begged her father, taking in the sight of the handsome man trembling at her father's joke. Color had always been one of their biggest difficulties with silk production, so Harold's ink would be perfect for them. It had such vivid colors after just one coat, and it wouldn't fade. Up until that point, they had to soak their silk to dye it, then wash it after dyeing it, over and over again. This would be revolutionary for them. It would also save them quite a bit of money since they wouldn't have to use nearly as much water, which was a precious commodity in Pallas.

"Well, if that's what you want, then we'll give it a try. Harold, was it? Could we buy that ink off of you?" Without even questioning the child's opinion, Leonard asked to purchase some. He was ready to seal the deal by saying he'd spend however much it cost. It was plain as day that the rumors about how much he loved his daughter were true.

"H-Hold it!" Joshua appeared at the entrance of the room,

completely out of breath. Apparently, Leonard had left him in the dust as he'd run up the stairs.

"Huh? Joshua?" George and William both turned to face Joshua, rubbing their heads where their father had smacked them, and seeing Joshua doing the same. Apparently, he'd gotten just as mad at Joshua earlier.

"Lord Leonard, you have to run all business dealings by the Rothschild family first!" Joshua cut in, desperately trying to catch his breath. The Stewart family was so terrible with money that it almost seemed like they were cursed. If *someone* didn't step in, it was obvious the count would return his family to their previous poverty-stricken life. No matter how many times the Rothschilds warned him not to, he'd always tell people he'd buy things at the asking price or give his wares away for free. Naturally, there was a never-ending queue of people wanting to get their hands on the Stewart family's tremendous fortune. The Rothschild family had fought off every last one of them and protected the family's assets.

"I apologize for the sudden intrusion. I am Joshua Rothschild, the owner of the Rothschild Company's capital store and business adviser to the Stewart family. Please be sure that any and all business dealings go through me." Though by all appearances, he seemed to be just an ordinary kid with prominent freckles, he'd given such a proper introduction *and* was able to talk shop. It made another chill go down Harold's spine.

Did he just say...what I think he said?

"The...Rothschild Company?"

As in, the most prosperous merchant company in the kingdom? As in, the one with thumbs in a multitude of foreign pies? As in the ones that deal in anything anyone could possibly imagine?

Right before Harold's eyes was the wealthiest merchant in the kingdom and a rich count to boot. Here in the slums. In a building with a crumbling roof and walls.

"Oh, hey! You're the guy who got ink splattered all over your store, huh?!" Hugh hadn't really understood the gravity of the situation, but he remembered what the three siblings had mentioned before.

"That's correct. Would you happen to know if it's possible to clean the ink from our storefront?" Joshua's eyes were hopeful, but the answer was still the same.

“I’m sorry…”

Joshua slumped his shoulders in disappointment. The rumors that were bound to spread about his store being splattered with blood-like ink right before opening were going to be hell. Whether he tried to sand the ink away from the paving or remove it entirely, it was going to be costly. The rumors about it being a store that had been vandalized were bound to affect customer turnout as well. His target clientele were noble ladies who attended the academy, but with unsavory rumors surrounding it, *nobody* would want to shop there.

“I’m really sorry…”

“No, no. This location tends to get quite a bit of harassment. I knew what I was getting into.” Joshua smiled, telling him not to worry about it.

“Hey, Harold? Can you possibly paint over the ink?” Emma had moved away from Leonard at some point and was now looking at the painting on the wall. It was a brilliant picture of greenery.

“Hmm? Sure. It won’t come off once it’s dry, and it won’t mix with the colors under it either, so it’s great for painting.” Harold had been deeply apologetic up until then, but the ink was something he made to paint with. It didn’t matter what surface was painted on—the color would apply perfectly and wouldn’t fade. Once the ink was dry you could paint over it without disturbing the color below and it was thick enough to cover it completely. It really was the perfect ink for any artist.

“So what if you just painted over the stuff at Joshua’s store? It’s red, so…maybe some strawberries or something would be cute! It’d be a smash hit on social media!” Since the ink wouldn’t come off, Emma suggested a more aesthetic solution.

“I take it you painted the mural on this wall? I see… Yes, this *would* be quite eye-catching, wouldn’t it?” Joshua had seen countless paintings for work, and Harold’s was professional enough to satisfy him. And if, as Emma suggested, he were to turn that bright red into something like strawberries, it would be seen as adorable rather than a horrifying river of blood. He could even deny that the storefront had been the subject of harassment; he’d merely been laying down the first coat for the strawberries.

Though most of all, Joshua couldn’t refuse a suggestion Emma made, even if he had no idea what a “social media” was.

“Harold, could I possibly ask you to paint some strawberries

at my store? Naturally, you will be compensated for your work. If the reception is good enough, we may even ask you to come by and paint other murals as well. Perhaps we could have paintings of seasonal fruits or limited edition desserts."

"Huh? I mean...sure, but..."

"Well then, how about we form a one-year contract to make you the Rothschild Company's exclusive painter? This will be a separate contract from the ink itself. We'll purchase the amount of ink we need for now, today. Later, we'll have you create a few samples of it for us, and if we think it will sell, we can potentially sign another contract granting us exclusivity to sell the ink as well."

"Uhh... I mean...sure, but..."

Joshua promptly went into a whirlwind of forming contracts. He whipped out one of the templates he always had on him and began scribbling down the necessary clauses, then signed it.

"If these terms are acceptable to you, will you please sign here? This is the contract for us to have you as a painter exclusive to our company, and this is a pledge stating that you won't sell your ink to anyone else until we've decided whether we'd like to sell it ourselves."

"Uhh... I mean...sure, but..." Harold had no idea what was even going on anymore.

"Bro, you've been sayin' the same thing over and over again! You good, man?" Hugh asked, worriedly tugging on the hem of Harold's clothes.

"Y-Yeah. I mean, it just feels like a dream come true, y'know? And the details all seem pretty good to me..." The conversation already felt too good to be true, but when Harold saw how much the pay was on the contract, he couldn't believe his eyes.

"It's certainly a dream come true for us as well. This will be much less expensive than trying to sand away or remove all our paving, and since our target clientele is schoolgirls, having a café that's cute and stands out will be a great boon." Joshua looked quite satisfied as he collected the signed papers. It was a win-win business deal.

"Wh-What did you just do?" The children couldn't understand what just happened either, so they began questioning Harold. It hadn't even been ten minutes since Joshua arrived yet the whole situation had changed.

"Right, um... I've basically just found work as a painter. It

means you'll all have food to eat every day for a year," Harold replied.

All the children looked at each other. *Food? Every day? There's no way that could be!*

"You sure he's not trying to trick you?" The children of the slums were all too suspicious of such an amazing offer. It was bound to have an ulterior motive, and they were understandably worried about Harold.

Joshua scoffed. "That's awfully rude of you! The Rothschild Company doesn't *trick* people. That's why we make these contracts!" He then added that the welfare his company offered was as generous as the Stewart family's. "This is quite the distance from our shop, so would you like to move to the public district instead? We have plenty of properties we can offer—"

"No, I can't move." While Harold had been agreeing to pretty much everything up until that point, he was firm in turning this down.

"We can prepare something quite large for you. Large enough to accommodate all the children." Joshua sweetened the pot even more, but Harold still shook his head.

Harold lowered his voice as he scratched his head. "The thing is, the raw materials for the ink are under the slums. If I moved away, someone else might camp out here and it'd be a real pain. I might not even be able to make it anymore." After wandering for so long, Harold had found the legendary mushrooms he used as materials growing in droves in the cellar of this nearly crumbling building. He couldn't make his ink without them. "And I'm worried that if it ever gets out how I make this ink, they'll be overharvested." Therefore, in order to secure the source of his mushrooms, Harold and the children had settled down in the slums.

"Well, um...I must apologize, but we really can't have you working for us in the shopping district looking like...that. We'll budget to have some clothes prepared for you, so could we potentially have you start painting tomorrow?" Joshua asked. Harold's clothes were even more tattered than the children's. The places torn up by the carriage were especially noticeable.

"Oh, Joshua! I think Harold would look *amazing* with a hunting cap! Also, anything too frilly will get in the way of his work, so go with a simple shirt!" Emma was wearing an outfit that was in tatters herself, yet here she was commenting enthusiastically on

how Harold should dress.

"Wow, you're getting clothes n' stuff?!"

"You're gonna look like a rich guy!"

"I've never had new clothes!"

Hearing Emma gushing over Harold's new clothes had all the children envious. So many of them were wearing clothes that clearly didn't fit them or were completely tattered. They likely were all clothes they'd gotten from donations or clothes they'd salvaged from the trash.

"Well, why don't I make you all some? I don't have any hunting to do since I'm in the capital, so I have all the time in the world." Leonard gave Joshua a look that said, *That should be fine, right?*

Emma hurriedly stopped her father. "No way! Your taste is far too…unique, Father! I'll design the clothes. You can just focus on the sewing part." If they left the design part to Leonard, he'd wind up making clothes that were covered with high-quality embroidery of Emma's face. Though Emma had only ever cared about bugs since she was little, even she couldn't stand that level of obsession, so she had started designing the clothes, dresses, and lace.

"Wait… You sew? And you're a count? You realize there are more than ten of us here alone?" Harold exclaimed. *He said* he *was going to do it? Not just order it from a tailor? This isn't just a parent doing it overnight or whatever! He's a count with land to his name and everything!*

"Oh, it's nothing to worry about! We'll be helping out too!"

"We'll even make some for the kids who aren't here right now, so it'd be a huge help if you could tell us how many we should make!"

Even the count's sons seemed raring to start sewing too.

"Wow, I had no idea nobles could sew. That's pretty sweet!" Hugh was actually starting to respect them for the first time.

"Most nobles don't, Hugh." Harold shook his head, trying to make sure Hugh didn't get the wrong idea.

Joshua, meanwhile, was working himself into a tizzy. "To be able to wrap yourselves up in Lady Emma's designs… Oh, what I wouldn't give! I'm so jealous of these damn children!"

Once the conversation had fully wrapped up, Leonard and his children all decided to return to the manor.

"Melsa was awfully worried about you all too. We need to get you all home and put her mind at ease."

Emma twitched when she heard her mother's name and started to shudder.

"Hey, um...is mother, like...really, really mad?" The only person Emma feared was the Stewart family matriarch, Melsa. Emma had a terrible feeling that she was bound to be far angrier with her for staying out without permission than her male siblings. Even her doting father and General Kongming wouldn't be able to save her from her mother's wrath. Emma's mood did a complete one-eighty.

"What am I going to do... What if she says I can't have snacks for a whole week...?" Though Hugh was hearing this thinking, *Wow, she gets to have snacks? And a parent who gets mad at her? What a luxurious life*, Emma was reluctant to get into her carriage.

The siblings, Joshua, and Leonard all piled in, and though it was already pretty much over capacity, Kongming hopped in after. They couldn't have a massive cat like her out in the open, after all. Their goal in the capital was *not to stand out*. Now that the siblings were in the carriage too, everyone was squeezed in nice and cozy.

"Huh? How is General Kongming doing that with her body?" someone asked. There was hardly any space, yet Kongming was squeezed into the tiniest of crevices. They'd thought it'd be impossible for them all to fit, yet she had managed it effortlessly.

"Uh... Cats are liquid, so..."

"Mrooowr!"

And so, Kongming offered her fluffiness to give a brief reprieve to the children before the storm of Melsa's fury.

◆◆◆

"Harold?!" As George and William were on their way home from school, they were shocked to see Harold painting in front of Joshua's store.

"He's like...completely unrecognizable..."

The man before them garbed in clothes provided by the Rothschild Company was so very different from the man they'd seen the day before on the brink of starvation that you'd have thought he was a new person altogether. He'd made a brilliant transformation into a chic and trendy middle-aged man. Emma's suggestion had been perfect. Perhaps *because* she was so into

older guys, she'd been able to recommend something that made him look much more professional. The young ladies on their way home from school kept stealing glances at him and sighing dreamily.

"Hey there, you lot! Er, I mean, you two! I guess it turns out you really were aristocrats, huh?" Harold tipped his hunting cap, which he'd worn low on his head, at George and William to greet them. "Hey... Aren't you missing someone?"

Emma wasn't with the brothers.

"Our sis is... Uh..."

"Yeah, Emma's..."

George and William both awkwardly avoided answering. When they'd gotten home the night before, Melsa had thoroughly laid into Emma. As punishment, Emma was now forced to go to etiquette lessons with her mother's family, the Sullivans, immediately after school every day.

Melsa's mother was the strictest in the entire kingdom when it came to etiquette, to the point she was feared. The family had gone to visit her once after they'd reached the capital, and the siblings had seen for themselves that their grandmother was an even more fearsome woman than their mother. Emma fought her punishment with all her might, crying that she wouldn't be able to play with her beloved kitties anymore, and she couldn't stop for tea with her buddies on the way home from school, and she couldn't try any of the dessert prototypes at Joshua's café, but her mother wouldn't budge. Without any delay at all, the Sullivan family carriage had been waiting to retrieve Emma outside the school gates. Maybe it was just the look of miserable resignation on Emma's face as the carriage took her away, but they couldn't stop thinking of a calf being led to the slaughter.

"I, uh... I'm sorry, guys..." Harold felt quite guilty since Emma had saved his life and all.

"Oh, it's fine. Sis has gotta learn from her mistakes sometime."

"Maybe Grandma Hilda can help her grow up a little bit..."

Of course, William and George both knew that was a pipe dream at best.

"Wait... As in...Madame Hilda?!"

Madame Hilda Sullivan of the four great ducal families. She was infamous for her high and harsh standards for etiquette, and Harold now recalled her daughter had married into the Stewart family. The woman was nicknamed the Etiquette Demon.

I'm... I'm so sorry, Emma... Harold looked up at the sky in apology.

Chapter 37: Crime and Punishment and Grandma

“Eeeuuuggggh…”

It had been two weeks since the Stewart siblings had gone to the slums. Emma never stopped sighing, even during embroidery class.

“Will they be coming to pick you up after school today too, Lady Emma?” Francesca asked, clearly worried for Emma and her lack of energy.

“Yes… They sure will…” Emma said, heaving another great sigh and adding another finished coaster to her stack. She looked completely exhausted, yet she kept embroidering coasters one after another. It was a Stewart family rule to always keep your hands moving.

As punishment for staying out overnight without permission, Emma was to spend four hours after school every day for a month at the Sullivan household, her mother’s childhood home.

“Grandmother is a hundred times stricter than my mother is…”

Emma had memories of her past life, so she at least knew the bare minimum of etiquette…or so she’d thought. Hilda was *strict*. Emma only wanted to know enough to not embarrass herself, but Hilda had far different plans.

At the Sullivan estate, dinners were far fancier than what they were at the Stewart household. They were extravagant multicourse meals every night, but the downside was that Hilda was a stickler for manners the whole time. Emma had been so excited to have steak, but it was cold by the time Hilda had finished telling her the *proper* way to hold her fork and knife.

“They’re making me go to some kind of soiree this weekend too…” Emma groaned. Her grandmother was quite cross with her, saying it had been rude of her to ignore all of the invitations to tea parties and evening parties she’d received. Her one saving grace was that the evening party she was practically being forced to attend was a banquet at the castle, so there would be no dancing.

“Well, we’ll be going to the soiree this weekend too, won’t we, Caitlyn?”

“Indeed, we’ll be going to the soiree this weekend too, Catherine!”

The twins had apparently been invited to the same banquet. They thought it was quite unusual for Emma to be attending as well.

“Uuuggghhh… You two go to a lot of these, right?” This was the first formal event she’d be going to since she’d started school, and she couldn’t be less enthusiastic. That was only exacerbated by the fact that her grandmother would also be in attendance. Seeing that the twins, who were the same age as her, were already used to these sorts of things made her admire them all the more.

“We usually go to about two a month, right, Caitlyn?”

“Indeed, we usually go to about two a month, Catherine.”

Since the twins’ homeland was such a hub of foreign trade, they were often asked to help guide any foreign guests at parties in the capital. She’d thought the twins were regular devil-may-care types, but even they were doing their jobs properly. Emma couldn’t complain without looking exceptionally childish.

“If we run into each other there, I hope you’ll teach me everything you know.” Emma was basically asking the twins to help her out before she wound up causing some kind of scene and making her grandmother upset. Though she was considerably older than them mentally, she couldn’t exactly *say* that.

“The party this weekend is supposed to have a prince from another country in attendance, so I hear it will be quite the big event, right, Caitlyn?”

“Indeed, the party this weekend is supposed to have a prince from another country in attendance, so I also hear it will be quite the big event, Catherine.”

“Euurrrgggh…” The fact that her grandmother had picked such an important event *had* to have been on purpose. She couldn’t have eased Emma into this sorta thing first?

Even the twins could tell how miserable Emma was and tried to cheer her up.

“Not to worry, Lady Emma. It’s a big party, so they’ll probably have the counts sitting close together, right, Caitlyn?”

“Yes, not to worry, Lady Emma! It’s a big party, so they’ll

probably have the counts sitting close together, Catherine!"

I don't wanna go to this stupid party... I wanna try dyeing a dress for Lady Rose with that new ink... All sorts of ideas Emma wanted to try out ran through her head, but she didn't have the time nor freedom to try any of them.

"Euuuugh..." Emma groaned again.

Emma had Marion's full sympathy, as she'd managed to turn the invitation down. "My brother will be attending for the Bell family, so I won't be there. Those frilly dresses don't suit me at all, and they wouldn't permit me to wear menswear either."

"Oh, I bet we could find something for you, Lady Marion. You're tall and have great posture, so I think a dress would look beautiful on you," Emma said. While Marion usually preferred more masculine clothing, she had an incredible figure. Even though she tried to hide it, her chest was quite large. Emma knew a person's size just by looking at them, so she knew it was true. A formfitting dress would look great on her...and an all-black dress with a plunging neckline came to mind.
"Aaaggghhh... I want to make a dress that would look good on you, Lady Marion..." Emma moaned. *Something that would show off how much all her working out pays off... Something cool and sexy...* Designs just kept popping into Emma's head one after another.

"You don't want to make yourself even *busier*, do you, Lady Emma? You should be worrying about your own dress," Marion responded.

Emma never went to any soirees, so she didn't have many dresses appropriate for them. She pretty much only made new dresses for Rose.

"I mean, I have the dress I wore for the last party, so I'll be fine." Even if she *was* still a growing girl, she'd only just made that dress, so it would certainly still fit. Thankfully, her breasts hadn't filled out either.

"You can't do that, Lady Emma! Wearing the same dress for an evening affair is unacceptable! Especially with a party as formal as this!" Francesca was shocked and scolded Emma accordingly. A lady couldn't be seen wearing the same dress more than once in high society. The dress she'd worn back then *was* quite lovely, but that was even more reason people would remember she'd worn it. They'd know right away that it was a repeat.

"Seriously?! What kinda rule is that?!" Sounded like the kind of

thing a girl who'd only had her first couple of dates would come up with. If *that* was the case, it would've been nice to have cheaper, fast fashion sort of clothes instead. Noblewomen's clothing was so expensive.

Actually, I wonder if that would sell if I made some...

No wait, nobles are all about having the highest-quality stuff. They wouldn't be up for something so cheaply made. But what about the commoners? Oh...they wouldn't be going to soirees in the first place.

To think her dress of Pallas silk would wind up only being worn once just felt like such a waste. Especially since she'd worked so hard to make it tough enough to withstand getting washed and everything...

"Uuurrrggghhh... Fine, I guess I'll make my own dress," Emma said, but she didn't exactly have time for that either. Emma could come up with any number of ideas for Rose's dresses, but she cared so little about what she wore herself that it actually took longer to design anything. Emma didn't have much skin she could show, and she had no chest to speak of. Her butt was still flat as a board, and her legs were so thin, there was no point in showing them off. Her only choice for making a dress that had any personality was to use her father's lace or embroidery, and she *really* didn't want that. She tried thinking up dress designs as she made coaster after coaster, but it just wasn't coming to her. She kept getting distracted by other ideas.

Marion the masc beauty. The ideal silver-haired dark-skinned twins. The iron-willed drinker Francesca. With all these gorgeous and unique women around her, she kept thinking about designs that would look good on *them* instead. A cool and sexy dress for Marion. Naturally, a matching pair for the twins with inverted colors. Francesca should have a modest dress with lots of lace to draw out even more of her beauty...

"Uuugh... You're all so cute, I can't think about my own dress at all..." Emma sighed again. The four other girls shared an awkward laugh over poor Emma's sad state.

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How did it all come to this?

Emma had somehow managed to finish her dress for the party in only five days. It was supposed to be the kind of party

where she could just stay quiet, listen to her grandmother, eat her meal, and be done with.

Edward, the second-born prince, could tell that Emma was acting reserved and decided to try to help. “Your dress is quite fetching, Lady Emma.”

“Th-Thank you very much, Your Highness.” Her grandmother’s *very close eye on her*...or rather, the *worried* expression was killing her. Emma felt like it didn’t matter *what* she did, her grandmother was going to get angry with her later.

“It really is a nice dress, Miss Emma. Grass the same color of your eyes is quite innovative.” Maybe it was because Marion told him to, but Arthur (who was representing the Bell family) was being much sweeter to her than usual.

Emma’s dress was a white base with a nature-inspired pattern of fresh grass and tiny flowers. She’d managed to catch Harold as he was painting in front of Joshua’s store and had requested he paint the pattern directly on it with his special ink.

Emma remembered that just before the Tanakas had been killed in that earthquake, nature patterns had started getting popular and it gave her a last-minute idea. This world didn’t have the know-how for textile printing, so a dress with brightly colored patterns was quite rare and made a great impression.

Emma had tried dyeing both thread and fabric to match her eye color at least fifteen times at that point and it had never come out quite right. Enlisting the urgent assistance of Harold allowed her to use his ink, which one could mix and make any color in the rainbow. Then all she had to do was paint it right on the dress and she was done. The family didn’t have the time to test the coloring, but they didn’t even *have* to because it was perfect in one go. Even her extra-strict grandmother seemed satisfied by the modesty of the dress and how it used the Sullivan family’s green as the main draw, as she didn’t say a word about it.

Also, since they didn’t have any major furniture brands in this world, she wasn’t about to get criticized for wearing some kind of curtain pattern either. That part was *really* important to her.

However, even though she’d thought making the dress would be the hardest part, her nerves were still on edge. When Emma was escorted to her seat by the servants, she had been taken to a separate table from her grandmother. She’d initially thought it would make it so her grandmother would have fewer

opportunities to get angry with her, but...

After some time, Arthur came to sit on her left side and Prince Edward sat on her right. And then, Robert was brought to his seat in front of her—with an *exceptionally* displeased expression on his face.

Something important to note was that the Stewart family had a title, but only that of count. The royal family was at the top, with dukes, marquesses, counts, viscounts, and barons following. It was very clear that Emma was the odd one out at her table. Both her friend Arthur and her enemy Robert were from ducal families.

Huh? Lady Catherine and Caitlyn are so far away... I thought us counts were supposed to be close together?!

Then, an absolutely stunning woman with an ample bosom and wearing a dress that embodied all the latest trends in the capital sat down next to Robert.

“Evening, Lady Beatrix. You’re as dazzling as ever tonight.” Arthur praised the woman politely with the perfect word to describe her. However, she was eyeing Emma suspiciously. “Oh, this is Lady Emma Stewart of the Pallas region. She just started attending the academy this year. Lady Emma, this is Beatrix Spencer, of Duke Spencer’s family.” Arthur courteously introduced the two of them, but Beatrix stubbornly turned away with her nose in the air.

It was clear that someone of Emma’s low status wouldn’t be able to speak to her in a formal setting like this. All she could do was what her grandmother had taught her: the greatest bow one could do while sitting. It was a bow directly passed down by the Etiquette Demon herself. How many hours had she spent doing this stupid bow over and over with her grandmother? It had been truly hellish.

Emma cast her gaze downward, then bowed at the perfect angle to keep her long hair from touching the table. The prince, Arthur, and even nobles from other tables gasped at how beautifully her bow was executed. Whether she wanted to or not, she stood out like a sore thumb as the sole member of a count’s family at a table that seated the children of dukes as well as the prince. Hilda might have seen it as barely enough to get by, but as Emma had learned directly from her—her bow was more beautiful than anyone else’s.

“I was wondering what a count’s daughter was doing at that

table, but look at how immaculate her manners are…"

"Were you unaware? Lady Emma's mother is from Duke Sullivan's family. Perhaps they were worried about their status once they began discussing marriage with the second-born prince. Perhaps they're hoping she can be adopted into a duke's family?"

"Come to think of it, I *had* heard rumors that Prince Edward was quite taken with Lady Emma. I didn't think it was possible, but now I can certainly see why."

"So then that must be where they're putting the children who will have the kingdom on their shoulders. The second-born prince and the families of the four great dukes… I just hadn't thought they'd put the prince's partner there too."

Emma couldn't hear the great number of people whispering about her. She was checking to see whether her grandmother, who seemed so far away, approved. It looked like she had nodded, which was a humongous relief.

"You'll wear yourself out if you don't ease up a little, Emma. Try to pretend you're just here for the food. The castle chef put his all into making the food today," the prince kindly advised, but Emma was still nervous about Hilda's gaze. The prince was used to having people's attention, even at formal events like this, so he smiled to let Emma know that if anything happened, he'd have her back.

"Thank you, Your Highness. I do look forward to our meal." Emma was three times more deferential than usual, and she meekly looked away from the prince as one was meant to. Her long, lightly colored eyelashes cast a shadow upon her pale skin, and the slender nape of her neck gave her such a delicate appearance that the prince couldn't help but gulp. In fact, it wasn't just the prince but also Arthur, Robert (against his better judgment), and any lords lucky enough to spot her. While the large scars lit by the candlelight stood out on her skin, it just added to how ephemeral she seemed.

Emma really *could* be demure if she tried.

Music began to play and Emma raised her gaze once more to see the king and queen arrive, with a foreign prince following behind. Seeing the handsome king in his formalwear had *Emma* gulping.

He really was the handsomest silver fox she ever did see, no matter how many times she saw him. Everything had been so

stifling since she'd come to the capital, so the simple fact that being there increased her chances of seeing the king was her only salvation.

"I thank you all for gathering here this evening. Allow me to introduce Prince Tasuku Hinomoto of the Eastern Empire. Those in tune with the news may be aware that his country's borders had been closed for quite some time, but they have now decided to form ties with our kingdom. We would like to allow him to stay here for a time so he can come to understand our kingdom's culture."

Emma had been focused on how gorgeous the king's voice was when the foreign prince's name snapped her back to reality. *Tasuku Hinomoto? That's such a Japanese-sounding name.*

The prince had short, styled blue hair and blue eyes, with exceptionally handsome features. Nothing about him screamed Japanese to Emma. Emma wasn't exactly up-to-date on the latest news either, so she had no idea where the Eastern Empire even was.

"Um... Thank you for the, uh, introduction. I'm, uh, still learning the, uh, language here, as you can see. I look forward to, er, spending this time with you all." The imperial prince stumbled through his speech, clearly not used to the language spoken in the kingdom, then gave a beautiful, Japanese-style bow. The crowd applauded, and he was then guided to his seat for the banquet. And that seat just happened to be the last empty seat at Emma's table, right between Prince Edward and Robert.

This place is the spotlight of the whole damn event! Emma felt as out of place as a single high school baseball club member sitting at a table of major league players.

"I, um, look forward to, er, spend time with you all here," the prince repeated shyly before bowing and taking his seat. Now *he* was the spitting image of a nice young man from a baseball club.

"Welcome to our kingdom. I am the second-born prince, Edward Tholus Royale. Shall I introduce everyone here to you?" Prince Edward took on the role of host quite naturally, as he was used to it. After Prince Tasuku nodded, Prince Edward adeptly introduced everyone at the table. Emma was able to get away with just bowing as she had before. While Beatrix had been hardheaded earlier, she gave a perfect bow toward the imperial prince and a smile as one would expect from a duke's daughter.

Robert and Arthur seemed used to this sort of thing as well, so they showed no signs of nervousness either.

It sucks being the only one totally out of place… It's way too bougie for my past life memories to be of any use here!

The king made sure all of the imperial prince's introductions were complete, then signaled the beginning of the banquet. "Now then, today is a special occasion. We decided to prepare the traditional cuisine of the Eastern Empire, so all of us can enjoy this cultural exchange with Prince Tasuku. Prince Tasuku, do you have any particular rituals you do before a meal?"

When the king turned the conversation to him, Prince Tasuku stood straight up. "Yes, Your Majesty. We take, um…both hands, and put them together, and say '**itadakimasu**.'"

"Ita…takinusu?"

"No, no. **Itadakimasu**."

"I see. All right, everyone, put your hands together… Itadakimusu!"

Everyone present did as the king ordered, put their hands together and said unanimously, "Tatatakimusu!"

Meanwhile, Emma was breaking into a cold sweat.

Itadakimasu*… That's* literally *just Japanese, isn't it?! Also, how bad is everyone's hearing over here?!*

After everyone gave their butchered "**itadakimasus**," the staff began serving the food.

"Your appetizer, milady," a servant said, placing the dishes in front of Emma. Her cold sweat got so much worse.

A spinach salad with sesame dressing? Miso-glazed eggplant? Rolled omelets?!

These were a sort of appetizer the Tanakas had never expected to see in this world—they were staple *Japanese* dishes.

"In the Eastern Empire, they use these to eat. I'd love it if you could try to use them too."

To top it all off, the utensil the servants placed before them…was a pair of chopsticks.

Robert held a chopstick in each hand and turned to Prince Tasuku. "Prince Tasuku, how do we use these?" Unlike his rude attitude with Emma, he was perfectly polite in this formal scenario. Regardless of how he *usually* acted, the boy *was* the son of a duke. As much as Emma hated to admit it, his manners here were befitting of that title.

"These are called **hashi**. You are supposed to, um, hold both

of them in one hand to eat." The imperial prince smiled, trying awkwardly to explain and show how to use chopsticks to his fellow seatmates who had never used anything like them.

"Oh dear... This is quite difficult, isn't it?"

"Don't, uh...ball your fist. Look at my hand, please."

"Like this, Your Highness?"

"Not quite. Like this. You don't want your **hashi** to cross over. Hold them like you're holding a pen."

This really was a great cultural exchange.

The prince patiently taught Robert, Beatrix, Arthur, and Prince Edward how to use their chopsticks, though he was clearly not used to speaking the kingdom's language.

The imperial prince glanced at Emma, who hadn't asked any questions, right as she'd just used her chopsticks to pop a rolled omelet into her mouth. "Oh, Lady Emma! Very good!" She'd been *thoroughly* trained in how to properly use her chopsticks by Yoriko in her previous life.

"Lady Emma, you're incredible! Have you ever used these, uh...bashi before?"

"You're quite good at this, Emma!"

Both Arthur and Prince Edward were surprised by Emma's skill with her chopsticks and complimented her for it, but Emma had just taken a big bite of her rolled omelet and couldn't respond. Prince Tasuku had bad timing with his compliment. Emma finished chewing her food and swallowed, then smiled to try and mask the awkwardness.

"Thank you. I've had to use them before." Emma probably should have pretended to learn how to use the chopsticks like everyone else, but after seeing Japanese cuisine for the first time in so long, she couldn't hold herself back. She only wished she could've tasted the seaweed dashi in her rolled omelet more...

To be honest, it was rude of Prince Tasuku to point it out while she was trying to eat. Her grandmother probably would have gotten on his case for his bad etiquette. Nobles and their manners were such a pain.

"Prince Tasuku, the sauce on these eggplants has such an unusual flavor. It's like nothing I've ever had before." Beatrix didn't seem too pleased that Emma was getting all the attention, so she gave her opinion of the food. She seemed to have given up on the chopsticks for the time being and was instead using the knife and fork from the table setting.

“Oh, that’s miso. Uh… It’s…**fermented soybeans…? With rice koji?** I’m so sorry, I don’t know how to explain it in this language. It’s a…um, sauce that we use in the Empire quite often.” The imperial prince was having a very difficult time explaining. He’d only started studying the kingdom’s language once they’d decided to work together, so more complex words were difficult for him. He apologized, seeming quite frustrated with himself.

“A ‘source’?” Prince Edward repeated incorrectly. “What a strange way to phrase it. Well, it’s a very thick flavor. I like it quite a bit.”

“I’ve never tasted anything like it myself either. But this…souse…? It really is very delicious. I don’t believe we have it here in the kingdom.”

Both Prince Edward and Arthur were smacking their lips over how tasty the eggplant was, while Prince Tasuku wore a rather troubled expression. While initially, Emma had assumed he’d just been laughing awkwardly at how bad the hearing of everyone in the kingdom was, she was suddenly struck with a wave of nostalgia.

I know that smile… she thought, and was flooded with memories from her previous life. That was a smile that Emma, or rather, Minato, was all too familiar with.

While Emma lived the good life monetarily, Minato lived the good life because she had nothing tying her down. It meant she could travel by herself all she wanted—Kyoto being her favorite place to go. For some reason, every time she went, foreigners seemed to always be asking her for directions. Foreigners had never spoken to her when she was just living her life at home, but every time she’d gone out sightseeing, she’d get an “excuse me” or two from various tourists. Had it just been her fate as someone with an extremely average Japanese face?

Her grades in English hadn’t been the worst, but she had naturally been a bit flustered whenever someone actually tried holding a conversation with her. She’d just wanted to tell them to keep going straight, then once they passed a shrine on their right, they’d see the train station. She’d studied English for so many years, yet she could never recall a single word the moment someone spoke to her in it. She’d wanted to tell them, but couldn’t.

She *knew* how frustrating that was.

In the end, all she’d ever get out was, “Uhhh… Go straight!” It

was the most painfully awkward answer she could've given. She imagined her face back then must have been the same as the imperial princes at this very moment.

"Your Highness, **miso** is made by fermenting soybeans. We have soybeans here too, right?" Emma said, taking over explaining for the imperial prince without a second thought. Her grandmother might not have approved of her butting in, but the memory was so vivid, her mouth practically moved on its own.

"Soybeans? You mean in the 'saltz'? I had no idea. You're quite knowledgeable, aren't you, Emma?" Prince Edward beamed.

"'Fermenting'? You mean, something like what we do to make yogurt? You really *are* quite knowledgeable," Arthur praised.

"Don't think you can get away with butting in just because you're a woman." Robert, of course, had nothing but complaints.

Beatrix seemed rather taken aback and stared at Emma. Having finally gotten eye contact with Beatrix, Emma returned it with a smile, completely ignoring Robert's complaining.

"Um, what did Lady Emma just say? There were some, um, difficult words," the imperial prince asked with an awkward smile. He could have smiled and gone with the flow of conversation, but he was clearly trying his best to learn.

What a great guy... He's not a little brat like Robert, and he doesn't look down on women like Robert does. And he probably wouldn't mug people in the slums like Robert either. You could learn a thing or two from him, Robert.

The imperial prince had likely predicted he'd have to give an introduction and teach people how to use chopsticks, so he'd been able to practice that piece ahead of time, but it seemed he still needed a bit more practice before he could hold everyday conversations without trouble.

"**Oh, Prince Edward was saying miso isn't an ingredient we use in our kingdom, so I explained that miso is made by fermenting soybeans, and we do grow soybeans here,**" Emma translated so the imperial prince could understand.

When she finished, there was a long, drawn-out silence.

Uh... Is it just me, or did this place get really *quiet all of a sudden? I kinda thought people were listening in on our conversation here, but they weren't* this *quiet before. Shoot. Did I do something again?* Wait...

*I heard the imperial prince saying **itadakimasu** and miso and all that Japanese stuff, so I just assumed it was Japanese, but what if it's*

not? Oh god, that's so embarrassing! Some noblewoman confidently saying random stuff in a language nobody knows is weird as hell!

"Oh, that was, uh… Well, you know…"

I've gotta come up with some kind of excuse or something to gloss over it, but I can't think of anything! This is such a formal event… And my grandmother's here… And now everyone's gonna think I'm a total freak! My punishment is gonna be extended, isn't it?! God, no! Anything but that!

But before she could speak, Prince Tasuku suddenly rose from his seat with a clatter, rushed to Emma's side, and grasped her hands. "Lady Emma? A-Are you able to speak, um, the Empire's language?"

"Um… I, uh… Did you understand what I said?" Emma timidly replied, and the imperial prince got even closer and nodded emphatically. He was *weirdly* worked up about it.

"You were amazing! Your, um, pronunciation, grammar, and formality were all perfectly imperial! I heard that, um, our language was very, um, difficult for people in your kingdom, but! I've, um, never! Met anyone who could speak as well as you!" The imperial prince seemed so happy, it almost felt like he was about to hug her.

Emma could barely keep up with the situation at hand and looked around for answers, but Prince Edward, Arthur, Robert, Beatrix, everyone at the party, *including* her grandmother, were all staring dumbfoundedly at her.

Someone please do something before I get the bear hug of a lifetime!

If this were her previous life, she could have taken her hands back and told him to calm down, but this was in the middle of a *formal banquet*. Right where her grandmother could see it. Right where everyone was staring at her. But Emma *knew* getting held right out in the open was straight-up wrong for a lady…

Look, see? I'm *not the one who's causing a scene! It's totally him! The scene's coming to me!*

As though someone had heard her heart screaming for rescue, the imperial prince was pulled aside and Emma's hands were freed. She looked up to see her savior and found that the king—who was supposed to be at a different table altogether—had been the one to tear the imperial prince off of her.

Way to go, Your Silver Majesty! I owe you one! was what Emma thought at first.

“*Emma!* You can speak the imperial language?!” But now the *king* was grabbing Emma by both her shoulders and sounding *very* alarmed.

Nononono! Why is this happening?! Why is the king joining the fray now?! Do you have any idea how terrifying my grandmother is?!

Obviously, Emma was practically drenched in cold sweat now. She could feel the singular goal she’d had since coming to the kingdom crumbling beneath her feet. Melsa’s warning *not to stand out* was in vain, as Emma stood out more than anyone else at the banquet that night. Emma had a bad feeling things were only going to get worse from there.



Side Story 2: If You Were a Flower…

One day at the end of a lesson, the students were all putting their books in their bags to get ready to go to their next class when an incident occurred. For once, it was one that Emma *wasn't* involved in.

A boy entered the class with a bouquet in hand. He looked around the classroom. Once he found who he was looking for, he nodded to himself, strode toward his target, and got down on one knee. He held the bouquet out to a girl and began speaking, nerves plain on his face: "Emily, I love you with all my heart. I swear that I will protect you for the rest of my life. Won't you make me the happiest man alive?"

Emily, the girl in question, went red in the face and began trembling. "Logan… Why?" she asked.

"Emily?"

"Why would you ask if I *won't* make you the happiest man alive?"

"E-Emily?"

"Because you know I *will*!"

"*Emily!*"

Cue Whitney Mewston's famous tune…

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"And that's what happened, right, Caitlyn?"

"Yes, that's what happened, Catherine!"

The group was in the courtyard of the cafeteria. Even on days when the embroidery class buddies had separate classes in the morning, they always made their way to the courtyard to spend time together during their lunch break. Francesca would talk about the official way of things at their school, Marion would tell them what went on behind the scenes with knights, and the gossipy twins would tell them all sorts of secrets going on at school. They always had so much fun together.

The day's hot gossip had happened at the end of the twins' morning class that day. Apparently, public proposals were not an uncommon thing, as there were a few a year at the academy.

“Lord Logan gave the most adorable bouquet of red tulips to Lady Emily, right, Caitlyn?”

“He said he chose one that fit Lady Emily to a T, didn’t he, Catherine?”

Both the twins were still giddy from the morning’s events, placing their hands to their cheeks and sighing dreamily.

“I’ve heard their families are on good terms, and they’ve known each other since childhood,” Francesca said.

Marion nodded. “Now I understand why all the girls were talking about how it was every girl’s dream to have someone propose to them at school.”

Francesca and Marion had been at school longer than Emma and the twins, so they seemed to be aware of the two lovebirds already. Emma was fully focused on the snacks Joshua had prepared and was happy to just listen during their conversations, but this time she actually spoke up.

“What’s so great about getting married while you’re still in school, Lady Marion?” The twins had said both Logan and Emily were only sixteen, which—based on her feelings from her previous life—was *way* too early. Even if it was the standard in this world, Emma hadn’t exactly shared the basic expectations of the world around her even before she regained her memories of her past life at age eleven. You really couldn’t expect much out of a girl who filled her head with nothing but bugs all day.

“‘What’s so great about it?’ That’s quite the funny thing to ask, Lady Emma.” Marion looked a bit confusedly at Emma, who was making a face that showed she really had no idea. The one thing most girls at school feared was not being able to find a family to marry into. A few years after they graduated, people would laugh and say it was too late for them. They’d be seen as a nuisance to their family. Most of them wouldn’t be able to deal with the shame and would instead flee to a convent to dedicate themselves to religion instead.

Francesca then told her exactly what was “great” about getting married. “Once you find someone to marry, you’ll be able to graduate, Lady Emma.”

The young lords couldn’t graduate until they’d passed their required subjects. Those who were to inherit their lands had even more difficult subjects to pass. However, ladies did not have that requirement. It was said that school was a place where young ladies could train for marriage, as it would give them a

foundation of etiquette and human relations in high society.

"So wait, does that mean you can't keep studying once you're married, Lady Francesca?"

"No, that's not...wait...actually, it might be?" Francesca thought back to all the stories of students who had gotten married, and none of the girls kept attending after their wedding.

"Lady Emma sure has a funny way of thinking, doesn't she, Caitlyn?"

"Lady Emma sure does have a funny way of thinking, Catherine!"

The twins looked at each other with their identical faces, as they'd never heard any girl say such a thing before.

"You really think so?" There were so many different subjects they could study at school, and since they could pick whichever ones they wanted ahead of time, Emma actually enjoyed her classes. *Especially* her entomology class, though there weren't a lot of people in that class for some reason. If she weren't able to keep studying because of marriage like they were saying, it would feel like a total waste. Though she did seem to remember hating school in her previous life... It wasn't until she grew up and started work that she really appreciated her teachers for taking the time to teach her.

"If you want to continue studying, I will be happy to wait for you, Lady Emma," Joshua interjected. He angled himself away so Emma couldn't see his wicked grin as he thought, *Even if it means I'll have to swiftly and physically remove all those other pests too...*

Just then, Prince Edward and Arthur met up with the group in their gazebo. William, who had been quietly reading a book next to Emma, noticed the two of them and called out. "Oh, what a surprise! You didn't have to go back to the castle today, Your Highness?"

"I did not. I was able to finish most of my work this morning, and I thought it'd be nice to spend my lunch break at school for a change. You all seem to be enjoying yourselves." The prince sat next to Joshua, who had taken position right in front of Emma.

"Tch... Just when things were getting good..." Joshua spat under his breath.

"Did you say something, Joshua? Oh, I'd appreciate it if you could scoot over so Arthur can sit as well," the prince commanded with a perfectly unbothered expression. Arthur had plenty of room to sit even if Joshua didn't move, but if Joshua

moved over enough for another person to sit, it would put the prince in front of Emma instead.

"Sure. Here." Joshua was ready to throw down for a moment, but he couldn't ignore the prince's orders.

To break the tension, Marion addressed the prince, "Are you aware of what happened with Lord Logan and Lady Emily this morning, Your Highness? Lady Catherine and Lady Caitlyn were in their class, so they were telling us everything about it."

"Ah, yes. It was the talk of the class I was just in." The prince was well aware that after someone proposes at school, some students would be inspired to do the same for the objects of *their* affection for the next several days. That was why the moment he confirmed he had no pressing matters at the castle, he rushed to the courtyard where Emma would be. Just as he thought, that merchant was trying to get a head start on the process. The prince was relieved he'd made it just in the nick of time. He really couldn't let his guard down when that boy was around.

"It's pretty unusual for you all to talk about romance, though." Here Arthur thought they mostly just talked about class and sweets and the like with no real room for romance, but he supposed they *were* all girls. He seemed quite pleased for some reason, and his youthful face seemed even sweeter than ever when he smiled.

"You don't get it at all, Arthur." Marion sighed.

"Talking about other people's relationships is the spice of life, Lord Arthur!" Emma grinned. Talking about one's own nonexistent love life was a drag, but talking about other people's was one of the best things ever. You could say whatever you wanted and nobody would get hurt.

"O-Oh, okay. Got it," Arthur said, but he completely didn't. He was of the opinion that it was a lot more fun to actually *date* than to watch other people do it.

Afterward, all the girls started gushing about what flowers they thought best represented each other. Arthur thought that if they were going to talk romance, they could at least talk about who they wanted a proposal from, but apparently his sister and all her friends were fundamentally different from all the girls he knew.

Meanwhile, the girl of Prince Edward's dreams was right there in front of him, but he sat beside Arthur, silently watching her

with a smile. His greatest rival was next to the prince, taking every opportunity to please Lady Emma by telling her she'd suit one flower after another. It was driving Arthur absolutely crazy.

"Your Highness, what sort of flower would *you* gift Lady Emma?" Arthur knew the prince was just happy to spend his lunch break with Emma, but he was offering a lifeline to him to get him to join the conversation a bit more.

"Flowers…? For Emma?" The prince took a moment to think, then answered, "I think lily of the valley. Don't you think her lovely and graceful air matches the lily of the valley perfectly?"

"Pfffft! Ack, hack!" William spat out his tea full-force. "Y-Your Highness… Who…hrk! Who told you that?" Nobody had *ever* called his sister graceful. Not even in her previous life.

"Hmm? Is there something wrong with what I said, William?"

"N-No, it's just…" William sputtered and coughed. *You've gotta wake up and smell the flowers, Your Highness…both for our country's sake and your own.* The words William wanted to say never quite made it to his mouth, instead expressed in the magnificent spray of his tea.

"Are you all right, William? You can't eat so fast or that's bound to happen." Emma scolded her choking brother like a big sister should, patting his back.

"Hrrk…" *You are the* last *person I want to hear that from…*

How in the world is she so damn popular when she's such a self-indulgent hedonist?!

"You're awfully lucky to have such a sweet and well-mannered sister, William." The prince's usual cold expression was replaced with a *far* different dreamy smile as he stared at Emma. Even though he was talking to William, his gaze was fixated on her.

"Ggh…" *Well, try taking a walk in my shoes, then! Just wait 'til you see how much I've suffered!* "Yeah, you're right…" William wanted to scream his true feelings, but he held back.

"Well, what sort of flower would you gift your sister, William?" Arthur was clearly enjoying himself, so he asked William the same question.

"A flower for *my sister…*?" It was a rather difficult question for a shy Japanese late bloomer like William. He'd never given a girl flowers before, and there was absolutely nothing fun about imagining giving his *sister* flowers. "Uh… Oh!"

"Have you thought of something?" Marion kindly prompted.

"Yeah. I'd give my sister a touch-me-not. Or maybe a pitcher

plant…?” The only flowers he could think of that his sister would like were either carnivorous plants or jade plants. Pitcher plants would lure bugs with sweet scents, and once their prey tipped into the pitfall, it was nearly impossible to escape. To William, the prince and Joshua seemed like unfortunate insects who had already fallen for the sweet ruse.

“Why, Lord William! I’ve never heard of any plant like that! Have you, Caitlyn?”

“Why, Lord William! I’ve never heard of any plant like that either, Catherine!”

The twins admonished him and told him to take this more seriously.

“Huh?”

But there are lilies of the valley and tulips here… I thought we had the same plants as we had in our previous life. We’re all talking in the kingdom’s language instead of Japanese. Maybe there’s a word for them in this language and they already know it…?

“William, those are plant monsters, you know.”

“Oh!” William remembered once Emma pointed it out, but some carnivorous plants from their previous world had…evolved—or maybe transformed?—in this world.

“Wow, William… You’re seriously comparing your sister to a *monster*?” Arthur’s judgmental gaze and lowered voice really said all he needed. Arthur had *just* snapped at Robert the other day for giving Emma that gelatin shaped like a slime. To him, William’s words were on par with Robert’s prank.

“William, even if you’re joking, you took it *way* too far.”

“I thought you were better than that, Lord William.”

The prince, who was especially protective of Emma, and even Joshua, who definitely knew what William was *trying* to say were both rebuking him too.

“Wha? B-But, that’s not what I meant…”

Is this what people meant when they said the enemy of one’s enemy is one’s friend? Both rivals for Emma’s affection had formed an alliance because neither of them would tolerate even her little brother hurting her feelings.

“Then what *did* you mean?”

“You better make it good.”

Arthur, who had been watching over Emma from the sidelines, was especially frightening.

“Um, it’s just… Y’know… Guys, can we just calm down for a

sec?" The last time William felt this kind of disdain directed at him was when he'd been fired for being late five days in a row in his previous life. He never thought he'd be getting these looks even after being reborn.

George would normally have backed him up, but he really was in no place to do that at the moment, and Emma was clearly entertained by his squirming, so he was essentially out of luck. But then...

"Oh, I get it! Lord William was trying to say that he wouldn't let anyone who wasn't willing to risk their lives procuring a flower from a plant monster to take his beloved sister from him, right?" Francesca clapped her hands together as though she'd solved the riddle all by herself. It wasn't the help William wanted, but...

"What?!"

"Oh?"

"Goodness!"

"Really?"

"Is that true, William?"

While this meant he might have escaped all their criticism, he really, really didn't want to agree. He really, really, *really* didn't want to, but Arthur was terrifying when he was angry and he didn't want to make an enemy of the prince of the whole kingdom. He choked back his tears and prioritized his safety over his pride.

"Y-Yep... That's... That's exactly right." You really couldn't make an omelet without cracking a few eggs. William might have taken psychological damage, but Francesca's interpretation of his words disarmed the minefield he'd walked into like it was nothing.

"I knew it! You really do love your sister, don't you, William?"

"You've got a great head on your shoulders, but a kid's still a kid, huh? You're still so attached to your sister..."

"That's so cute! Don't you think, Caitlyn?"

"It certainly is cute, Catherine!"

Everyone's faces had softened considerably toward William as they all chuckled at his boyish charm.

"Aww, thanks, William," Emma chimed in, barely able to stifle a laugh.

"Uh-huh... I sure...do...love...my sister..." Emma's grin was killing William, but he forced the words out as bitterly as he could, knowing he'd already become the butt of her jokes.



“By the way, what has George been doing over there?” the prince asked. George had been moping at the edge of the gazebo, holding his knees up to his chest.

“You should leave him be, Your Highness,” Arthur whispered in response.

“George is always like that after Ancient Imperial Language,” William replied.

“Why?”

“He can’t understand a word out of the teacher’s mouth…” he continued, giving George a pitying look.

During the class, George had gone completely pale and asked his siblings, “Hey, do you have any idea what the teacher’s saying?”

“Hmm? You mean about how a lot of the monsters got their names from the old empire’s language?” William had asked, giving his unnerved brother a look like “you good?”

“But is he even speaking our language? None of it’s sticking…”

“What?”

“George, you *do* remember that mother said you *had* to remember this stuff in order to pass Intermediate Monster Studies and up, right? And if you can’t pass Monster Studies, inheriting the Pallas region is out of the question because you won’t even be able to *graduate*,” Emma had reminded him.

“I *know* that! But my brain’s straight-up rejecting all of it!” George had wailed. He had been a complete failure at English in their previous lives too.

“Focus, brother. Just listen carefully to what the teacher’s saying.”

“Okay, but…could you maybe translate what he’s saying into *our* language, Emma?”

“*Chill*, George. He’s been speaking *our* language this entire time.”

“No way. *Please* tell me you’re joking, Emma.”

“Just *pay attention*, George. Listen and learn.”

“William, I’m begging you. Can’t you ask the teacher to speak in modern language for me or something?”

Both William and Emma had only been able to sit in stunned silence. Maybe there was just something incompatible with George’s brain and the language, but it was incomprehensible to him. Why was it that in this world that had languages where you could get by just with lakkurus and lokkurus, the one foreign

language he had to take was practically impossible for him?

"Okay, so you know that this kingdom's language and the empire's language are pretty much the same. The ancient empire's language is *completely* different. Although it's using ancient words, all the knowledge we have on monsters has been compiled since those ancient times. And from learning about the past, we can come up with all sorts of new ideas for the future." William had tried cheering his brother up, but his brother was despairing in full force. Their mother had told them that if you couldn't understand elementary ancient imperial language, you might not even be able to *read* the problems on your homework, let alone try to answer them.

"You all have to be pulling my leg, right? Like, this is just a prank, right? Someone *please* tell me it's all a bad joke!"

"Lord George, it'll be over soon. Just a little bit longer until we all go on break, so try to contain yourself!"

Five minutes had passed, then ten, then an hour. Joshua said later that George looked like he was withering away with every passing second.

"George tries really hard to pay attention in class, but...he always winds up like this after..." Emma said, going so far as to say that a cicada's discarded shell had more spirit left in it than George did after the ancient language class.

"Lord George is able to run for ages during Hunting Techniques, and yet this is what takes him out..." Joshua said, putting a hand to his chin as he considered the mystery before him. He had no idea what was so difficult about ancient imperial language, so even if he *wanted* to tutor George, he wouldn't know where to start.

"Anyway, just let him be for now, Your Highness," Emma, William, and Joshua all whispered the very same words that Arthur had.

◆◆◆

Shortly after the incident in the slums, Emma had been faced with a horrifying reality. After class, her mother's family, the Sullivans, called upon her. Though saying they "called upon her" was a nice way of putting it; what really happened was that she was ambushed on her way back from school and forcibly thrown into the Sullivan family carriage. By all appearances, it looked

like she'd been kidnapped.

"Emma. Melsa told me all I needed to know. You've caused quite a lot of trouble, haven't you?"

"G-Grandmother?! There's been a misunderstanding! I didn't cause any trouble! Things just happened!"

As punishment for staying overnight in the slums without permission, Melsa had decided to have her mother, Hilda Sullivan, hammer proper manners and etiquette into Emma. Hilda was infamous for her meticulousness to the point where every noble in the capital knew her name. She was also known by the terrifying nickname, the Etiquette Demon.

"Look at these flowers, Emma." Hilda held out a vase that featured a lovely arrangement. There were light pink and white gerberas and baby's breath. The juxtaposition of the cutesy flowers next to her grandmother was certainly something.

"Th-They sure are nice?" Emma had no idea what she was supposed to say, so she chose to go with the most inoffensive comment she could think of.

"A lady must be as beautiful as these flowers."

"R-Right."

"Now, you cause a lot of trouble, so that makes you the pink gerbera." Hilda took one of the most eye-catching pink flowers out of the vase and held it out to Emma.

"U-Uh-huh?" Emma couldn't tell what Hilda was trying to say, so she hesitantly took the lovely pink flower.

"The more you stand out, the more your flaws do in turn."

"Oh. Yeah." For a moment, Emma thought she'd completely lost track of where the conversation was going, but now the fact that it was a lecture was becoming clear.

"Now, what happens if a petal is missing on this pink gerbera? Or if it becomes worm-eaten? Why, it would get far more criticism than its white companions. Now, try to imagine how many people would even notice if a baby's breath lost one of its petals? When you cause trouble and stand out, it makes *you* this pink...no, it makes you a *bright red rose*."

"Urgh... I'm sorry, Grandmother..."

"Even *I* heard the rumors from the party you attended before school started."

"Eep! I-I'm sorry, Grandmother..."

Hilda deliberately took a red rose out of a different vase and held it out to Emma. "There's no way for you to become a white

gerbera now. You already have too many eyes on you." Hilda let out a frightfully deep sigh, then shook her head.

"Th-That can't be, Grandmother!" Emma wailed with a red rose in her left hand and a pink gerbera in her right, fully in despair over the horrible trials awaiting her.

"Now that you've become a bright red rose, you can't afford any holes or missing petals. Do you understand me, Emma? I'm going to teach you how to have *picture-perfect etiquette*."

"Eek...!"

"Now that you're so far in the spotlight, you have to learn the most beautiful bows. You must have the most beautiful conduct. And you must have the most perfect manners of anyone in the capital. But you mustn't worry, dear Emma. I, the Etiquette Demon, Hilda Sullivan, will take it upon myself to teach you everything you need to know."

"No... *Noooo!!!*"

From that day forward, it was said that every evening around the Sullivan manor, you could hear the endless screaming of a young girl...

◆◆◆

A few days later, one of the boys who brought Emma snacks during her lunch break asked, "Emma? You seem rather down as of late. Is everything all right?"

"I'm quite all right. Nothing to worry about."

"Okay, then, if you were to get a bouquet of some kind, what sort of flowers would you like?"

The story of Logan and Emily's engagement was still quite the hot topic around the school. Sending girls flowers at school was now starting to catch on. However, for Emma, flowers had become a symbol of the hellish training her grandmother was putting her through.

"I wouldn't want red roses or pink gerberas. Not even white gerberas... I just want to be a baby's breath..." Emma was truly exhausted from all her days of etiquette training, and her pure and honest wish was what spilled from her lips as she smiled weakly.

Even if it loses a petal, nobody notices. In other words, Grandmother wouldn't get mad.

Even if it gets worm-eaten, nobody notices. In other words,

Grandmother wouldn’t get mad.

No matter how hard it tried to stand out, it couldn’t. In other words, Grandmother wouldn’t get mad.

What she wouldn’t give to live like the miracle of baby’s breath…

“Emma… You truly are a paragon of humility…”

The boy who had asked Emma wasn’t the only one impressed. All the students listening in were shocked and moved as well. Noblewomen were mostly raised getting anything they wanted and vocally saying as much, so a delicate young girl choosing something like baby’s breath…made her stand out even more. Baby’s breath was a subtle, modest, and reserved type of flower, after all.

“She’s the very picture of ladylike…”

“I’ve never met a noblewoman like her before…”

“I have to look after her…”

Before anyone knew it, Emma’s words (which she’d chosen because she didn’t want her grandmother to get mad at her) had spread through the school like wildfire, and she was standing out more than ever. From that day forward, baby’s breath began disappearing from flower shops in the capital, causing yet another major incident.

Side Story 3: Melsa and the Cats

After she finished sorting through the mail, Melsa stretched her arms up high. The children were at school and her husband had been called to the castle. Since they'd all moved to the capital, she'd had more time alone like this. It was nice sometimes, but could certainly get lonely too.

"Anyway..." Things really just weren't going the way she wanted them to. Melsa sighed. Today, George had received ten letters, Emma twelve, and William eight. They were mostly individual invitations to the same tea parties, but they hadn't attended any tea parties since they'd gotten to the capital, as they had arrived so much later than they'd intended. At this point, it would have been awkward to attend some out of the blue.

Emma really was nothing but trouble. She received the most marriage prospects of all three siblings, and every single portrait was of an upstanding eligible bachelor. Emma was blessed with choosing whoever she wanted, and yet she would only take a passing glance at each one before turning them down.

"Give 'em another thirty...no, forty years..." she'd whisper, then skip off to go take care of her bugs. If only her taste skewed twenty years younger, it might have worked out, but the memories of her past life seemed quite ingrained now, so she was harder to match than Melsa expected. She heaved another heavy sigh.

More importantly, perhaps it was time to check up on how her eldest, George, was faring. She pulled herself together and held up a letter addressed to him. It was an adorable pink letter from a region far away from the Pallas region itself. It was from Lady Marina, with whom George had been corresponding for the past year.

The letter began with, "My beloved Lord George," and was clearly a love letter, yet her son was so utterly obtuse that he didn't mind his mother screening it. It was clear he was utterly unaware of the girl's feelings. Melsa sighed again.

There was another letter from Lady Marina addressed to William. It was completely different from the one she'd written

George, written on plain white paper. She didn't even have to open the envelope to feel depressed by its contents. It always started so businesslike, with "Dear Sir, I hope this letter finds you well," but her youngest never gave up continuing their correspondence. His perseverance was frightening, even to his own mother.

Things just never worked out the way she wanted. Not in her past life, and not in her current life. Luckily, it was easy for parents to influence their children's marriages in this world. She could tell leaving it to her kids as she had in her previous life was only bound to make history repeat. She swore that she would never make the same mistakes again.

But for the time being, they were attending school with a bunch of nobles, and they seemed to be making friends and having fun. She told herself she'd hold off just for a little bit, but it was the last extension she'd be giving them. Melsa heaved yet another sigh.

"Now then..." She decided to warm up her tired bones after working so hard all day, so she looked out the window. It was another lovely day.

"Kongming! Liu Bei! Guan Yu! Zhang Fei!" Melsa called to the kitties as she went out to the yard. Each day, after the four cats saw the children and her husband off, they all went to their favorite spots to take their first naps of the day. It was about time for them to wake up and begin patrolling the yard.

All four cats meowed in response and gathered around Melsa.

"Do you mind if I join you for your patrols today?"

"Mrowr!"

Melsa occasionally rode the cats as they made their rounds of the premises, which was ridiculously big even by the capital's standards. The cats would patrol every day, but they didn't tend to check for any damages on the buildings or the grounds, so she would occasionally go with them to check for herself. Normal countesses wouldn't spend their time doing such menial chores, but Melsa had lived in Pallas for so long, she was used to it. They had plenty of money now, but they still didn't employ many servants. It was likely because they couldn't shake the habits they had built when they were poor. It was just a Stewart family thing to split the chores with their servants, and the cats were no exception to that rule.

"Mrowr?" Suddenly, Guan stopped and looked up, his nose

twitching.

“What’s the matter, Guan?”

“Mrow!”

Melsa, who had been riding on Zhang’s back, turned around to see the black cat happily running off. “He must’ve seen a big cicada or something…” she muttered, tilting her head. She and all the other cats then took off after Guan.

“Yeaaargh!”

Guan pounced on someone who had climbed the wall from outside and was trying to lower himself into their yard. The wall surrounding their grounds was sturdy and well over three meters tall, so nobody would try to climb over it on a whim. Anyone bypassing their gate and climbing the wall clearly had ill intentions. The Stewarts had never had any burglars coming to their manor back in Pallas (and even if they had, there was nothing to steal), but several trespassers had made attempts to get into the manor for the past few weeks.

“Eeek! Hrgh! Agh! Aaaagh! It’s a monster! S-Someone hel—” After Guan had yanked the would-be robber down, the man screeched as he took kitty bap after play nip and play nip after kitty bap over and over again. Guan was clearly holding back, so the man wasn’t being *seriously* injured.

“Stop…! Hrgh! Ack! Waagh! Yeeeagh!”

Sometimes Guan would give the man enough time to run, then pounce on him after a few seconds. Then he’d go back to bapping the man about and giving him soft bites.

“Myah! Meow! Mrowr!”

He was having the time of his life. Guan had always been a fighter, and since there weren’t any monsters in the capital like there were in Pallas, he’d seemed a bit bored since they’d arrived. Apparently, the thieves who tried to break in occasionally made a good substitute for him.

Most of the manors in the aristocratic district had gatekeepers and plenty of guards who kept a close watch to make sure there weren’t any intruders. Even the manors facing the main street that had plenty of eyes on it already from the location alone had lookouts, but the Stewart family manor, which was a little bit farther into the district, didn’t have a single one. They only had a single elderly gatekeeper. These burglars would assume the Stewarts were nothing but naive country hicks and target them, thinking it would be an easy job…and that was

when they would find out just why the Stewarts had no need for even a single guard.

The man noticed Melsa as Guan kept playing with him and desperately reached out for help. “Ah! Y-You there! Hrgh! Help me...! Agh!!!”

“Guan.”

“Myah?” Guan turned to look at Melsa with the burglar in his mouth.

“Make sure you bring that to Evan when you’re done playing.”

“Myaaaah!”

“Huh? W-Wait, help...! You can’t be serious! No...! Yeaaaargh!”

Melsa ignored the burglar’s wails as she continued her rounds with the other three cats. Though the time it took to do the rounds while riding on the cats was much shorter than by foot, their property was still large enough that doing a thorough check still took over two hours. She marked off any areas that seemed like they were in need of repairs on a map of the grounds. Leonard had always been good at DIY repairs even in his previous life, so it was his job to take care of them now. Most counts would never do such menial chores, but Melsa was used to life in Pallas, so the strangeness of it barely registered with her.

“Myah!” Zhang rubbed up against Melsa.

“Mrow.” Liu rubbed up against Melsa.

“Mrowr!” Kongming rubbed up against Melsa.

“Did you three want to play?” Melsa asked, and all the cats meowed in return. While they weren’t as active as Guan, the other three were feeling rather bored themselves. They were usually all over other members of the family, so it was rare for them to be this affectionate toward Melsa. “Well, if you insist.”

With an all too happy expression, Melsa pulled out a handmade ribbon like one that would have been used for rhythm gymnastics. It had been made with Emma silk, which was sturdy enough to withstand a giant cat’s playtime without tearing easily. “Come get it if you can!”

“Mrowr!”

Melsa spun the ribbon in circles, and the cats went straight into hunting mode.

“Over heeere! Whoops!”

“Myah! Myaaah!”

“Reowr!”

“Mrah?!”

Just before the cats could catch the ribbon, Melsa would spin it away from them again. The cats were giving it their all, and it was three against one.

But Melsa wasn’t about to just let them win either.

“Hee hee.”

“Myah!”

“Over heeere!”

“Mrow!”

“Oh, so close!”

“Reowr!”

Melsa and the cats worked off all the energy they’d built up from lack of physical activity by running around the yard. She might have been embarrassed if her family or the servants caught her doing this, but she didn’t need to worry about that with a yard as large as hers.



“Phew… How about we take a break, you three?” Melsa panted. The cats all meowed in agreement, and Melsa laid on the grass, resting her head against Zhang. Kongming rested her head on Melsa’s stomach and Liu rested her head upon Melsa’s legs. They all purred happily.

“Days like this can be so nice sometimes.” Melsa sighed, listening to the distant screams of the burglar being used as Guan’s cat toy.

“All right, who’s ready for round two?” Melsa asked as she grasped the ribbon in her hands to signal their break was over…but the cats didn’t respond to what she thought they’d *leap* at the chance to do.

“Kongming? Zhang? Liu?” The cats’ ears perked up as they stared off toward the gate. “What’s the matter? Don’t you want your ribbon?” They didn’t respond even when she spun it around like she had before. “Kitties?” Melsa made an arc with the ribbon to no avail.

After another moment of silence, all the cats meowed at once and took off toward the gate. “Wait, you three!” Melsa shouted.

“Yeeeaaargggh!” Melsa saw the burglar screaming as Guan picked him up in his mouth and made a mad dash toward the gate.

“Ah… I suppose the children must be home.” Here they’d been having so much fun, but it was a blunt reminder that the children always came first in the cats’ minds. Melsa had mixed feelings about it, both a bit sad for herself but happy for her kids, as she silently put her ribbon away.

Afterword

Hello again, everyone. This is Choco. Thank you all for taking the time to read volume two of the isekai series “The Tanaka Family Reincarnates,” written by a fan of silver foxes, about silver foxes, for fans of silver foxes.

At the end of the first volume, I said that the Stewarts would be starting their lives in the capital, but then I started getting palpitations thinking, “But what if they don’t?!” and had a hard time breathing again until I heard we were continuing publication. This is the second volume and all, so it has an ending that has me pretty worried too, so the palpitations and breathlessness might just keep going at this rate. (I’m in perfectly good health.)

The story has entered the royal academy arc, which means we got a whole bunch of new characters all at once. It’s a festival of new characters! I can’t thank kaworu enough for accepting the job to design this whole festival of new characters. Every new picture I got felt like a gift. They’re all just as incredible as the illustrations I received for volume one! Thank you so, so much.

I’d also like to thank all the people who’ve taken care of pretty much everything for me while I’m still getting used to being a novelist.

And most of all, I’d like to thank all of the people who have been reading since I was first published online and all the people who discovered my works in bookstores and web stores. Thank you for supporting me. I would love it if you kept reading more of my work. Thank you all again!

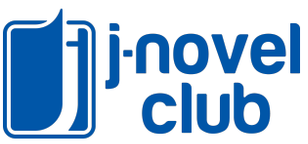
Choco


The Tanaka Family Reincarnates
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Choco
Illustrator: kaworu


The Tanaka Family Reincarnates
2
Choco
Ill.: kaworu


Lunchtime with friends!
Francesca Delacour
Catherine Simmons
Caitlyn Simmons
Marion Bell
Arthur Bell
Joshua Rothschild


"THE KITTIES SAID THEY'D TAKE US ALL THE WAY TO THE REAR ENTRANCE!"
"MROWR!"
The three siblings set off to the public district to find clues about who attacked Joshua's store!
Cat: Guan
Cat: General Kongming
Cat: Liu
Detective Tanakas, move out!



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The Tanaka Family Reincarnates: Volume 2
by Choco

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Edited by Emlyn Dornemann

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Ebook edition 1.0: February 2025