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8



My Next Life as a VILLAINESS: ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!

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New event: Foreign nobles at the castle!

Mysterious Man

"Are you scared of me?"

→ Nod silently

→ Don't reply for now

I must lock the door... Just in case...

Did you fall asleep or something?

...That was a good dream.

I must help my brother win her over!

You really think I'm a good person?

You are as cute as ever.





My Next Life as a Villainess:

Jeord Stuart

Third prince of the kingdom, and Katarina's fiancé. Although he looks like a fairy-prince with his blonde hair and blue eyes, he secretly harbors a twisted and terrible nature. He once spent his days in boredom, never showing interest in anything, until he eventually met Katarina. His magical element is Fire.

Larna Smith

A very talented woman who holds a high position in the Magical Ministry.

Cyrus Lanchester

The serious and strict director of the Magical Powers Department at the Magical Ministry.

Sora

A young man wielding the Dark Arts, in service to the Ministry. Fond of Katarina.

Raphael Wolt

A young man working at the Magical Ministry. A calm and capable person.

Dewey Percy

A child prodigy who skipped grades to work at the Magical Ministry.

Pochi

A Dark Familiar who usually lives inside Katarina's shadow.

Katarina Claes

The only daughter of Duke Claes. Has slanted eyes and angled features, which she thinks make her look like a villainess. After memories of her past life returned, she transformed from a spoiled noble lady to a problem child. Although she often gets ahead of herself, she is honest and straightforward. She has below-average academic and magical ability. Her magical element is Earth.

Cezar

A handsome young man with tan skin who has come from Ethenell to attend the International Assembly.

Luigi Claes

Katarina's father, a Duke and the head of the Claes family who spoils his daughter.

All Routes Lead to Doom!

Character Introduction



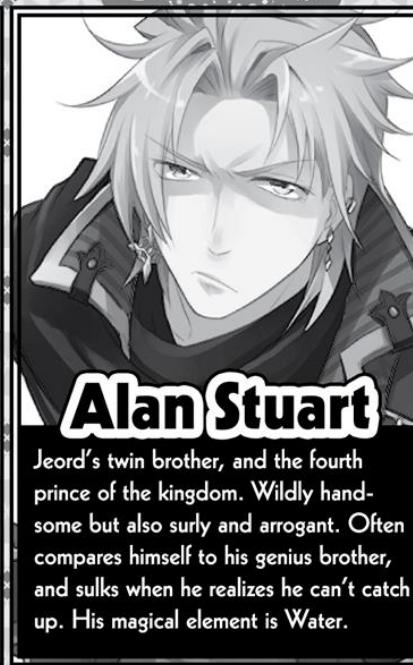
Nicol Ascart

The son of Royal Chancellor Ascart. An incredibly beautiful and alluring young man who loves his sister, Sophia, deeply. His magical element is Wind.



Keith Claes

Katarina's adopted brother, taken in by the Claes family due to his magical aptitude. Considerably handsome, and seen by others as a chivalrous ladies' man. His magical element is Earth.



Alan Stuart

Jeord's twin brother, and the fourth prince of the kingdom. Wildly handsome but also surly and arrogant. Often compares himself to his genius brother, and sulks when he realizes he can't catch up. His magical element is Water.



Sophia Ascart

Daughter of Royal Chancellor Ascart, and Nicol's younger sister. Used to face discrimination due to her white hair and red eyes. A calm and peaceful girl.



Maria Campbell

A commoner, but also a rare "Wielder of Light." The original protagonist of *Fortune Lover* who is very hardworking and loves baking.



Mary Hunt

Fourth daughter of Marquess Hunt, and Alan's fiancée. A lovely and charming girl who's well known as the perfect image of a noble lady.

Millidiana Claes

Katarina's mother, and wife of Duke Claes. Has very angled features, much like her daughter.

Anne Shelley

Katarina's personal maid. Has been by her side since Katarina was eight years old.

Chapter 1: The Invitation

It is time for a Katarina Claes meeting. Please assemble inside Katarina's head.

Meeting chairwoman: Katarina Claes.

Meeting representative: Katarina Claes.

Meeting secretary: Katarina Claes.

Let's discuss how to avoid Bad Ends!

"Shall we start with a summary of the situation so far?"

"Very well. We should start from when the memories of our old life came back."

"Please allow me. Katarina Claes, then eight years old, hit her head on a rock while walking through the garden, and hence regained the memories of her previous life as a teenager from a normal family living in the countryside of Japan. There she had grown up playing surrounded by nature, and, after reaching high school, had become a bona fide otaku."

"That previous life was cut short by an unfortunate accident, after which she was reincarnated as the daughter of a duke. Her new appearance, with brown, silky hair and blue eyes was much better than the average, raccoon-faced one that she was used to. However, she quickly noticed that her slanted eyes and thin lips made her look somewhat menacing."

"Which is when she realized something very important."

"Exactly. She realized that the world that she was now living in was the one of *Fortune Lover*, the otome game that she had been playing until right before her untimely death. And she had now become Katarina Claes, the villainess and antagonist of that game."

“She became engaged to a prince, who was also one of the romanceable characters in the game. According to the game, once she went to the Academy of Magic that magic users were required to attend starting at age fifteen, she would meet the game’s protagonist and bully her. If the protagonist achieved a “good end,” Katarina would be exiled out of the country. But if she instead achieved a “bad end,” Katarina would die. Katarina Claes is a sad character for whom all routes lead to doom.”

“Realizing what fate had in store for her, Katarina started working hard to prepare for the time when she would turn fifteen and thus be staring down the barrel of doom. After several birthdays, she eventually entered the academy.”

“There she met the protagonist, Maria... and they became friends. The next two years were marked by... lots of stuff happening, but the game unexpectedly reached its conclusion through the “friendship end,” and Katarina was thus spared from doom.”

“I think you skipped over a considerable number of events, but okay.”

“After avoiding doom, Katarina happened to obtain Dark Magic by pure coincidence. For that reason (and a few others), she started working at the Magical Ministry.”

“She was happy that she had found employment at the most popular organization in the whole kingdom, giving her hope of stability for the future... However, she then found out that the Magical Ministry was the setting for *Fortune Lover II*, the sequel to the game that had threatened her with doom.”

“In this game, the old romanceable options were joined by new, equally handsome ones for the protagonist to fall in love with, and that would have been all fine and dandy if only the game hadn’t,

once again, starred Katarina Claes as villainess and doom-bound antagonist.”

“Exactly! Katarina’s incredible comeback means that all the Catastrophic Bad Ends come back as well!”

“Just when we thought we could retire peacefully! Gahhh!”

“Please, everybody, calm down. I understand why you feel that way, but let us continue with our meeting.”

“Yes... Where was I? So, despite realizing the horrors awaiting her, Katarina never considered giving up! She decided to fight against fate with new catastrophe countermeasures!”

“Even after starting work at the Ministry, specifically at the Magical Tool Laboratory, Katarina did her best to learn as much as she could about the new characters — the potential sources of doom.”

“For some reason, she got her hands on lots of Dark Magic-related things, which made her nervous. But thanks to the kind words of her friends, who promised to always stay by her side, she is now back on track in fighting against fate.”

“...Thus concludes Katarina’s story so far. But what do you think will be the best course of action in the future?”

“As far as new characters are concerned, we managed to befriend Cyrus and Dewey, and we were friends with Sora to begin with. We should ask them lots of questions to learn even more about them and what they might do.”

“I agree. And we should also start practicing lockpicking so we can escape if we end up imprisoned.”

“You’re right, that’s also important. And don’t forget about sword training. We must be prepared in case one of the Catastrophic Bad Ends involves us getting slashed to death.”

“Very well. This time we don’t have much information about the game, so we don’t know which kind of doom, specifically, awaits us! Let’s hedge our bets!”

“Oh, right, we also need to train Pochi to bark and scare off threats on command.”

“We have much to do. We also need to decipher the Dark Covenant for work.”

“...”

“...”

“Excuse me? Why did you two go silent all of a sudden?”

“...It’s just a topic I’m not fond of...”

“Ugh, it’s such a tough task. I want to be finished with the covenant as soon as possible and go back to cleaning and delivering packages!”

“I agree, but... we must give our best.”

“...You’re right.”

“Therefore, it is time to dismiss this meeting and go back to working on the covenant.”

“...Yes ma’am...”

“Lady Katarina, what is the matter?”

Maria, as beautiful as always with her blonde hair and blue eyes, was looking at me with a worried expression.

“Oh, I was just escaping reality to hold a meeting in my... I mean, I was just spacing out,” I said while scratching my head.

Maria and I were by ourselves inside one of the many meeting rooms within the Ministry, analyzing the covenants that we had found a few days prior.

We activated the ancient magic in the stone that we found in one of the gardens within the Ministry's grounds, were transported to mysterious alternate dimensions, and Maria and I found the Light and Dark Covenants, respectively.

These were books which described ancient lost magic, and only the person who found them could read them, although not even they would be able to copy down its contents for others to read. Therefore, the two of us were now supposed to study our books so that we could report on them.

"I'm not making any progress!" I lamented with a sigh.

"Me neither," said Maria. "The ancient script used in these books is even older than the one we studied, so it is very difficult to read."

Her definition of "not making any progress" was obviously different from mine. She knew how to read ancient script from having studied it at the Academy of Magic, and her struggle was having to check the obscure words that occasionally popped up.

I, on the other hand, remembered absolutely nothing of what I had studied, and reading each single letter was a pain. Maria had already read dozens of pages and deciphered some Light Magic spells, while I hadn't even gone through the foreword notes. The path to actually learning any ancient Dark Magic was still long.

And for me, an outdoor person who doesn't like using her head, having to painstakingly check dictionaries and references while holed up inside a room was nothing short of torture. I could feel my energy steadily deplete, which made my reading even slower.

And so, yet another day ended without me having finished reading the foreword. I reported these results to Larna, my superior and the overseer of this lost magic mission, and then said goodbye to Maria as she made for the dormitory together with Dewey.

Sora, who worked in the same department as me, saw me off to the carriage that would bring me home.

“Hah, I’m so tired!” I said as I approached the Ministry’s gates together with him, sighing repeatedly.

“You really hate deskwork, huh?” he asked, exasperated.

“I do! Working in the fields under the blazing sun is ten times better than this!”

“A duke’s daughter in the fields, under the blazing sun?!” he said before erupting in laughter.

Was it that funny?

I kept walking along with the laughing Sora, and we ran into a group of female Ministry employees chatting amongst themselves. Since the workday was already over, they were probably going back to their own departments to gather their things.

“Have a good evening,” I greeted them. I didn’t know any of them, but I wanted to be polite to my colleagues.

“You too,” they replied, but one of them noticed Sora and immediately gasped.

“H-Hello, thank you for the other day,” she said to him while blushing.

Even I, who, admittedly, wasn’t the sharpest, could see that she liked him.

“Oh, don’t mention it,” he said casually, giving her a bow and walking away.

As I went after him, I could feel her gaze on my back.

“Sora, do you know that girl?” I asked him.

“Earlier today, I saw her having trouble trying to carry some heavy stuff and I helped her out.”

“Oh, so that’s why she thanked you,” I said, understanding the meaning of that exchange. “But she looked like she wanted to talk with you some more.” It was obvious from the girl’s face that she would have loved to speak with Sora.

“I didn’t really have anything to talk with her about,” he said with a shrug.

I was impressed at how nonchalant a man that was always so popular with girls could be. Sora, who had received the fake surname “Smith” from Larna, our department’s director, was more than my trustworthy colleague — he was one of the love interests in FL2. Like all the others, he was incredibly handsome.

“His blue hair and eyes are so wonderful, and his mannerisms are so sexy,” girls throughout the Ministry whispered. I’d heard of this from Laura, my colleague who had the look of a masculine bodybuilder and the heart of a lovely maiden.

I hadn’t thought about how attractive Sora was until she told me that. Being surrounded by attractive people since childhood, I had developed a resistance against handsomeness and sexiness.

I was staring at Sora’s face, thinking such thoughts, when he looked back at me with a troubled expression. “Is there something on my face?” he asked.

“No, I was just thinking of how popular you are, and how that pretty face of yours must help with that,” I replied honestly.

“Huh?” he said, confused.

“I’m not saying that it’s only because of your face. You also have a good personality.”

“Do you seriously think I have a good personality?”

"Hm? You're so kind and thoughtful. I'm glad we were assigned to the same department. Thank you for everything!" I said with a smile, grateful for everything he always did for me. He looked away pointedly and gave me a noogie.

"What are you doing?!"

He did that all the time. When I asked him why, he'd say something like "Because your head was there."

You'd think that right now, while I was expressing my gratitude, he'd be touched. Or at least not rub a fist on my head. I even heard him whisper, "Thick! So thick!" under his breath while he did it.

This made me so mad that I puffed out my cheeks, stood on tiptoe, raised my hand over Sora's face (which was red, probably because the sun was almost setting) and onto his head, and gave him a noogie myself. Unfortunately the height difference made it difficult, so my revenge wasn't as effective as I would've liked.

Our noogie battle went on, and we eventually reached the gates.

"See you tomorrow," Sora, whose face was still red — still, presumably, because of the sunset — said as I got into the carriage.

I spent the ride back home stretching my back and hips — my whole body was stiff from all the deskwork.

"Spending all day reading dictionaries and references is so boring. I wish I could do something different for a change," I mumbled to myself right before falling asleep.

Little did I know that my wish would soon come true.

Back in my room, I was lying on the bed, refreshing after a hard day of work, when I was told that Father had called for me. Mother did that all the time to scold me, but Father almost never did.

I went to his study, wondering what he could want to tell me, and found him waiting for me with a saddened expression.

Father was deeply in love with his wife, and, consequently, adored the daughter whose face so closely resembled hers. He would always greet me with the most affectionate of smiles, even when he found me covered in mud or with a snake I had just caught in the fields in my hands.

Why does he look so preoccupied?

“Father, why did you want to speak with me?” I asked him after swallowing hard, worried by his expression, which didn’t change even as he replied.

“Once every two years, the royals and nobles from Sorcié and the neighboring countries hold an International Assembly. This year it will be held here, in our kingdom.”

“An assembly?” That did sound like an important event, but Father was a duke and must have been used to this kind of thing, so I couldn’t understand what the problem was.

“And today, we have received an invitation... for you to participate.”

“What? Me?”

I was surprised. I don’t mean to brag, but among high-ranking nobles, I was probably the one who knew the least about diplomatic events. I knew that Jeord and Alan, as members of the royal family, were often involved in dealings with other countries. But this was the first time I’d ever been invited.

“Yes. All the royals from the other countries are going to come here, so all high-ranking nobles will have to join in providing hospitality and participating in diplomatic exchanges. This already happened once a number of years ago when you were still a kid. But now

you're an adult, and you're engaged to a prince to boot. You *must* participate," he said, sighing deeply.

So I had to show up there as Jeord's fiancée. "Hm, I understand. I will participate. But why are you looking so upset about it?" I asked, and he jolted in surprise.

"Katarina, you say that you will participate as if it were the easiest thing in the world, but this is an assembly of powerful people from several countries! It is an extremely formal event where no faux pas will be forgiven!" he said heatedly, standing up from his desk.

"I-I see..." I said, taken aback, making his face turn even darker.

"Katarina, I believe that you are a wonderful daughter. You are an active, positive, optimistic girl."

"Th-Thank you."

Father was acting really weirdly today — now he was praising me all of a sudden.

"But etiquette and studying are not your *forté*, right?"

And now he was criticizing me.

"Well... that's right," I had to agree, since what he had said was nothing but the truth.

"And every time you join a public event you always get yourself into trouble, do you not?"

"...Do I?"

"You ended up drunk at the coming of age party for the princes, and I've heard that you were running around the castle at their graduation party."

"That's... Well, that's true, but..."

These things had happened because of very good reasons... but then again, I couldn't deny that they were true.

"And that is why, Katarina," he said, sighing again, "I believe that, though you may be a good girl, formal events are not your strong suit. I tried explaining that to the powers that be, but I couldn't have your invitation canceled."

I looked at Father, whose face showed the extent of his tiredness, and I felt deeply sorry. I knew I wasn't cut out for this kind of thing. If I could have, I would have gladly avoided participating in such a bothersome event alongside nobles and royalty.

"But why do I *have to* participate?" I asked, considering faking a fever so I wouldn't have to attend.

"Because it's a direct invitation from the royal family..." he replied in a pained voice as he held his head in his hands.

"What about sending a fake Katarina Claes?"

"...I don't think we could get away with that. I'll try to come up with a solution, but for the time being, you must mentally prepare yourself to join the Assembly," he said, exhausted, before telling me to go back to my room.

Mother, who was usually the first one to voice her complaints in this kind of situation, had been knocked completely unconscious by the shock of seeing that invitation, and was resting in her bed.

Mother... I think you're overdoing it...

I thought about my conversation with Father as I walked back to my room. A gathering of royals and nobles sounded like a total drag.

This must be because I wished that I could do something different from studying that covenant! But what's the point in doing something different if it's even more troublesome? I wanted to do something relaxing!

I found myself sighing loudly.

“Big Sister, did Father tell you about the invitation?”

Keith, my adopted younger brother, was waiting for me near my room. Lately he’d been so busy helping Father as his secretary that I hadn’t been able to spend much time with him, but his flaxen hair, blue eyes, and seductive face were as handsome as always.

“He was telling me about it just now. Did you hear about it too?”

“Yes. I was also invited, as heir to Duke Claes.”

“Oh, so you’re coming too?”

Keith being there with me would be a huge relief. For almost a decade now, he’d been cleaning up after whatever trouble I made — he was the best at it. With him by my side, any minor mess wouldn’t be a problem. I was glad he’d be there.

However, he looked anything but glad.

“*Too?* So you couldn’t refuse the invitation... What did Father say?” he asked, looking slightly disappointed. He was probably as worried as Father was about me having to participate.

If even Keith, who has years of experience looking after me, is anxious about this, this Assembly must be quite the event.

“He said that he’ll try to come up with a solution... But, is this Assembly such a big deal?”

“Yes. There will be influential people from all the nearby countries, after all. All kinds of trouble is bound to happen, and you have a tendency to get mixed up in trouble... Or rather, you have a tendency to jump into it.”

Do I really get mixed up in trouble that much? I thought to myself, but I had known Keith for long enough to tell by his dark expression

that, if I asked him that right now, he would come up with a never-ending list of examples.

"I'm sure that Father will think of something... At worst, you could always just show up and leave immediately after and try not to do anything that could cause problems in the meantime. In any case, you'd better mentally prepare yourself to attend the Assembly."

Keith ended up saying the same thing as Father. He repeated the part about not causing problems, just to make sure, and then he left.

They really don't trust me at all. Now that I'm working, I feel like I've become more responsible, haven't I...?

Feeling a little sad, I entered my room.

By the way, the only thing that Mother managed to suggest despite her shock was the same idea I'd had: finding a lookalike and having her attend in my place. But Father quickly dismissed the idea, saying it was impossible.

Anguish loomed over Claes Manor because of that *dreadful invitation*, but the very next day, a solution presented itself from the most unexpected of places.

The next day, Father (who probably hadn't come up with a solution) still looked exhausted, and Mother was still resting in her room. Since I couldn't do anything to help, I just went to work.

I took my place at the desk by Maria's in the meeting room, where, armed with dictionaries and references, I had to keep analyzing the Dark Covenant.

"When is the main content going to start?" I complained as I laid my face down next to the book I was supposed to study.

"The foreword is really long, is it not? However, I think that the notes contained in it are crucial," Maria replied with a troubled expression

on her face. Then she added, “Lady Katarina, it will soon be lunch time. I have brought you sweets to eat as dessert, so please look forward to them.”

“Really?! Great! I’ll hold out for a bit longer!”

I hated studying and deskwork, so the task I’d been busy with for the past few days had been close to torture. Maria, however, tried to make it easier on me by bringing sweets and other treats. She really was an angel — nay, a goddess.

I kept working, letting out the occasional moan of despair despite having Maria’s treats to look forward to, until it was finally lunchtime.

I triumphantly jumped out of my chair, chanting “Lunch! Lunch!” as I made for the dining hall.

“Oh! Hi, Sora. Hi, Dewey.”

“Hey.”

“Hello, Miss Maria. Lady Katarina.”

On the way, we’d encountered two boys walking towards us.

“We were just coming to see how you were doing,” Dewey said happily, decidedly looking in Maria’s direction.

The thirteen-year-old boy, handsome with his orange hair and blue eyes, was one of FL2’s romanceable characters.

Unlike Sora, whose feelings for Maria I wasn’t so sure about, Dewey was head over heels for her. He did greet me as well, but his loving gaze was aimed at the beautiful protagonist, completely ignoring the villainess besides her.

“That is so sweet of you! Thank you, we are making very good progress,” Maria said with a smile, and Dewey’s face turned red and his expression melted into a pleased grin.

“What a sweet kid.”

“I know, right?”

Sora and I, looking at their exchange from the sidelines, exchanged remarks about Dewey’s reaction.

“And, by the way,” Sora said, with a look of pity in his eyes, “did you make any progress?”

“I made barely any progress yesterday. What makes you think today would be any different?”

“You have a point. Oh well, don’t give up,” he said with sympathy.

The sad conversation between Sora and I was over, as was the loving one between Maria and Dewey, so we all went to the dining hall.

I thought I’d try to eat less to leave room for Maria’s dessert, but that day’s special was a fried food set, which I couldn’t resist ordering.

Whatever. I always have room for dessert.

“Hng, my stomach is going to explode...” I said, holding my tummy with my hands.

“No wonder,” Sora said, looking at me with sympathy once again.

“You ate that whole fried lunch, then you had desserts, and even went for seconds.”

“What could I do? Maria’s sweets were so delicious...”

“Hehe, I am glad that you liked them. I will bake them again.”

“Really?! Thank you! I’m already looking forward to that.”

“You really never learn...” Sora commented dryly.

“Don’t worry, I won’t have the fried lunch next time.”

“But Lady Katarina,” Dewey, this time, said, “you always tend to go for the heavier lunch options.”

I could tell from his eyes that he wasn’t trying to scold me (unlike Sora), which made it even worse. It was true that the lunch sets had very generous portions, but they were so tasty that I always ended up finishing them.

Now that I think of it... Have I been eating too much since I started working at the Ministry? My dresses are getting a bit tighter around the waist... I should be more careful, I thought while looking at my belly until the topic of the conversation changed.

“It will not be long until the International Assembly, is that right?” Dewey asked

“Yeah, and the Ministry has been asked to assist with the preparations,” Sora replied.

“What? You two knew about the Assembly?” I asked, looking up.

I had first learned about it on the previous day, but those two spoke as if it was common knowledge.

“You mean you *didn’t*?” Sora asked me, appalled, and Dewey and Maria also looked at me with surprise.

“I believe I learned about it in school...” Dewey said.

“We were taught about the subject in the academy as well...” Maria continued uncomfortably.

Just as with ancient script, I had promptly dumped from my brain all information about the Assembly as soon as it stopped being useful for tests.

“I must have forgotten,” I said honestly, and asked for an explanation.

“Simply put, every two years, five countries located near each other, including Sorcié, meet to strengthen their relationships. This Assembly has been held for more than a century, and serves as an occasion to discuss international agreements. Some say that it is thanks to the Assembly that we can enjoy peace,” said Dewey, showing off the knowledge that had allowed him to pass the Ministry’s incredibly difficult entrance exam at the young age of thirteen. That exam was in place to allow people like Dewey, who was extremely talented but did not have magic abilities, to join the Ministry.

“The five countries take turns hosting the Assembly once every two years, meaning that each has to do so once every ten years.”

“And now it’s Sorcié’s turn, right?”

Dewey, maybe because of his great intelligence, was really good at explaining things.

“Exactly. Are you going to participate due to your rank?”

“Yes. I received an invitation, so I have to...” *Unfortunately.*

“Nobles have so many responsibilities,” said Dewey, who was a commoner and, before coming here to work, had hardly ever even seen a noble.

“They really do. Mister Lanchester and Miss Larna are also going to attend, so I imagine that things will become even busier at the Ministry,” Maria said.

Maria was a commoner just like Dewey, but she had spent two years amongst nobles at the Academy of Magic.

Cyrus Lanchester, by the way, was Maria’s superior and another one of FL2’s handsome love interests. He had a cool, smart facade that hid his true self — a country bumpkin who was scared of speaking with women.

“Those two are attending too?” I repeated, surprised.

“Yes. Mister Lanchester told us in advance and is working more than usual right now, so as to avoid causing any problems for the department.”

As usual, Cyrus was really diligent. I imagined that Larna would just ask her subordinates to take care of things as she left.

“Our director will never do that, so we’ll probably have problems to spare,” whispered Sora, who was thinking the exact same thing as me, and I nodded in agreement.

I decided to leave nutritious snacks for everyone in the department, especially Raphael, the vice-director, before leaving for the Assembly.

We kept chatting about work until lunch break was over, then Maria and I went back to our covenants and Sora and Dewey went back to their respective departments.

My progress in the afternoon wasn’t much better than in the morning, and I still didn’t manage to finish reading the foreword. Maria, on the other hand, had found a new Light Magic spell.

I’m being left further behind every day... I thought, starting to get worried, as I rode the carriage back home.

Once I arrived, I saw a familiar carriage parked in front of the mansion.

What a weird time to visit — so late in the evening.

“Young miss, there is a guest waiting for you in the parlor,” the butler informed me.

“Yes. I will go,” I replied immediately, knowing who it would be from the carriage outside.

"Katarina, it is good to see you," said Prince Jeord, my fiancé, who was waiting for me with a smile.

Jeord Stuart, a handsome youth with blue eyes and blonde hair, was the third son of the King, and one of his potential heirs. In the parlor with him were Father, looking anxious, Mother, who had managed to get out of bed but still looked terrible, and Keith, whose expression wasn't much better either.

What's the whole squad doing here? I thought, getting the feeling that something bad was going to happen.

"Prince Jeord, how do you do," I elegantly greeted him with a curtsy in spite of my nervousness.

With his usual smoothness, he escorted me to my seat, right next to his. His movements were so perfect and beautiful that it was no wonder why all the girls said that he looked like a prince from a fairy tale. He actually was a cunning, ill-tempered prince who was afraid of snakes, but of course they didn't know that.

Everyone else sat down and Jeord, with a dazzling smile, spoke first.
"Katarina, I have wonderful news."

Oh! Could it be...?

"I don't have to go to the Assembly?!" I asked excitedly.

"You do," he immediately said.

I looked at him in disappointment, and he chuckled.

What's the good news then?

"As my fiancée, you must attend the Assembly. But you are not fond of this kind of formal event, are you?"

As expected of someone who'd known me for all these years, he really understood me. *Correct!* I wanted to shout, but before I could do so, my mother took the words right out of my mouth.

"Correct, which is why I beg you to consider attending with someone else, *anyone* but my daughter," she said breathlessly, looking extremely sincere as she expressed her opinion, which was actually the same as mine.

Jeord's expression didn't change the slightest bit after hearing her speak. "Lady Claes, I understand your concern. However, I cannot attend without my fiancée."

"I see..." she said with despair on her face.

"Which is why I will provide her with an opportunity to learn about etiquette and international history and politics."

"Really?!" Mother shouted, standing up from her chair. Father gave her a look of disapproval. "Excuse me," she said, catching herself and sitting down, though she was still unable to contain her excitement. "So, what kind of opportunity would this be, Prince Jeord?"

"Many people within the castle, in order to prepare for the visit of our foreign guests, have asked for help in improving their manners and their grasp on history, amongst other things. We have therefore hired the best professors and instructors in the kingdom to do exactly that. I imagine that if Katarina were to attend their lessons, she would be able to participate in the Assembly without any cause for concern," explained Jeord, as calmly as always.

"And will these lessons take place in the castle?"

"Yes. Katarina would stay at the castle for the duration of this seminar, so that she may more easily study. What do you think?"

Staying over to study?! Anything but that!

I was listening in silence like a good girl, without interrupting Mother, but this was too much. I protested. "I would absolutely never wa—"

“Excellent! Please, Prince Jeord, do as you just said!” Mother loudly interrupted me, making it clear with her deadly gaze that she would not be taking any objections.

“Very well. I will contact you as soon as we are ready. Katarina, please prepare yourself for the stay. It should be quite enjoyable,” Jeord said, fixing me with his smile.

It was thus decided that I — against my will — would have to stay at the castle to attend a seminar.

★★★★★

As my sister’s fiancé Jeord left my home with a victorious smile, I saw him off by returning (in appearance, at least) the smile before going back to my room. Once there, my fake smile gave way to sadness and sighing.

This is terrible. His plan played out perfectly.

I suspected that he would try something as soon as Katarina received her invitation, but I never imagined he would go as far as having her stay the night at the castle.

He had even managed to get Mother, who fervently disapproved of Katarina’s engagement with him (because she wasn’t good enough for a prince), to agree with him. He had outdone me.

He had said that they had hired the instructors for that seminar owing to the requests of many people within the castle, but I believed that, ultimately, those requests were his doing as well. Of course I had no proof, but I had little doubt about it.

I had thought that his advances towards Katarina had become tamer, but that was just because he had been so busy preparing this plan to use the International Assembly as an excuse to have her stay at the castle. He was truly a cunning, calculating man.

And the reason why he wanted her to stay the night at his home was clear as well. Rumors had it that the second-born prince was now close to marriage, and Jeord, no doubt, wanted to marry Katarina before she had time to set her roots at the Magical Ministry.

He had a shortcut to do this in taking her *physically* and using that as reason to make her his wife. Katarina was completely oblivious to matters of romance, and, for Jeord, having his way with her would be as easy as tricking a child.

Damn you, Jeord! I've been restraining myself, despite living under the same roof as her, for all these years! I won't let you have her this easily!

If I wanted to stop him, I would first need reinforcements — as many people as possible.

And thus I began making plans to protect my beloved, heedless sister.



The less you're looking forward to something, the shorter the wait seems to be. The day I had dreaded so much had come — it was time to go to the castle for the seminar.

When he visited us, Jeord said that he would let us know as soon as preparations were done, and that, too, felt like it happened in an instant. The servants at home had already done most of the work for me, so all I had to do was to request a few days off at the Ministry.

It was true that I was fed up with having to work on the covenant, and I had wished that I could do something else for a change. But studying at the castle was so bad of an alternative that I hoped my superiors would deny my request.

They approved it without a second thought. The reason, it seemed, was that the Ministry had been ordered to cooperate fully with the

International Assembly. Plus, as a newcomer, it wasn't like I had any important responsibilities to worry about.

As for the covenant which I was deciphering with so much effort, Larna said that since we knew so little about it, we couldn't tell what would happen if it was separated from its owner. She told me to keep it with me at all times. So, since I couldn't bring my usual work bag with me, I put it in the baggage for my stay at the castle. I had to be careful not to lose it — admittedly, I wasn't the best at taking care of my stuff.

With these things I had to remember on one hand, and the permission granted by the Ministry and by Mother on the other, I was completely ready to ride the carriage that would take me and my baggage to the castle.

"Quick, Big Sister, get in. We're going to be late," Keith said, stretching out his hand. I took it and stepped into the carriage.

It turned out that my kind, thoughtful brother would be coming with me. He wouldn't need to attend all the classes that I did, but he would take some in the free time he had left after helping Father with his duties at the castle.

Just having him with me was a huge relief. He could wake me up if I fell asleep during a lesson, explain to me the things I hadn't understood, and help me with all kinds of stuff.

"Mother asked me to make sure that you don't slack off, so try to take this seriously, okay?"

"Keith, you were working for Mother all along?! I thought you were on my side!"

Just when I was thinking that I felt safe with him as an ally! Turns out he's an enemy spy!

"Work for...? Anyway, she also asked me to help you with whatever may come up," said Keith, looking dejected.

"Oh, I'm so glad. So you're my ally after all," I said, but, for whatever reason, Keith sighed.

The sunlight was streaming into the carriage from a sky which, as if to mock the darkness of my current mood, was stupendously clear. *This would be the perfect day to work on the fields and play with Pochi...*

"Oh, right, Pochi," I said to my shadow.

"Woof!" the black puppy cried happily, coming out of it.

After Keith's kidnapping incident, Pochi had somehow become my pet Dark Familiar. He almost never left my side, and he lived inside my shadow. Since he was a familiar, he didn't need to eat or to be walked, so he was really easy to care for.

Most dogs, in both of my lives, hated me. So the fact that Pochi was so attached to me made him seem even more lovable in my eyes. But since he was a product of Dark Magic, I had to keep him hidden, and couldn't call him out of my shadow when other people were around. Larna told me not to let him out at the castle, because we didn't know who might be around to see him.

I won't be able to pet him for a while, I thought, and I spent the rest of the carriage trip giving him an advance share of rubs and pets, complete with interest.

After thoroughly petting Pochi, I reached my destination in time and got out of the carriage. The castle felt different from usual — it was full of people and the security was much stricter.

"It's because of the incoming International Assembly," Keith explained when I mentioned what I'd noticed. "Royals from the

neighboring countries are going to come here as guests, and soon only authorized people will be able to enter the castle.”

That really made it sink in how important an event it was going to be.

When we got inside, I went to the room that Jeord had reserved for me.

“Mary?! Sophia?! Alan?! Nicol?!”

I was so shocked at seeing my friends there that I ended up blurting out their names, one after the other. I’d expected to find only Jeord waiting for me, so this was a pleasant surprise. As for my fiancé, he was looking extremely annoyed.

“Lady Katarina! We’ve been waiting for you!” said Mary, running towards me with a huge smile on her face before I could greet the annoyed prince. Sophia, with a matching smile, followed behind her.

Mary had hair and eyes the color of burnt sienna, and Sophia had white hair and red eyes (which was rare for this country). The two, like me, were rival characters in the game. But while I sported a villainesque face, they were both straight-out beauties.

I was very happy to see them, since I’d had few chances to do so since I’d started working at the Ministry, but I didn’t understand why they were in the place where I’d be staying for the duration of the seminar.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“We, too, will be staying at the castle to attend the seminar!” Mary replied with sparkling eyes.

“All of you?!”

I’d thought that this was meant as an opportunity for me, a subpar noble lady, to improve myself. So why would people like Mary, the very definition of properness, be attending as well?

“Not that I see what use Lady Mary, revered as a paragon of excellence amongst ladies, would have from such lessons,” Jeord, who had been thinking the same thing, commented with a smile.

“Not at all,” she replied, smiling as well. “I still have much to learn. Do you not agree, Prince Alan?” she said, turning to Jeord’s silver-haired, blue-eyed younger twin, who happened to be her fiancé.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Alan replied shortly while avoiding looking at his brother, whose smile now seemed to have something dark about it.

“So she got the information from you, once again...” Jeord murmured between his teeth.

I still didn’t understand the details, but knowing that my friends would be there with me was reason enough to rejoice.

“Lady Katarina, I have brought several novels for your stay,” the lovely Sophia said as she dragged a huge trunk with her.

“So *that* is why you had all that baggage with you. We are here to study, and this is no time to be reading novels,” said her brother Nicol, a handsome youth with black hair and dark eyes, as he relieved her of the trunk without ever changing his facial expression.

I had also hidden a couple of romance novels in my baggage, so I looked on with fear and sympathy as Sophia’s were taken.

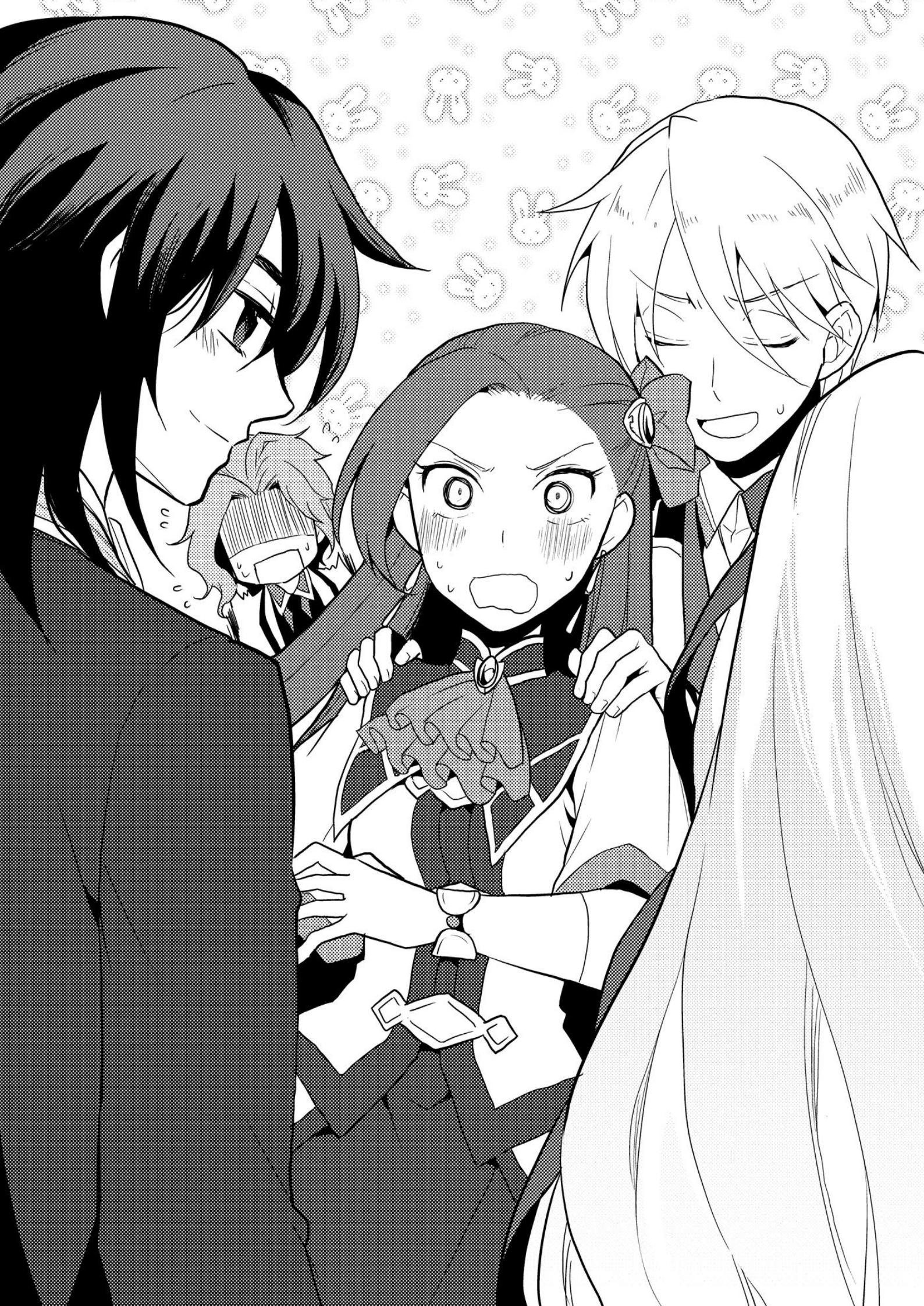
After giving the trunk to a servant, Nicol gazed at his disappointed sister. “As you can all see, Sophia is not quite serious about this whole matter, but please look after her. I will be staying at the castle too, for work, so let me know if anything happens,” he said with a bow.

So he won’t be joining us at the seminar, but he’ll still stay here.

“Of course, if anything I should be the one asking you to look after me!” I said, bowing as well.

Nicol replied with a short hum, and as he smiled ever so slightly, I risked swooning at his attractiveness for the first time in a while.

“Enough pleasantries. I will escort you to your room, Katarina,” Jeord said, pulling me away from the dangerously handsome Nicol.



“No need to bother yourself. We have already prepared a room for her,” said Keith, taking hold of my other arm and pulling me, this time away from Jeord.

“And we will be staying in the annex next to that room,” said Mary, gesturing to herself and Sophia.

“Tyranny of the majority, I see...” Jeord said, his smile turning even darker, but I was perfectly happy to be close to Mary and Sophia.

We all went to the guest room that Keith had prepared for me, right in front of his room and very close to the annex where Mary and Sophia were staying.

Now that I was surrounded by friends, what I had been thinking of as a boring seminar camp had started feeling more like a fun field trip.

I entered my room, where I was to leave my baggage, and I stretched myself out on the bed.

“I’m going to do my best!” I shouted.

“Young miss, remember that you are not home. Please keep your voice down,” scolded my maid Anne, who had followed me all the way to the castle.

And thus began my stay at the castle to attend the seminar.

Chapter 2: The Seminar

After my belongings were stored in my bedroom, I went to the room where I would be taking lessons the next day. It was there that the instructor gave an introductory address.

The twin princes went to attend their duties, while Mary and Sophia joined me, and we sat on the chairs that had been prepared for us. There were many other young men and women in the room with us, presumably nobles who were here to attend the seminar too.

The instructor, an old man, told us that we would be studying from dawn to dusk.

This could be the first time I have to study this much in a single day... Back at the academy my talented friends were always there to help me cram the night before the exams.

I did study a lot before the high school entrance exam in my past life, though, motivated by Acchan's promise that she would lend me her otome games for as long as I wanted if I passed.

“Lady Katarina, you seem to be spacing out... Is everything alright?”

“Are you not feeling well?”

My two friends spoke up, dragging me out of my musings and back down to earth.

“I was just thinking that we'll have to study a lot. Doesn't it sound harsh?” I asked them.

“It really does. We shall work together and do our best,” Mary said.

“As long as we work together, we will be fine!” Sophia added.

“Thanks! Let's do this together!” I thanked them with a smile, feeling grateful that I had such reliable friends.

The old instructor's address ended, and it was about time for dinner.

I went back to my room and changed clothes, but when I came out, I found that Keith still hadn't come back. So I supposed I'd only be having dinner with Mary and Sophia.

"I wonder what we'll be eating," I said, looking forward to the food that we'd be eating here in the castle for the duration of the seminar.

We met Jeord at the T-shaped intersection between two hallways.

"Oh, Katarina, perfect timing. Let us go have dinner together," he said with a smile as he gave me his hand, meaning to escort me.

Wait, what?

"The royal family is going to have dinner together with the guests?" I asked.

I'd heard that the people who were staying at the castle to attend the seminar or for work would have dinner together in a specially prepared room, but I didn't know the royal family would be joining them. I had no problem with Jeord and Alan, who I knew, but dining with the other members of their family would make me very nervous. However, my fear proved unfounded.

"No, my family is going to eat by themselves, as usual. I am the only one who is going to eat with the guests, because I wish to have dinner together with you, Katarina."

Oh, that's fine then, I thought, relieved, and I reached for Jeord's hand... but, out of nowhere, Mary showed up and walked in between us.

"Prince Jeord, you may be trying to ignore us, but we are also here as guests. And Lady Katarina is going to have dinner with us."

"Oh, Lady Mary, so you are here as well. It has been a while since I have had the opportunity to spend some time with Katarina, so I ask that you reconsider. Instead, may I suggest that you dine together

with my family? It would be the perfect opportunity to strengthen your relationship with your fiancé, and, incidentally, there is an empty seat at their table tonight.”

“Thank you, but the relationship between Prince Alan and I is already strong enough. And I, too, have not had an opportunity to spend time with Lady Katarina in quite a while. I ask that you be the one to reconsider intruding on this fun time between ladies and, instead, go back to eat with your family. I am sure that your brother is missing you.”

As Mary and Jeord were talking while smiling at each other, Sophia and I were left to wait by the side.

“Oh, Big Brother!” said Sophia, noticing Nicol approaching us from the end of the hallway.

“Are you all going to dinner?” he asked, noticing us and elegantly moving closer.

“Yes,” his sister replied briskly, “we are going to the dining hall.”

“Perfect. Then let us all go together,” he said, looking happy and slightly embarrassed.

Sophia later told me that to Nicol, who had very few friends because of his superhuman attractiveness (which made people fall in love with him before they could become friends), sharing a dinner table with so many people was a rare and fun event.

Nobody could refuse him, seeing how happy he seemed at the prospect, so we ended up dining together while sitting around a large table.

Keith eventually joined us too, so Alan was the only one left out. I later heard that the prince was appalled by this fact when he found out.

Nicol, who was the one to propose that we dine together in the first place, ate as usual: with no expression on his face and without starting any conversation. However, according to Sophia, he was actually overjoyed. He certainly didn't look it, but if my friend was happy, I was happy too.

Given how late it was by the time we were done eating, we all went directly back to our respective rooms to sleep. However, Mary and Keith locked my door for, as they said, "safety reasons."

The castle was so safe that I didn't see the point, but they insisted so much that I let them do it and quickly fell asleep onto the castle's soft, luxurious bed.

"Lousabre, located just north of Sorcié, is still facing problems with national security, and, as such, the border is constantly patrolled. Etran, the country right next to Lousabre, has been an important trade partner of ours for years, and is also the birthplace of our former queen. Xiarmah, to the east, is home to a culture much different from ours, but, nonetheless, we are on very good terms with each other. Further yet to the east is Ethenell, which is also undergoing a period of social turmoil. However, this does not pose any threat to us due to the sea dividing us, and we trade with them, with safety inspections at the ports."

The old lecturer was standing in front of a map of Sorcié and its neighboring countries as he explained the politics and relationships between them.

Nobles were taught about these countries by their private tutors from childhood. However, as the political situation continuously changed, they had to hear updated explanations several times during their education. This meant that even I remembered enough about them.

Sorcié stood out as the most peaceful, secure, and wealthy country in the region, which meant that hearing about the turmoil in other countries lacked a sense of realism for me. The only not-so-safe place I had ever visited so far was the border near Lousabre, back when Keith was kidnapped, and that made me realize how much I still had to learn before meeting with people from outside Sorcié.

I realized that, sure, but... the lesson which had started as a basic explanation of international politics had now started delving into difficult, specialized topics.

After lunch the lesson became considerably harder, and I was doing my best to listen without moving from my desk. I had to take lessons like these back at the academy, too, but at least then we had practical magic training, so we never spent the whole day sitting down. Passively listening to theoretical lessons wasn't my forte (though it wasn't like practical magic training was either), so I was already exhausted.

The explanations were very concentrated due to the tight schedule, with lots of information to take in in very little time. When that day's lesson was over, I could literally feel that my head had become heavier.

While I was eating dinner, holding my heavy head so that it wouldn't fall down, Mary, who didn't seem half as tired as me, said that there was a large shared bath and invited me to take a dip with her. Unfortunately, I was so spent that I had to refuse and just walked back alone to my room

Anne prepared the bed for me and I collapsed onto it.

"I'm so tired..."

The day-long lessons were even harsher than I had expected. Knowing that the next day had more of the same in store for me (and

since the basic explanations were all over, all that was left was the harder stuff), I was in despair.

Just as I was starting to sink into depression, I heard a light knock on the door.

“Who is it?” I asked from the bed, since Anne had already left.

“Big Sister, are you still awake?” a familiar voice asked me back.

I jumped out of bed, opened the door, pulled Keith inside (kind of forcefully) and made him sit on the couch.

“The lessons were so difficult. Even worse than I expected,” I said, sharing my thoughts on what we had to learn that day and my fear regarding what we would have to learn tomorrow.

“Just as I thought,” Keith said, grinning wryly.

I gave him a confused look. My brother apparently knew how I would be feeling from the start.

“You had trouble with the lessons at the academy, which weren’t that long, so I knew you would be struggling even more having to sit down and learn all day long,” he explained with his usual calm smile.

He understood me perfectly, and realizing that made me feel a bit better. We had lived together since when I was eight years old, and now he knew me better than I did myself. He would come to check on me whenever he felt I’d need it. I suddenly got the urge to have him comfort me like when we were kids.

“Keith, can you stroke my hair like you used to do back in the day?” I asked, sitting next to him on the couch, looking up to him.

I was so exhausted that I felt justified in asking that much, but Keith groaned, and his face stiffened.

“I guess you can’t...” I mumbled, looking down as I expected to be scolded for behaving like a child.

But then, I felt something warm and soft on top of my head — he had granted my request. Keith, deep down, was a really sweet boy.

My mood got instantly better as he gently caressed me, and I started to feel that I'd be able to withstand another day of the seminar.

Hehehe, having my head stroked feels so good. He used to do it all the time years ago, unlike now.

Maybe that was a privilege unique to children... but Father, if I asked him to, would probably still have complied without a second thought. The problem was that his stroking was so energetic that it was painful rather than pleasant, and it also messed my hair up. I wished he'd learn from Keith's gentle caressing, which, as I just noticed, had become even better as he grew up.

And his hands are so much bigger too, I thought, grabbing the hand that was stroking my head to take a closer look.

Having it right in front of my eyes, I could tell just how much it had grown, and I examined the long fingers, the pale complexion, and the smoothness of the skin.

This looks like it would be...

I tested my hypothesis by placing Keith's hand on my cheek, and it turned out I was right: it was incredibly soft and pleasantly smooth, probably even more so than my hands, despite all the trouble that Anne was always going through to take care of them.

Keith, however, retracted his hand in surprise.

I wanted to enjoy that a bit longer... I thought, but Keith got up and left my room in a hurry.

He was already outside before I had time to say anything, and was now making a metallic clattering noise on the other side of the closed door.

"K-Keith? What's wrong?" I asked him through the door

"Think of what you did, and maybe you'll realize what's wrong..." he said, with a hint of anger in his voice.

"I'm sorry," I said, apologizing for something that I must have done without noticing, "But... what's that clattering?"

"I'm locking the door."

"What? Why? And why from the outside?!"

"If the door is locked, you won't get any crazy ideas..."

"Why would I ever do that?!" I asked, unsure of why I was being treated like a wild animal, but Keith didn't reply.

"I'll give the key to your maid. Good night."

I was still confused, but if Anne had the key, I could just ring for her tomorrow and have the door opened, so I went to bed.

I tried thinking of what I had done, as Keith had said.

Hm... Was it because a lady isn't supposed to rub someone's hand against her cheek without permission?

That was the only explanation I could come up with, so I decided I'd apologize for that in the morning.

However, with my troubles stoked away, I felt I'd be able to sleep without any problem. On top of an apology, I owed Keith a thank you.

I made a mental note to give him both of those the next day and then fell into a deep slumber.

★★★★★

I went back to the guest room that had been assigned to me and, with my back to the door, I slid down onto the floor with an exhausted sigh. My face still felt as if it were on fire, and I imagined I was visibly red.

"I'm glad I had the key with me," I murmured to myself.

I had taken that key to protect my sister from Jeord, but I never expected to use it to protect her from me...

She wouldn't have been safe if the door was unlocked, because when I said, "*If the door is locked, you won't get any crazy ideas,*" I was actually speaking to myself.

I needed to restrain myself not to enter her room, put my mouth over her soft lips, and push her onto the bed.

The way she had tempted me today was just *that* bad, but, of course, she didn't have the faintest idea.

She didn't know anything about the ways in which men and women courted each other. Or maybe she did from all the raunchy romance novels she read, but without ever imagining that those things also applied to her, which was why she was always so helplessly clueless.

I was terrified of what would happen if I did not exercise the utmost restraint in response to that temptation.

I let out a second sigh, putting a hand on my forehead as I thought that I had to do something about how feverish I was. But this gesture, unfortunately, made me recall the situation from earlier.

She had looked up at me, asking me to stroke her hair in her sweetest voice.

I knew how bad that could prove for me, but considering how tired she was, I tried my best to please her. She was leaning onto me, pushing her lightly clothed body against mine as her expression melted in pleasure, and I was already on the edge... and then she took my hand and stroked it against her face!

How much are you going to tempt me?! What is this if not an invitation to lay with you?!

Well... at least it would have been that if it had come from anyone except Katarina.

I mustered what little restraint I had left and ran out of the room, but I wondered if, after that, she was fine by herself.

...She probably is. I've listened to her complain about the lessons, and I've also stroked her hair as she asked. I'm sure she's already asleep by now.

And I was sure that, on the next day, she would come to apologize to me without actually realizing what she had done. I had confessed my — romantic, not brotherly — love to her, but she had likely already forgotten about it. I would need to explain it to her once again.

The priority, however, was to impress upon her that she could not appear in front of men in her nightgown.

A lot of different thoughts ran through my mind, but none intense enough to make me forget about Katarina and how lovely she had looked while sitting next to me.

The feverish heat burning my face showed no signs of subsiding, and I prepared myself for a sleepless night as I let out that day's third — and deepest — sigh.

★★★★★

In the morning, as soon as Anne woke me up, I went looking for Keith to thank him and apologize to him.

I thought that he was mad at me for doing something unladylike, and I was probably right, because he told me not to let people inside my room when I was in my nightgown.

He said that he was going to work. But, noticing the dark circles under his eyes, I got worried and suggested that he rest for a while, because he looked tired.

"This has nothing to do with being tired. If anything, right now, I want to work to clear my mind," he said, leaving me there alone and confused as another long day of study was about to start.

"...And this is how the Assembly of these five countries came to be. This concludes our morning lesson," the instructor said, and I rejoiced while stretching out, already exhausted. *Finally.*

We had lunch in the same hall where we'd had dinner the previous day. After eating with everyone, I went to the toilet and then for a little stroll, just for a little change of pace. With the Assembly right around the corner, the castle was bustling with activity, and all the servants were coming and going, looking busy.

I tend to forget, but the Assembly is really going to be a huge deal...

Among the instructions and orders that the servants were giving each other, I could faintly hear something like music.

Oh, I heard it again... It's coming from here, I thought, following the sound.

I reached a sort of open-sky courtyard, decorated as if it were going to be used during the Assembly, and found the source of the music: a large piano in the middle of it.

The man behind that beautiful performance was none other than Alan. It had been a while since I last heard him play, and I lost myself in his music until the piece was over.

I shouted, "Encore!" and Alan, surprised, noticed me.

"What? What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be attending the seminar?"

"We're taking our lunch break right now, so I heard your music, followed it, and ended up here. Why are you playing in this place?"

“You really just do whatever comes to your mind, huh...” Alan commented before replying to my question. “I am practicing here because I was asked to perform during the Assembly.”

“That’s wonderful! I’m sure that your music will charm people from all countries!”

“Now, that’s... Do you mean you were charmed?”

“Yes! I absolutely loved it.”

Alan’s performance was so beautiful that even I, who knew next to nothing about music, loved it.

“I see... I was thinking of playing another practice piece. Do you have any requests?”

“I can make a request?”

“Well, someone could request a piece during the real performance. I have to train for that.”

Alan was really serious about practicing. *He’s so diligent...*

“In that case...” I said, requesting a famous piece that anybody in the kingdom knew.

“Sit down,” Alan said, pointing to a chair behind the piano, next to a window, before starting to play.

Once again, I lost myself in the beautiful sounds he created.

This is so relaxing... The warm afternoon sun feels so good... I’m still full from lunch and the music is sublime... I’m kind of... sleepy... Oh, the piece is over.

“One... more...” I mumbled, and, half-asleep, I heard Alan scolding me for falling asleep on the chair.

★★★★★

I was busy practicing the piano in preparation for the Assembly performance when Katarina Claes, my brother's fiancée, appeared out of nowhere.

Seeing her roam around the castle without a care had already shocked me enough, but not as much as when she fell asleep while listening to me playing. Not only was it rude because she had requested that piece herself, but, as a noble lady, you'd think she'd be careful enough not to sleep in a place like that.

When I called her name, it was already too late — she was already deep in slumber. And, what's more, when I approached her and tried to wake her up, she rested her head on my shoulder.

We were facing each other, and someone looking from far away could have thought that we were hugging.

I felt her breath on my skin, and I had her delicate nape in front of my eyes... My heart skipped a beat.

I had never told this to anyone, but I was actually in love with Katarina. And I had been for a long time, but I didn't plan on hindering my brother's engagement, so I was mentally prepared to eventually set those feelings aside.

I was prepared, yeah, but this situation was... problematic.

As a healthy young man, being this close to a girl was titillating enough, but the girl in question being the very one I've secretly loved for years made it that much worse... It was almost torture.

Stop mumbling that close to my face! Stop smelling so nice! Stop having such a sexy neck! This girl... she's always acting like a wild animal, so why is she being so feminine now of all times?!

Lamenting my pain was fine, but I had to do something — and quickly. If somebody saw us like this, they'd probably get some weird

ideas, and, more importantly, I couldn't resist much longer. Both mentally and physically.

I made up my mind to grab her shoulders and push her up. *Even she ought to wake up if I do that.*

However, as soon as I put my hands on her shoulders, she started leaning to one side, and I had to catch her before she fell down.

"*Phew, that was close,*" I murmured, before realizing that things had gotten even worse. She had gone from resting her head on my shoulder to leaning against my chest as I hugged her.

Now we were *definitely* too close. Our whole bodies were pushed against each other.

And these soft things I feel pressing into me must be... No, don't think of that. Stop thinking about it, I said myself, but to no avail. She was too soft, and she smelled too good.

I was on good terms with Mary, my fiancée, but I'd never exchanged much physical contact except for escorting her or dancing. The sensation of Katarina's soft body between my arms was a first for me, and it was very pleasant. I wished that we could stay like that forever, or even that I could lift her up and carry her to my room.

My dangerous thoughts were interrupted by a familiar voice.

"Lady Katarina? Where are you? The afternoon lesson will be starting soon!"

The voice, coming from a distance, belonged to Mary.

I snapped out of it, sat Katarina back onto her chair, and opened the door.

"Mary, she's here," I said, and she noticed me.

"I was practicing the piano, and she fell asleep. I'm busy, so take care of her. See ya," I said before immediately running away.

I really was busy, but all I could do at that point was to go to my room and try to calm down and cool off. And the memory of Katarina's soft body between my arms made that difficult as hell.

★★★★★

I fell asleep while listening to Alan play, and if it hadn't been for Mary waking me up, I'd have missed the afternoon lessons.

I realized how rude it had been to sleep through the piece I had requested, and made a mental note to apologize to him at the next opportunity.

However, my short nap had also recharged me, and I didn't get sleepy while listening to the lesson. This made today, as a whole, a lot less exhausting than the previous day. *All's well that ends well.*

After refusing their invitation and going straight to bed the day before, I made up for it by inviting Mary and Sophia to the shared bath.

"Oh, that sounds wonderful!" Sophia replied, but Mary looked troubled.

"A-An invitation from Lady Katarina... I-I am not ready for this..."

"Are you going to pass, Mary?" I asked her.

"Not at all, I will be coming," she quickly replied.

Yay! Bathing with my girlfriends!

I went back to my room, asked Anne to help me prepare, and then went to the bath.

It wasn't like the baths we had back in Japan, where everyone could just walk in — it was reservation-only. I had decided to go on that same day, but luckily someone canceled at the last second, so we were able to get a reservation. I'd heard that a lot of ladies liked to reserve the whole thing for themselves.

I was so excited that I ended up arriving early, and neither Mary nor Sophia were there yet. I decided to take a peek inside, and saw that the bath was around as big as a small public bath. It still looked luxurious, though — it could probably fit ten people all at once. We did have a bathtub at home, but it wasn't much bigger than a normal household bathtub from my old world.

I was expecting something like a merlion-shaped fountain, but while there wasn't anything of the sort, the place was beautifully decorated. It had that kind of elegance which noble ladies like.

While I was admiring the bath, Sophia arrived.

"I have never been in a large shared bath!" she told me, visibly excited. She stepped inside and exclaimed happily, "This is wonderful!"

I know, right? I'm excited too. I want to dive in already.

Sophia and I, both thrilled, were eagerly waiting for Mary to arrive... She was late.

We were starting to get worried, because Mary wasn't the kind to be late, when her maid came looking for us.

"Lady Mary offers you her apologies. She is not well, and cannot come."

"Mary's not well?!"

Maybe when I invited her earlier and she hesitated, it was because she was already starting to feel sick...

"It would not feel right to enjoy bathing here while Lady Mary is unwell," Sophia said as her expression fell.

"You're right. Let's go check on her! We can always bathe here another time," I proposed to Sophia, but Mary's maid shook her head.

"Lady Mary just needs some rest; it is nothing serious. She would like for you two to enjoy yourselves without worrying," she said. Apparently, there was no need to check on her.

After hearing that, it would feel wrong *not* to enjoy ourselves... It was a shame that Mary wasn't with us, but we thought that the best we could do was have even more fun to make up for that.

"Oh my! This is so large!"

"We could swim in here!"

We went inside wearing nothing but towels wrapped around our bodies, and now that I was able to take a proper look, the bath seemed even larger than it had before.

"Please do not swim, young miss," Anne, who had come with me, immediately replied. Noble ladies were usually followed by their (fully clothed) maids when they bathed, and that took away the freedom of being naked inside of a tub of hot water. But anyway, I was proud of how ladylike I'd become over the past few years, so I wouldn't have started swimming.

"Lady Katarina! There is a pleasant smell coming out of the water!"

"Oh, you're right! It kind of smells like roses."

"They must have mixed a fragrance oil with the bathwater," Anne explained, seeing how Sophia and I were reacting.

A rose-smelling bath was a luxury worthy of the castle, and it was easy to imagine why all the ladies were taking turns to come here.

We poured hot water on ourselves, bathed in the perfumed tub, and then washed our bodies with a soft, bubbly soap.

We thoroughly enjoyed our bath, and I hoped that Mary could come along too next time.

★★★★★

I, Mary Hunt, went back to my room alone, holding back tears. The reason for my dismay was that I could not partake in what I had looked forward to so much: bathing with Lady Katarina.

I had reserved the bath in advance, but when Lady Katarina had refused my invitation yesterday, I thought that I would have to give up, as making another reservation for that popular bath would be too difficult.

Yet, today she invited me to go with her, and good fortune had it that somebody had just canceled their own reservation. What wonderful news!

I had been looking forward to bathing with her since I started staying at the castle... no, much earlier! I had dreamt of it for years.

I was enthusiastic, rejoicing at my luck as I imagined myself laughing and playing alongside Lady Katarina.

In order to preserve my fame as a paragon of propriety, I usually behaved in the most elegant, refined way possible. But, confronted with such news, I forgot all about elegance and refinement and expressed my excitement with so much fervor that, for the first time in at least ten years, I started bleeding from my nose. Atrocious.

I thought that keeping my nose pinched would be enough to stop the nosebleed, but it was not. In fact, I kept bleeding for so long that one of the servants even called a doctor.

“It’s only overexertion. She just needs to rest in a cool place,” he declared.

The servants, relieved, all started saying how glad they were... but there was nothing to be glad about!

I must go bathe with Lady Katarina! I have no time for cooling my nose down!

I tried reasoning with them, but the servants refused to let me go, saying that bathing would be too dangerous.

I never behaved like a spoiled child, but on this occasion I insisted so much that the old maid who had been taking care of me for my whole life had to intervene.

“Young miss, you are not a child anymore. You should understand that you cannot take a bath with that nosebleed. Even if you went, you would just make your friends worry. They would not invite you anymore after that,” she said coldly, so I had no choice but to choke back the tears and give up.

I could not let myself be seen bleeding like that, so I asked my maid to tell my friends that I would not need to be visited. I then laid on my bed, crying onto my pillow.

I swore to myself that I would not miss the opportunity to bathe with Lady Katarina next time, and I would find a way to prevent nosebleeds.

What I did not expect was for her to recount her experience bathing in the castle so enthusiastically to the other nobles that everyone became interested in it and the reservations immediately piled up, making it impossible for me to try again.

It seemed I must wait even longer for my dream to come true...

★★★★★

The next day, we were relieved to see that Mary had showed up to the classes looking completely normal.

In the morning we would listen to the usual lecture by the old instructor, but in the afternoon, we would have a dance lesson. I never liked dancing, but I was so tired of sitting all day in front of a desk that I was happy I could do something different. So I looked

forward to the afternoon while I listened to the old man talk about the politics of our neighboring countries.

“...and so, the new king of Ethenell, after being enthroned, has started a series of reforms. And this concludes our lecture for today,” the instructor said, putting down his book.

The morning lessons were finally over, so it was time for lunch — and then, dancing.

When I reached the room where we would be taking the dance lessons, I found someone unexpected.

“Prince Jeord?” I said, surprised, and he walked towards me with his usual smile.

“Oh, Katarina.”

“Why are you here?” I asked, so puzzled by seeing him there that I forgot to greet him properly.

“It goes without saying: to act as your dance partner,” he replied as if it were obvious.

Of course I would need a partner to dance, but there were lots of people here, so it felt weird that the prince, busy as he was, would have to bother.

“But Prince Jeord, you are so busy with work, so...”

“This is also an opportunity for me to refresh. Surely you would not mind?”

Once he said that, I had to give up on my original plan of kindly refusing his offer.

“Of course not...”

And so it was decided that I would be dancing with Jeord.

Of course, it wasn't that I didn't like dancing with Jeord. We had been engaged since we were eight years old, and, even after growing up, we had danced together several times at balls. But lately, he...

"Here, Katarina, come closer."

As soon as the lesson had started, he pulled me towards himself. "You are as lovely as always," he whispered in my ear with the sweetest voice.

That was so intense that I almost fell down, and he took the opportunity to pull me even closer, to the point that he was basically hugging me.

I could feel my face getting hotter. Lately, he was taking every chance to get physically closer to me and say sweet romantic things.

Of course, as a love interest in an otome game, his face and voice were perfect. I used to squeal with happiness in my previous life when I heard him say those things through a screen... But now that I was hearing them in reality, I couldn't even manage to make a sound. I only started feeling weak at the knees.

I had no romantic experience in either of my two lives, which made me react that much more strongly to whatever he did these things.

At this rate, I'm not going to learn anything about dancing. I can't let him have it his way!

My face was still burning hot, but I tried to regain some composure and looked up at Jeord, staring him in the eyes.

"Prince Jeord, I'm trying to learn how to dance. There is no need to stay this close, and, please, stop whispering sweet things into my ear," I told him.

"...Katarina, making that request with that expression on your face is not going to persuade me to stop. If anything, it will make me wish to

forcefully carry you to my room,” he said, looking entranced, and hugged me even tighter.

Expression? What expression? I’m probably blushing a little bit... Is that the problem? And we’re even closer than before...

I could smell something nice, which was probably coming from Jeord. As expected of a prince, even his smell was handsome.

The way he was touching me had gotten more audacious. My heart started beating faster, and I was seriously worried about what would happen next.

“Prince Jeord,” someone called out to him, “the song is almost over, so may I ask that you dance the next one with me?”

It felt like heaven had sent an angel to rescue me.

“Oh, Lady Mary. I am enjoying dancing with my fiancée after so long, so may I ask that you find someone else?”

“This is supposed to be a lesson,” Mary replied with a smile, “and dancing with several different people would provide the best practice.”

Elegantly, but somewhat forcefully, she took Jeord’s hand and pulled him towards herself. “You must be tired. Rest over there for a while,” she said to me, entrusting me to Sophia.

I gladly did as she told me, since I was physically and mentally exhausted from Jeord’s romancing. I sat down in a corner of the dance hall, and Sophia, thoughtful as always, even brought me something to drink.

The cold drink helped me cool down my feverish face, and my heartbeat slowly went back to normal. After emptying my glass, I sighed.

“Lady Katarina, is something the matter?” Sophia asked.

“I’m just a bit tired.”

I was too embarrassed to say that Jeord’s advances had been too strong for me to take, so I simply repeated what Mary had said.

“I am glad... I cannot forgive that perverted, handsy prince...”

“Huh?” I asked, because she had spoken the second part of the sentence in such a whisper that I couldn’t hear it.

She just smiled as if nothing had happened.

Anyway, I was very grateful to her and Mary for saving me. If it hadn’t been for them, I might have passed out in the middle of the dance hall.

Extremely relieved, I drank the new drink that Sophia had brought me.

Jeord and Mary were dancing together, and their moves were perfect in their elegance. They looked so beautiful.

★★★★★

I, Sophia Ascarr, with the help of Lady Mary, had just saved my friend Lady Katarina from the hands of a shameless, perverted prince.

She was nervously blushing because of him... but when I offered her a drink and some rest, she thankfully returned to normal.

Only the seminar attendees were supposed to take the dance lessons in the first place, so I was very surprised when I saw Prince Jeord casually stand in the middle of the room, then take Lady Katarina to dance with him.

Even from a distance, it was easy to tell that he was keeping her too close to himself. I stared as if in a trance as he led her across the dance floor, but Lady Mary could not withstand it.

“Lady Katarina is in trouble! We must help her!” she said, and I snapped out of my daze.

Had it not been for our prompt help, Lady Katarina would have certainly fallen into much more trouble. Doing such things in public, in front of so many people... I could not forgive that perverted prince!

But then again, if Lady Mary had not intervened, I would have done nothing but stare at them... unable to take action. I may never reach Lady Mary's level, but I would like to act in a more cool, decisive way.

"Mary and Jeord dance so well. They look so good next to each other — a handsome man with a beautiful woman," Lady Katarina said nonchalantly while I was reflecting on my actions.

To me, it looked like Lady Mary was trying to stomp her heels onto Prince Jeord's feet, and he was doing his best to dodge it, but... Lady Katarina was always Lady Katarina.

To be honest... I did not understand "real" romance. I greatly appreciated it within the context of novels, but, possibly because of my peculiar looks, I had never fallen in love with a real man. This is why I suspected that my understanding of romance was lacking when compared to other girls my age.

However, there was someone who understood even less... Tens of times less. Lady Katarina. Seeing her being courted for years by both Prince Jeord and Master Keith without realizing the intentions of either had me in awe at her slowness.

She now finally understood what those two felt for her, but... the same could not be said about Alan's or Nicol's feelings.

It took Prince Jeord and Master Keith an explicit confession for Lady Katarina to realize the truth, and I knew that Big Brother would never do anything of the sort, which in turn meant that his love of many years would never bear fruit, and that Lady Katarina would never become my sister-in-law.

This made me sad. Big Brother was a wonderful young man, much better than Prince Jeord, but he would have to give up just because the latter had become engaged to Lady Katarina first!

Even now that we were staying at the castle, making for a rare opportunity to see her since she started working at the Ministry, Big Brother had barely spoken with her at all despite being here too.

Prince Jeord was relentless in his approach, Master Keith was staying in the room next to hers, and even Prince Alan, yesterday, was playing music for her...

It is so unfair that everyone but Nicol is able to be with her!

I wanted this to be an opportunity to make Big Brother and Lady Katarina become closer, and, possibly, for him to charm her. But... knowing him, I was painfully aware that he would never actively approach her...

In that case, I, as his sister, shall help him!

I thought up a plan, and then started talking with Lady Katarina, who was still staring at Lady Mary and Prince Jeord dancing together.

★★★★★

After I had fallen prey to Jeord's romantic attack, Mary had somehow managed to make him dance with the other ladies, so the dance lesson ended without him approaching me anymore. I was grateful, since I knew that I would have passed out in the middle of the dance floor if he had.

When the lesson finished, we all had dinner and went back to our rooms. I loved the shared bath, and would have liked to go there again. But unfortunately, the reservations were full.

I lay on my bed and started rummaging through the romance novels I'd sneaked in from home, and amongst them, I found a book with a cover I'd become very familiar with. It was the Dark Covenant, which

I had been instructed to keep with me at all times. I'd tried to make sure to store it properly, but somehow ended up putting it in with all the other novels.

Cyrus and Larna would get mad at me if they found out...

I tried reading it for the first time in a while, but because I hadn't summoned my Dark Familiar (Pochi, that is), the floating black letters didn't appear over the normal text of the book, which was a manual on basic magic... Or so I had heard from Maria and the others, since I couldn't read that either. It was still written in ancient script, after all.

Lately, things had started happening to me — such as finding a Dark Familiar and the Dark Covenant — that were straight from FL2's script. That had me worried, but now that I wasn't at the Ministry, I figured I could relax.

The protagonist (Maria) wasn't here at the castle, so the Assembly probably had nothing to do with the game. All that I had to worry about was avoiding any major screw-ups at the Assembly itself.

I was thinking about that and flipping through the covenant's pages when I heard a knock on the door. Anne had already gone to her room, so I put the book down and went to answer the door myself. I found Sophia waiting for me there.

Hm? I thought she wasn't able to get a reservation for the bath today, I thought to myself, confused, as I invited her inside.

"I am sorry for intruding all of a sudden," she said with a bow.

I personally was the intruding-all-of-a-sudden type, but it was rare for her to show up without saying so beforehand. *I have a lot to learn from her,* I thought, seeing as she was an example of good upbringing with her respectful apology. *If I were a bit more like Sophia, maybe Mother wouldn't scold me as much.*

“Don’t worry, I was just reading to pass the time,” I told her with a smile. “Did you come for any reason in particular?”

“Indeed. I wanted to invite you to tomorrow’s morning tea party.”

“A *morning* tea party?” I asked, confused. I had never heard anything like that — tea parties usually took place in the afternoon.

“Yes. I found a wonderful spot near the room where I am staying. When the morning sun shines on it, the greenery around it sparkles, and it feels like a place from a fairy tale. I wanted to have tea with you there so that you could witness that beautiful sight,” she said with eyes full of excitement. She was the type of girl to make an invitation like that, since she liked fairy tales just as much as she liked romance novels.

I agreed immediately. After all, I was a girl as well. Having a tea party in a gorgeous fairy-tale-like place got me excited too. The starry sky didn’t have a single cloud, so the sky on the next day would also probably be clear. No reason to delay our tea party.

Sophia would be handling the preparations, and all I had to do was to get up slightly earlier than usual and go to her room.

We decided the time for our meeting, she went back to her room, and I lost no time before getting in bed, seeing that I’d have to get up early. As I was close to falling asleep, I wondered who else would be coming along.

I should have asked Sophia about that... I thought, but only for a second. Very soon, all of my thoughts disappeared, giving way to dreams.

Asking Anne to help me make sure I got out of bed in time paid off. If it hadn’t been for her, I wouldn’t have made it.

I was still drowsy, but Anne was already working at full speed to help me prepare to reach Sophia in time. I really owed a lot to my diligent maid.

I knocked on Sophia's door, and she immediately opened it, smiling and completely ready to go.

"Good morning, Lady Katarina. I am so happy that you could join me today," she said with an elegant curtsy.

"Thank you for inviting me," I said while doing the same.

Sophia then showed me to the place where we would be holding our tea party.

"Over here," she said, leading me with an unusually fast stride to an indoor garden near her room.

The place reminded me of a forest. The plants, rather than being neatly trimmed into shape, looked as if they had been allowed to grow as they wanted. The morning sun was shining in through the leaves, creating the beautiful sight that Sophia had told me about the day before.

I stared at it, moved by how magical it looked, and Sophia looked at me with a smile that seemed to say "*What did I tell you?*" before leading me further inside the garden.

"We will be having the tea party here," she said, showing me a smallish table and some chairs that had been set up there. The table, probably prepared by Sophia, was already set for tea.

Wait, why are there three chairs?

"Will there be three of us?" I asked her.

"Actually, I wanted to invite my brother as well, as a surprise. Would that be a problem?" she replied, her voice suddenly lowered. Sophia's attachment to her brother was as cute as always.

"Of course not! But if you're enjoying time with Nicol, wouldn't I be a bother?"

"Not at all! He will greatly enjoy having you here too," she said, vigorously shaking her head.

And so, we both went together to his room.

"By the way, why did you want to make it a surprise?" I asked her, and she blushed a little.

"Big Brother has been very busy preparing for the Assembly, and I would like to give him a pleasant surprise to get his mind off work."

Sophia was such a good sister... She prepared a tea party in such a beautiful place just to please her brother!

Maybe I should do something like that for Keith, to show how grateful I am to him.

Sophia knocked on the door of her brother's room.

"Big Brother! It is me, Sophia," she called, but we heard no response.

"Usually he is already up at this time..." she said, preoccupied, and knocked again.

This time, we heard a sluggish reply.

"...Yes, the door is open..."

That was definitely Nicol's voice, but I had never heard him speak like that. Maybe he wasn't a morning person?

Now that she had heard his groggy response, Sophia stepped through the door. I stood there, unsure whether I should follow her, but she dragged me inside.

I was expecting to find Nicol sleepy... but instead, he seemed to be actually *asleep*. He was sitting back on the couch with his eyes closed, wearing a loosely fitting nightshirt.

“Normally, he would already be up. He must be very tired,” Sophia commented while looking at him worriedly.

He was staying in the castle just like us, but unlike us, who only had to study, he had to actually work. It must have been tough for him.

“Oh... I did not expect him to still be asleep. I wanted to invite him to have tea with Lady Katarina in that beautiful garden! Big Brother, please wake up!” she said, and reached for Nicol, but her hand stopped halfway. “Of course! Lady Katarina, please wake him up!” she said with the enthusiastic face of someone who just had the best idea ever.

“What? Why?”

“He would be very happy if you were the one to do it! He does not like mornings. Please!” she said, pulling me in front of him. *Come on! Do it!* her smiling face seemed to tell me.

Her eyes were so full of expectation that I couldn’t bring myself to refuse. Not that she had asked me for anything particularly difficult — I just had to wake up a person sleeping right in front of me.

I looked at him sleeping on the couch, and thought that he must really have a problem with getting up early if he didn’t wake up even with Sophia and I talking so much. When he replied to us earlier, he must have been talking in his sleep. Finding out that the “Alluring Count” had such a weakness was pretty funny.

This was the first time I had ever seen him sleeping... and he was really handsome. Apparently handsome people are even handsome when they’re asleep.

His eyelashes are so long... His lips are so shiny... His skin is so smooth...

I realized that if I kept staring at him so closely, I would fall prey to his legendary allure. I had to concentrate on my mission and

complete it as soon as possible. So I did my best not to give in to his charm and tried waking him up.

"Nicol, please wake up! Your lovely sister has a surprise for you!" I said, bending down slightly to shake his shoulders.

When I touched him, he finally came to and slowly opened his eyes. His dark eyes gazed up at me, looking even sexier than usual, maybe because of how sleepy he was. I thought I was going to be sucked into them.

"Nicol... Your sister has prepared a..." I tried to say, but his long arms suddenly grabbed mine, pulling me down.

"Eek!" I squealed in surprise, and felt my body bend even further.

I'm going to fall!

I closed my eyes, preparing for the impact with the floor, but... *Hm? Is this the floor? It's not hard, and it's also kind of warm...*

I opened my eyes and saw Nicol's beautiful face very close to mine.

"Wha?!"

Surprised, I tried to jump back, but my body didn't move an inch.

I tried looking around to figure out what was going on, and I realized that I was lying on Nicol, and he was holding me tightly in his arms!

Why?! How did this happen?! I asked myself, panicking at the sight of Nicol's sexy features so close to my eyes.

And then, still looking sleepy, he touched my cheek with his hand. I twitched, but, apparently not even noticing, he started gently caressing my increasingly hot face.



What exactly is going on? I thought, and that was when I heard him whisper as if to himself.

“...What a pleasant dream.”

So he thought that this whole thing was just a dream. He was caressing me so kindly, so lovingly... Could it be that, in his dream, he was mistaking me for the girl he liked? In that case, all I had to do was tell him who I was, and the whole thing would stop.

“Nicol, it’s me, Katarina. It’s Katarina Claes,” I said desperately as I looked into his eyes. But his expression just turned into a sweet, satisfied smile as he pulled me even closer!

H-He didn’t understand me! This is bad! Bad bad bad! I’m being charmed so much that I can feel steam coming out of my face!

Unable to resist any longer, I closed my eyes, and then felt something soft touch my cheek.

This feeling... Is this...?

“I love you,” he whispered into my ear with a voice as sweet as honey...

With that, I promptly lost consciousness.

★★★★★

I, Nicol Ascatt, just had the most wonderful dream.

In this dream, I witnessed something that I could never hope to see in reality — waking up to find Katarina in my room, smiling down at me.

I have been in love with Katarina Claes for almost ten years now, but I have no intention of confessing this to her. The reason for this is that she is engaged to Jeord, third-born prince of Sorcié and childhood friend of mine.

I could have ignored that fact if it had been a purely political engagement, but Jeord clearly loved Katarina from the bottom of his heart. After witnessing his feelings for her for so long, I could never consider taking her from him.

Therefore, I buried my love deep in my heart, knowing that I also had to find a spouse to properly succeed my father as count. However, dreams like this were proof enough that I was still under Katarina's spell, and that I was still very far from forgetting about her.

I pulled on her soft, supple arms and drew her closer to me. Of course, had that been reality, I could have never done something so audacious. But it was only a dream, so I had no reason to stop.

During the day I could only gaze upon her lovely face from afar, so I took the opportunity to enjoy having it so close to me. I looked at her clear blue eyes, her plush lips, and her pale, smooth cheeks, now slightly tinted red. I moved my hand towards her face, and as I caressed her, she blushed even more and her eyes became slightly teary.

It was an expression I had never seen on her face, but an ever so lovely one.

What a wonderful dream. I wish I could never wake up, I thought, and the dream then became even better.

"Nicol... It's me, Katarina," I heard her call to me with her adorable voice, stating, for some mysterious reason, her own name.

Oh, my lovely Katarina, how could I ever not know who you are? How could I possibly mistake you for anybody else, even as far as you may be from me? I have looked at you for so, so long...

The face reflected in her blue eyes belonged to none other than me, and this alone made me ecstatic.

It is only a dream... I should take as much advantage of it as I can.

I placed my lips on her beautiful cheek, and, while keeping her in my arms, I whispered those words that I never could have spoken in reality.

“I love you.”

Hearing this, she leaned harder against me, as if she had no energy left in her body.

We were as close together as we could ever be, and I felt her softness, especially around where my chest was, but every last inch of her body was soft and warm. That sensation felt scarily real, as did the pleasant smell that reached my nose every time I breathed in.

Her softness, her warmth, her smell... Have dreams always been so realistic?

As soon as I thought this, the fog that hung over my brain quickly cleared.

I opened my eyes fully and looked around, finding myself in a guest room in the castle, with Katarina in my arms. My sister, Sophia, was standing close to us with her mouth hanging open in disbelief — so I hurriedly tried to get up without dropping Katarina.

Despair threatened to overwhelm me as I realized what had happened, but I had to tend to Katarina first. I slowly pulled her up and laid her down on the couch before turning to look at Sophia, who was still frozen still.

“Sophia, would you explain to me what has happened?”

She finally started moving again, and her face clearly showed her embarrassment.

“I had found a wonderful place for a tea party and had invited Lady Katarina there, and then I thought to invite you too, as a surprise. We came here and found you asleep, and I believed that you would be happy to be woken up by Lady Katarina, so I asked her to do it...”

Oh, I see now. Sophia had done this with my best interests in mind, but...

"It is not very proper for young ladies to enter the room of a sleeping man," I warned her.

"...But you told us that we could come in..." she replied.

I had probably invited them in while I was still half-asleep. Mornings had never been my forte, but lately things had gotten even worse. I was so busy, and therefore tired, that I let my guard slip... Anyway, while that was a problem, there was a much more pressing issue that I needed confirmation on.

"So, Katarina and you stepped in here, and she tried to wake me up... and then?"

Since I still wasn't completely awake, I was uncertain of my memories. The things that I had done believing I was dreaming... How much of them had I actually done in reality? I could tell that I had pulled her into my arms, but it was crucial that I knew how much of the rest I had done too.

"Well, you see..." she started speaking, fumbling for words. Her face grew redder with each detail, up to the point where it seemed that it would catch on fire.

This time, after she finished, I had reason enough to properly despair. All of the things that I had done in what I believed to be my dream, I had actually done to the real Katarina.

Hugging her, caressing and then kissing her cheek, and even whispering my love to her... these were all things that I thought I could only get away with in a dream.

I was so shocked that I could no longer even think anymore. However, I had no time to lose. I had to decide what to do next.

"Sophia," I said.

“Yes?” she said, anxiously straightening up, her face still red and frowning. She probably thought that what happened was ultimately her fault.

“You and Katarina were coming to my room to invite me to the tea party, but she felt unwell and passed out along the way, which is why you brought her to your room to rest. Am I right?”

“Wh-What...? Big Brother?” she asked me, confused, but I kept on talking.

“What happened here shall be kept secret. This risks compromising both me and, especially, Katarina herself. We could even be ostracized from noble society as a whole.”

“You really think that could happen?” she said, her face pale with fear.

Of course I doubted that things would take such a disastrous turn, but, just to be sure, I made sure to overstate the gravity of the situation.

“Yes. Which is why you two, today, have not seen me. Katarina passed out before she could ever reach my room. If she believes that anything else has happened, tell her that it was just a dream. She is the kind of girl to believe that.”

“I understand,” she said, nodding.

We stealthily carried Katarina to Sophia’s room, and I went back to mine.

I had made the most careless mistake of my whole life, but at least the only witness was my obedient, understanding sister. And I believed that the other interested party, Katarina, could easily be fooled into believing our story.

Some would say that Katarina was too kind to doubt people, others would say that she was too obtuse. Whatever the case, if Sophia and I both agreed on the story, she would probably believe it.

I sat back on the couch where I had been sleeping and let out a big sigh. It was an exhausting morning, but I couldn't fall back asleep even if I tried.

I looked at my arms, which I had used to embrace Katarina. I could almost feel the sensation of her soft, warm body against mine.

And that pleasant smell, and the smoothness of her face... I placed a hand on my lips. The white, smooth cheek I had kissed was, without any doubt, Katarina's. The more I thought about it the more the memories came back, incredibly vivid...

Realizing that I was never going to calm down at this rate, I left my room to start work early.

★★★★★

I was in a familiar place. Pink walls, a black table, and a metal-frame bed with azure duvets and blue cushions.

In my previous life I'd spent a lot of time in that room, as it belonged to Acchan, my dearest friend.

“Okay, let’s continue,” I heard myself say in Acchan’s voice.

I must be inside Acchan again, I thought as if it were a completely natural thing.

I’d already had dreams like this a few times, and they were always an opportunity to gather information on *Fortune Lover II!*

I was now fully focused (in the dream, at least), ready to watch as Acchan played to learn as much as possible about the game.

She turned on the TV and the game's opening sequence started playing. She selected the "Continue" option. Jeord appeared on the screen with an overly sweet smile on his face.

"Should you need anything, just let me know," his line read, followed by Maria's internal monologue.

"Prince Jeord's approach has never been this overt... And to think that I'm staying in the same castle as him! The thought alone makes me blush..."

Maria staying in the same castle as Jeord?

"No! Now I have to concentrate on my work at the Assembly!" came the second line of monologue, as I was still trying to figure out what she meant.

I didn't think Maria was supposed to join the Assembly... But the next line of monologue clearly read *"The Assembly begins!"*

Excuse me, but...

"What does this mean?!" I screamed, jumping up, finding myself in an unfamiliar room.

Where am I? I thought while scanning my surroundings. That was when I saw Sophia, staring at me with her eyes wide open with shock.

"L-Lady Katarina... is everything alright?"

"Sophia? What is this place?" I asked, and she kindly explained what had happened so far.

It seemed that she had invited me to a morning tea party, but I felt unwell and lost consciousness. I say "it seemed" because the dream I just had surprised me so much that the memories of what had happened before that had gotten hazy.

I also kind of remembered that Sophia wanted to invite her brother, and we made for his room... According to her, I passed out before we could reach it, and she called a servant to carry me into her room, where I slept for a while until, just now, I woke up.

I couldn't really remember, but anyway, I thanked Sophia and went back to my room. I had to think about that dream.

I lay on my bed and immediately started thinking back on what I had just seen.

In the game, Maria said that she was going to take part in the Assembly, but I hadn't heard anything like that from her back at the Ministry. She was the protagonist, sure, but she was a commoner, so there was no reason for her to take part in an event for nobles.

I wondered what that meant. Could it be that my dream wasn't real? Maybe I just had it because I was so stressed.

After thinking about it for a while, I realized that I didn't have enough information to make predictions at this point, so I just stopped.

No point in thinking about things I don't understand!

I was ready to go to take the morning lessons, which I honestly wasn't looking forward to. But since I'd passed out, I was told that I could skip them and rest in my room until the afternoon.

"Young miss, how do you feel?" Anne asked as she came to check on me.

"Hm... I feel totally fine, really," I said while lying on the bed.

Sophia said that I passed out because I was feeling unwell, but I felt fine, so the whole thing was a mystery to me.

"I see. Still, it would be better for you to rest, at least for the remainder of the morning, just in case."

“Okay,” I replied, turning around in my bed. Just lying there doing nothing was boring, but I didn’t want to think about difficult stuff either.

Oh, I know!

“Anne, get me one of my romance novels!” I said, planning to read one to recharge, but she looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

“Young miss, please rest properly.”

“But at times like these, I can’t get sleepy...”

It was so weird that I couldn’t fall asleep now that I was in bed, yet during lessons I always had trouble staying awake.

Anne let out a small sigh. “I will brew some hot tea then. Please drink that and rest.”

“Yay! And bring snacks too!” I said, jumping out of bed.

“Please stop jumping and calm down,” she complained.

Moments later, she came back with some delicious tea and my favorite snacks.

“This is wonderful... But you know, lately I’ve been so busy with lessons that having tea in the morning feels weird,” I said with my mouth full of snacks.

“You have really been working hard since coming here to the castle,” Anne replied with a smile.

“Well... the same goes for everyone,” I said, slightly embarrassed at being praised, which wasn’t something I was used to.

I felt closer to all of my friends while staying at the castle, and so it was easier to work hard. I was never the most diligent girl, but I worked well if everybody around me did the same. This stay at the castle, however, would be over soon.

“The Assembly is getting close...”

I had to put what I had learned at the seminar to use and do my best not to embarrass myself in front of all those important people from other countries.

“By the way, what’s the Assembly like, anyway?” I asked Anne, who looked bewildered by that question.

“Is that not what you have been studying at this seminar?”

“Yes, but... I still haven’t heard from someone who has actually attended, so I was wondering what it actually looks like. Have you ever been to the Assembly?”

“I am not high-ranked enough to attend it myself, and I have always been your personal maid since reaching adulthood, so I have not accompanied anyone there either. But I believe that your father and mother have participated in it in the past.”

That was reasonable, since only high-ranking nobles and their personal servants attended the Assembly. Anne came from a baron’s family, and had only been my personal maid since then, so she couldn’t have attended.

The security at the castle was so tight that going back home just to ask my parents for their opinion was too much of a hassle...

“Could you not ask Prince Jeord or Prince Alan? The Assembly has not been held in our country in ten years, but perhaps they have attended it in one of the other countries as part of the royal family,” Anne smartly advised as if she had read my mind.

“You’re right! I could just ask them!”

Anne is so smart! I decided that the next time I saw either Jeord or Alan, I would ask them about the Assembly.

I finished my tea, Anne put me back to bed, and I rested quietly until afternoon.

Once fully rested (even though I was feeling great to begin with) I was ready to go to the afternoon lessons, when Jeord walked in.

“I have heard that you were unwell. Have you recovered?” he asked worriedly.

“Yes! I’m all fine,” I replied briskly, and he seemed relieved.

“You have been putting in a lot of effort lately, so you must have been tired. Make sure you do not overdo it,” he said, sounding like Anne had earlier.

“Yes,” I replied, blushing again at being praised, and then I remembered my conversation with Anne. “Prince Jeord, you have participated in the Assembly in other countries before, right? How was it?” I asked, and he laughed.

“I am used to it by now, but... Katarina, you certainly change topics out of the blue. Why do you ask?”

I told him about what Anne and I had talked about earlier.

“Indeed, there are many things about the Assembly which you could not understand from a simple theoretical explanation,” he said, and then thought for a while before going on. “...However, the Assembly I attended was in another country, and one that, being the birthplace of our queen dowager, was on very friendly terms with us. Owing to this, the Assembly played out relatively smoothly. I believe that the country in which it is held and the people who participate in it make all the difference. In particular, this year, there will be more people than usual.”

"A lot of people from other countries are going to come because our country is so safe, right?" I said, repeating what I had learned in the past few days.

Jeord gave me a smile of approval. "Exactly. Our kingdom is the wealthiest and most advanced country in the region, and therefore more people than usual come here, trying to gather knowledge that they could make use of at home," he said.

Then he paused, and his face turned slightly dark. "The more people attend, the higher the risk of problematic individuals joining. I believe that none would be so foolish as to harm a high-ranking noble such as yourself, but I have heard that, in other countries, people of lower rank sometimes engage in acts of violence. I wish I could stay by your side for the duration of the Assembly, but unfortunately, I will not be allowed to. Please be careful."

"...I will," I replied, taken aback by the unusual seriousness of his words.

As I nodded, he went back to his usual smile and patted my head like one would to a child. It was nothing like his recent romantic advances. It felt pleasant and warm.

It seemed that the Assembly was a much more complex and dangerous thing than I believed.

Immediately after that, Mary and the others came to my room and we all went to afternoon lessons together.

Chapter 3: The International Assembly

“Lord Cezar, it’s dangerous to stand on the back of the ship like that! Please go back inside!”

I was on the deck, leaning on the railing and looking out at the sea. I sighed, taking care not to be heard.

Sorcié had lent us this ship, and it was much better than the battered, flimsy ones from our country. Even the railing at the back was solid. I could lean against it all I wanted and it wouldn’t be dangerous... But what would *they* know? These people had never seen any country but theirs, and knew nothing about the world.

Still, pointing that out would have just created needless friction, so I obliged and went back to the room that had been prepared for me.

“Welcome back, Lord Cezar,” Janne, my servant and childhood friend, told me as soon as I stepped inside.

“Come on, Janne, don’t call me that when it’s just the two of us. You know what I think about that kind of formality,” I told him, annoyed, and his stiff expression turned back into his usual grin.

“I know, sure, but I’d better practice. You don’t want me screwing up in public, do you?” he said with the informal register I was so used to hearing him use.

“You’re not the type to screw up anyway,” I rebutted.

As someone who’d known him for years, I had to think he was joking. I was biased because we were childhood friends, but even ignoring that bias, I still considered him an extremely talented man. I couldn’t recall a single time he had ever screwed up something. He was probably acting like a humble servant just to make fun of me.

"You've got a point. I, the great Lord Janne, know nothing but success," he said with a grin, confirming my theory. He made himself sound insufferable, but he was right.

"That's great. Incidentally, wouldn't the great Lord Janne pretend to be a Dahl? Bearing that surname is too burdensome for me," I said jokingly.

"My liege," he said, going back to his ridiculously formal speech while theatrically dropping his shoulders, "I could never. That most blessed of names belongs to the royal family, and as such, you shall be the one bearing it, O Lord Cezar Dahl."

I was expecting that sort of reply, so I just sighed and forgot about it.

Indeed, that was my name: Cezar Dahl, Prince of Ethenell.

I still wasn't used to it, though. Just a few months ago I was still just Cezar the mercenary, wandering from one country to the next.

My destiny changed when Ethenell's lewd king became interested in my mom, who was part of a foreign traveling company of entertainers, and forced her to live in the palace. He eventually got bored with her, but by that point, she was already pregnant with me and therefore couldn't afford to leave.

Despite being alone in a country she didn't even know that well, Mom did her best to bring me up by herself. *"When you grow up, let's leave this place and travel the world together,"* she always used to say. As a former traveling entertainer, she still hadn't given up on seeing the world.

I wondered if life in that unfamiliar country was what weakened her. Disease took her away from me when I was still six years old, and then I was alone.

The palace was full of women and children, and nobody cared about a little orphan like me. I was at the epicenter of the country's nobility, and yet I risked starving to death.

Yet despite everything, someone helped me: my half-brother, who is now the King of Ethenell. He was nine years older than me, and had therefore just become an adult — a young but talented one. His mother was a very well-known noble, and he was already one of the best candidates for succeeding his father as king. He was like someone from a completely different world.

One day, when I still didn't even know that he existed, I was passed out from hunger on the street in front of the palace. He found me and started taking care of me. His mother disapproved, but he insisted on becoming my guardian.

He entrusted me to his loyal governess, hired an instructor to teach me all that I would need to thrive as royalty, and sometimes even tutored me himself.

He told me that he didn't have any brothers from his mother, and he'd had few opportunities to spend time with his half-brothers, which is why he treated me so well. "I'm so happy to have you with me, Cezar," he'd always say.

Once I came of age, I arrogantly said that I wanted to leave the palace, where I didn't feel at home. He supported me even then, saying that it was my life and that I was free to do what I pleased with it.

So, at the age of fifteen, I left behind the palace and the title of prince, traveling the world simply as Cezar. The youngest son of the governess who brought me up, Janne, came with me. Allegedly it was to look after me but, knowing him, it was just to have fun.

It was harsh out there, but everything was new and interesting. I had some money with me, but it eventually ran out. So I became a mercenary, because the pay was good.

My brother had taught me how to fight with the sword back at the palace, and I had a natural knack for it to begin with. I quickly made a name for myself as Cezar the mercenary, and was able to earn enough to live freely.

More than ten years passed, and I thought I'd just be a mercenary until the day I died. But one day, while on a trivial mission back in Ethenell, I heard the news that the brother who had saved me had now become king.

So he finally did it, I thought and, curious, went to visit him... Little did I know that doing so would change my life once again.

My brother had become king, yes, but all around him were nothing but foes.

He wanted to do something about the terrible conditions in which our father had left the kingdom, but in doing so, he had ended up antagonizing the siblings who wanted the crown, the nobles' concubines, and even his own mother.

After seeing that, I couldn't go back to being a mercenary. He had saved me, and now I wanted to return the favor. I would become his best, most loyal ally.

My brother seemed sorry to see me renounce my freedom to help him, but he made me work day and night until I could fit back into my role as prince. I was planning to stay by his side as nothing more than a vassal, so that felt like too big of a burden for me. However he insisted, saying that having that title would "make all the difference," and I begrudgingly accepted.

This is how I ended up participating in the International Assembly, held in Sorcié, as the prince representing Ethenell. Rumors had it

that Sorcié had flourished even more since the crowning of the current king, so I looked forward to learning all I could from my experience in the kingdom.

I'll have to play my part, fool everyone, and take in as much information as possible. All for Brother.

★★★★★

"Ugh, I'm so bored!" I said while lazily stretching out in my room within the castle. "The weather's so nice. I really want to go for a walk..." I muttered while looking out the window.

"You cannot," Anne immediately replied. "Dignitaries from other countries are visiting the castle, and you have been told not to walk around needlessly for the duration of the day."

To be precise, the Assembly was going to start on the next day. But since many of the participants were coming from so far away, the castle started accepting them as guests this morning.

Some of us were supposed to welcome the foreign representatives, and those who weren't were told to simply wait in their rooms. In particular, Jeord and Keith had told me not to leave my room for any reason, to avoid running into — or causing — any problems.

I would have been happy to read indoors if it were raining, but the clear blue sky I could see through the window looked too beautiful to stay indoors.

I can't see any important-looking people from the window, so I don't think anybody would notice if I just went to the nearby garden for a bit. Anne is so strict about this kind of stuff though...

I couldn't come up with any good excuse to leave the room, so I just read a book for a while. Anne was eventually convinced that I wouldn't do anything stupid, and went to have lunch early. She had lunch by herself, before me, so that she could accompany me when it was time for me to eat.

“I will call another maid to look after you while I am away,” she said, but I quickly refused.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine by myself. Everyone’s probably busy preparing for the Assembly right now anyway. I’ll just be here reading,” I said.

“I will be back as soon as possible,” she said, looking a bit worried as she left for the servants’ dining hall.

This is my chance! I can go to the garden! But if I walk out of the door, someone will probably see me...

So naturally, I jumped out of the window. It was a piece of cake, since my room was on the ground floor.

I’m just going to take a little stroll under the sun. I’ll go back to my room in no time and Anne will be none the wiser.

“This is great!” I said to myself after filling my lungs with the fresh outdoor air.

It was pleasantly warm, and the garden (as expected, since this was the castle) was wonderfully cared for. There were no flowers, but the lawn was neatly trimmed and framed by rows of beautiful trees.

I crouched and touched the ground, rejoicing at how good the grass felt to the touch. How could I resist the temptation of this lush greenery after all that time spent studying in the castle?

And luckily, there was nobody around. I laid down with my back on the grass to better enjoy its softness and smell.

So cozy... I thought to myself as I stretched out.

As the warm sun shone over me, I started getting sleepy and eventually closed my eyes...

“Hey, are you okay?”

I heard a voice coming from above. As I opened my eyes, I saw an unfamiliar man looking perplexedly at me.

“Y-Yes, I am,” I replied, still half asleep.

“Oh, so you aren’t unconscious. That’s good. How do you feel? Do you think you can walk?” he asked me in a worried tone.

He probably thinks I fell down because I was feeling sick! I was just taking a nap, but I ended up making someone worry...

“Well, yes, but I think you’re misunderstanding something. The grass was so soft that I just wanted to lie down on it, and when I did, it felt so pleasant that I fell asleep... I’m feeling perfectly fine!” I said, shaking my fists to emphasize my point.

He was visibly shocked. “So you didn’t pass out or anything. You were just... sleeping?”

“Exactly!”

“Unless I’m mistaken, you’re in the castle’s garden, though...”

“I know that, of course! But I couldn’t resist this wonderful grassy turf,” I explained, and he started laughing without restraint.

This time, I was the one visibly shocked. *I wonder what’s so funny.*

Once I had regained my composure, I looked at the man more carefully and realized how handsome he was. He was tanned and muscular, and had black hair and eyes.

Oh, the wild and handsome type. That’s rare around these parts.

At first I thought he was scary, but now, as his slightly crooked teeth showed through while he laughed, he looked like a youthful, approachable person.

I kept observing him, and he eventually stopped laughing.

“Sorry, sorry, I shouldn’t have laughed that much. There I was thinking that you had lost consciousness or something, and then I

hear you explain that you were just sleeping, and for the funniest reason too! Hahaha!” he said, breaking into laughter again.

It was no wonder he was surprised — the average person doesn’t really sleep in the castle’s garden.

“...Don’t worry. If anything, I’m sorry for choosing a place to sleep that could cause misunderstandings,” I apologized, and he laughed again.

“Anyway, you are from this country, right? Are you one of the castle’s servants?” he asked while looking at my clothes.

Since I wasn’t supposed to leave my room today, I was wearing a very simple, comfortable dress, not too different from what a servant would wear. And now it was also covered in grass to boot.

As for him, he didn’t look like anyone I’d ever seen in Sorcié, so he was probably from another country. The last thing I wanted was for foreigners to think that the noble ladies of this kingdom wear clothes this plain and sleep on the ground, so I decided to lie.

“Y-Yes, I am!” I said, and only then realized that this could get me into trouble if we ran into each other during the Assembly. “And who may you be?” I asked him.

“I’m Cezar, a servant from Ethenell,” he replied with a smile.

Great! He’s a servant too. Well, he actually is a servant. I’m not. But still, this means that he probably won’t take part in the actual Assembly, since that’s only for nobles and Sorcié servants, or so I heard.

“My name is Katarina,” I told him, relieved.

“Nice to meet you, Katarina,” he said, giving me his hand. I took it, and we exchanged a firm handshake.

His hand is so tough. He must do a lot of manual labor.

"I just reached the castle and was taking a look around. I must say I'm impressed," he said.

"Oh, really?" I said. I had never been outside of Sorcié, and this was the only castle I'd ever seen in my life.

"How's the work here?" he asked with a grin.

I was surprised by his question, until I remembered that I was pretending to be a servant. "It's not bad," I replied.

I didn't know what the actual servants thought about working here, but I'd heard Anne mention that it seemed like a good workplace, so I guess I technically wasn't lying.

"Is work tough where you are from?" I asked, noticing the jealous look on his face.

"You bet," he said with a laugh. "A new king just took the throne in Ethenell, and the whole place is as busy as it's ever been. It's not an easy job, but I hope things will get better for everyone eventually."

I remembered hearing something about the recently crowned king, and how much that had shaken up the country, during the seminar. This must have been hard for a servant like Cezar.

"Why don't you rest on the grass too? It feels really good," I suggested, thinking that he may be tired, but he started laughing once again.

"That sounds wonderful, but if I got covered in grass minutes after reaching the castle, I wouldn't hear the end of it from my friends," he said, looking at how dirty my dress had become.

He had a point, and I realized that if I didn't clean myself up before going back, I wouldn't hear the end of it from Anne either.

"You're right... I should do something about these clothes too," I said, and started brushing off the grass as best as I could.

This made him laugh again. *He really laughs a lot, this Cezar.*

But he helped me clean up, even asking permission before touching my clothes. He didn't look the part, but he had a gentlemanly side to him. All in all, he was a mysterious guy.

"Cezar!" I heard someone shout when we were almost finished with my dress.

"Oh, I guess I spent too much time relaxing. Someone's come for me," he said, and his shoulders dropped a little bit. "See you around, Katarina," he said with a smile before walking away, waving at me.

He had left a deep impression on me, maybe because of how unique he was, or maybe because he was from another country.

Anyway, even though he said he'd "see me around," I figured that we wouldn't see each other again. After all, starting the next day, I'd be busy attending the Assembly.

He was a good guy, so I was sad about that. I finished cleaning up and started walking back to my room, and that was when I noticed someone standing beyond the rows of trees.

It was a familiar someone — someone who shouldn't have been there.

That dream I had... was that more than just a dream? I thought, and started running towards that person.

★★★★★

"Cezar, you had me worried. You said you just wanted to take a quick look around, but you sure took your sweet time," Janne scolded me.

I was the one at fault, so I apologized. "Sorry, that was my plan, but I met someone so interesting that I ended up chatting for a while."

“You? Finding other people interesting? Now that’s unusual. What made this person so interesting, anyway?” he asked, staring at me curiously.

I explained what I had just seen, and he laughed almost as much as I had.

“Wow, sleeping in the castle’s garden while there are foreign dignitaries all over the place? Talk about fearless,” he said between laughs. “That guy is wasted as a servant in this peaceful castle. He should be a mercenary or something. Actually, you should have scouted him,” he said half-jokingly.

“Unfortunately that was no guy — it was a girl. I’m not so sure she’d last long as a mercenary,” I replied, and he looked back at me in disbelief.

“A girl?! That’s even crazier,” he commented. After thinking for a while, he said, “Then you should have scouted her as your wife.”

“Huh?”

Why’s he talking about wives all of a sudden?

“I mean, it’s the first time you’ve ever shown any interest in a woman,” he said casually. “You’ve played around a lot, but you’ve never had a proper fiancée. That would be fine for a mercenary, but for a prince? You can’t stay single forever. What would the people think?”

He did have a point, but it was just annoying for him to say that out loud.

“I just said she was *interesting*, not that I’d fallen madly in love with her.”

Maybe I can’t stay single forever, but do I really have to find a wife here and now?

“Let’s go back now,” Janne said, completely ignoring my displeasure, and headed towards the room that we’d been assigned.

Sheesh, I was having so much fun and he had to go and ruin it. I wish I could speak with that Katarina girl again — that’d make me laugh.

I wondered how surprised she’d be once she saw me at the Assembly and found out that I’d lied about being a servant like her... But then again, would they really choose a girl like her, who takes naps on the ground, to wait on nobles?

Maybe I’d run into her again if I went back to that garden. Just thinking about that possibility brought my smile back.

Janne’s talk of marriage was an exaggeration, but I guess that I really do feel interested in her, even after just chatting for a short while, I thought to myself unconcernedly.

★★★★★

I kept running towards the figure I saw behind the trees.

“Lady Katarina?” called out a familiar voice that was full of surprise.

“Maria? What are you doing here?” I asked her, surprised as well.

She wasn’t supposed to be here, and I certainly didn’t expect to see her in those clothes. She was dressed as a maid.

“Did you quit the Magical Ministry to become a maid at the castle?”

“No, not at all, this dress is borrowed... I am just here on a mission for the Ministry,” she replied, lowering her voice.

“A mission?”

What kind of mission would require her to go to the castle dressed up as a maid?

“Well...” she started to explain.

"Hey, newcomer, come here. And make it quick," an old maid called with a menacing voice.

"Yes, ma'am!" she replied nervously, before whispering "I will see you later" to me and quickly walking towards the maid that had called for her.

So she's working as a maid as part of a Ministry mission... I thought, and then remembered what I recently saw while passed out.

In my dream I saw Maria, inside the game, say that she had to do her best at the Assembly. Since at the time she was nowhere near the castle, I assumed that it was just that: a dream.

But now she was here, and it looked like she would actually be working at the Assembly. This meant that this was part of the game's story, and the castle wasn't safe for me anymore.

I stood there for a while, shocked, before realizing that I'd better get back to my room. However, I was so busy thinking about what had just happened that I forgot that I wasn't supposed to leave my room, and went back in by casually walking through the door.

Apparently a lot more time had passed than I thought, because Anne was waiting to ambush me with a firm scolding.

I was in my room, worrying about how the Assembly was actually part of the game, when Keith stopped by to check whether I had been staying inside as instructed. Anne promptly informed him that I had not, so despite my best efforts to fool him, I was scolded again.

Once he was done with that, I told him about seeing Maria in maid clothes, and that she had talked about a mission for the Ministry. I wanted the opinion of someone smart.

"I wonder why the Ministry would ask her to work as a maid," I said.

"It's just a theory," he said, furrowing his brow, "but I doubt that the Ministry asked her to actually *work* as a maid. She is probably just supposed to pretend to do so in order to investigate something within the castle."

Keith's theory sounded very convincing. Maybe when Maria talked about her "work at the Assembly" in my dream, she meant this mission.

"But if they chose a newcomer like Maria for a mission like this..." Keith murmured by himself with a preoccupied expression on his face.

"What's that?" I asked him.

"No, it's nothing. You just stay here and rest in preparation for tomorrow," he said, brushing off my question and then going back to his own room to prepare as well.

There only was one day left. The Assembly would take place with all nobles of the same rank gathered in separate open areas.

After the relief of thinking that the Assembly had nothing to do with FL2, knowing that I had likely been wrong and that I would have to worry about the Catastrophic Bad Ends completely ruined my mood.

But just worrying about it without doing anything wouldn't solve my problems. It was time to call the Katarinas inside my head for a meeting.

Please assemble for today's meeting of the Katarinas.

Meeting chairwoman: Katarina Claes.

Meeting representative: Katarina Claes.

Meeting secretary: Katarina Claes.

“The first and only item on today’s agenda is the discussion of the International Assembly, and, in light of the fact that it is part of the scenario of the game known as *Fortune Lover II*, whether it could include some game-relevant events.”

“Yes. It could be a romantic spy story, for example. That would be nice.”

“Nice indeed! A change of scenery is the perfect occasion for love to blossom!”

“Just imagine this: one of the love interests, made bolder by their unusual surroundings, looks at the protagonist and tells her ‘I won’t let you go back home by yourself. Not tonight.’”

“But *Fortune Lover* was rated for all ages, so I don’t think they’d go that far...”

“But this is the sequel! So maybe now it’s rated M because of some new raunchy stuff.”

“Oh my! I’m still too pure for this kind of—”

“Please, everyone! You are forgetting what we are actually supposed to discuss! How can you be so nonchalant about this whole matter? Our issue with the Assembly is not whether love is waiting for Maria, but whether doom is waiting for Katarina!”

“Y-Yes, you are right...”

“Sorry...”

“I’m glad you understand. Now, let’s think of how we should act once the Assembly starts.”

“We can’t just not show up and go back home... right?”

“Definitely not.”

“But we’ve never played the sequel, so we don’t even know what kind of events we should avoid if we don’t want to run into the bad ends.”

“Unfortunately, that’s true.”

“For the time being, I think we should try to stay close to the love interests and rival characters as much as possible.”

“So you mean that the only way for Katarina to end the Assembly without any problems is to get help from her friends?”

“If that is the case, making some major mistake as a normal noble lady would be even more likely than running into one of the game’s bad ends...”

“Unfortunately, that’s also true.”

“So, what should we do?”

“Be a good, ladylike girl?”

“That’s the least specific idea I’ve ever heard...”

“But that’s all I can come up with!”

“Three heads should be better than one! Why can’t we come up with any useful solutions?”

“Technically we’re all inside a single head though. And not a particularly brilliant one either.”

“...You’re right.”

“...Excuse me, may I...?”

“Go ahead, Katarina.”

“I wonder if Katarina even takes part in the Assembly at all in FL2”

“What do you mean?”

“According to what we know so far, Katarina is supposed to be infiltrating the Ministry undercover, but she’s not a noble lady anymore. So why would she be at the Assembly?”

“That’s right!”

“So, I think that there are no Katarina-related events awaiting. We should just be concentrating on avoiding screw-ups.”

“Katarina... I didn’t know you were so smart...”

“Hehe, how do you think I survived FL1? I’m a genius!”

“Haha, that’s a bit much. So, in conclusion, even if the events at the Assembly are part of the game, they won’t affect Katarina. We have nothing to fear! Let’s do our best at the Assembly.”

“Yeah!”

“Yes ma’am!”

And thus, the meeting of the Katarinas was dismissed. I realized that, even if FL2-related stuff were to happen, it couldn’t be a problem for me. And so I effortlessly fell asleep.

“Young miss, please wake up. It is morning already.”

Like on most mornings, I woke up to Anne’s voice. I had slept well and was feeling full of energy. I started preparing, ready to give 100% at the Assembly.

Specifically, I had to go to the gathering for nobles with the rank of count or higher from all the participating countries. On the surface, the purpose was to strengthen international bonds, but the *real* purpose was searching for useful information about foreign powers and finding out what they thought of specific policies in order to get a diplomatic advantage. So I was told to only speak the bare

minimum and be very careful not to do anything that may put my country at a disadvantage.

I had always hated the gatherings of Sorcié nobles greeting each other with fake smiles, so having to withstand it on a much bigger scale and for a whole day was just the worst... But it was my duty, so I had no choice.

Thankfully, I had some reliable people to count on: Keith, Mary, Sophia, and Nicol. Jeord and Alan were at a different gathering reserved for royalty.

Let's do this! I told myself, and together with Keith, I went to the hall.

It was large and luxurious — even for the castle's standards — and a lot of people were already there. At a glance, it looked more or less like the princes' graduation party, but the attendees were completely different.

First of all, they *looked* different. Sorcié people all had white skin and, usually, slender bodies, but there were some guests with plump physiques and the same skin tone as the Japanese people from my previous life, and even some with brown skin and black hair, probably from the same country as Cezar.

These traits made them unusual enough, but their clothes were very peculiar too. When attending a formal event such as this one, Sorcié nobles would normally wear dresses similar to ones from European high society in the Middle Ages in my old world. But today, I could see all kinds of outfits throughout the hall. If I were to compare them to things that I'd seen in my previous life, some looked like southeast Asian traditional clothing, and some like Japanese kimono.

I was taken aback by the exotic scene in front of me. If this had been my old world I would have expected to hear lots of different languages, but it seemed that there only was a single one in use here, and nobody had trouble communicating.

I was extremely grateful for that. For someone who hates studying as much as I do, having to learn a foreign language would be downright hell. My first experiences barely avoiding catastrophe actually dated back to when I was a Japanese high school girl and had to take English tests.

I was reminiscing about that when Keith pulled my arm. “Big Sister, don your best smile. We’re going for a round of greetings,” he whispered to me.

I remembered that I was supposed to act like a perfect lady throughout the whole Assembly, so I pulled myself together, smiled, and followed my brother into the circle of people. Even with so many nobles from other countries, what we had to do was the same as always: smile, greet them, introduce ourselves, and chat for a while.

I had been told to be wary that some of them would try to use these little chats to gain sensitive information, but then again, I didn’t really know much about the kingdom’s policies. The more important thing was to be careful not to say too much about the Magical Ministry.

It was rare for such a high-ranking noble to work there, but that fact wasn’t confidential, and most of the guests here actually knew about it. I was surprised that people from other countries would know that about me, but Keith explained that it was normal for nobles to know things like that.

I was asked several times about what kind of place the Ministry was, but I just smiled and replied with, “I only help with some minor tasks, so I am not so sure.”

I actually owned a Dark Familiar and was currently deciphering the Dark Covenant, but obviously I couldn’t reveal those national secrets.

Everyone quickly believed me when I said that I didn’t do much work there, as that made perfect sense for a noble. When I first entered

the Ministry, the other employees thought that I was just there to kill the time until marriage, and the people that I was talking to now probably imagined something similar.

Using this strategy, I was able to get through all conversations without any problems.

Sophia and Mary, my beautiful friends, were on the receiving end of several advances. But since I wasn't anywhere near as beautiful as them, cursed as I was with the villainess look, ~~unfortunately~~ luckily that didn't happen to me.

I kept smiling and chatting, and eventually the day came to an end. I went back to my room and, absolutely exhausted, quickly changed into something more comfortable and jumped onto the bed.

Ugh, if I'm so tired after just the first day, this is going to be really hard... I thought with a sigh as I watched the trees outside the window turning red in the evening sun. Judging from my exhaustion I would have guessed that it was already late at night, but if the sun was still setting, that meant it was still earlier than when the seminar lessons usually finished. I thought those were hard, but this was on another level.

Hm? As I looked outside the window, I noticed the person I'd met on the previous day. My room was on the edge of the castle farthest from the entrance, so it was rare for people to come into the nearby garden. Seeing the same person there on two consecutive days was really weird.

Could it be that he came all the way here just to see me again?

If that were the case, it'd be rude not to go. Thankfully Anne had just left and I was alone in my room, so I could sneak out of the window.

I started walking towards Cezar, the handsome man I'd met the day before. He noticed me and turned around.

I still haven't said anything, and I wasn't that close to him, so how did he even notice me? Must be his wild survival instinct or something.

"Oh, I didn't think I'd really see you again," he told me with the same childish smile I'd seen on him last time.

"Did you come here just to see me?" I said, surprised that he'd really do something like that.

"Well, I was just taking a walk, and I figured that if I passed by this garden you'd be here too."

He hadn't come specifically to meet me, so there was no need for me to go out of the window to greet him. But now that I had, I couldn't just up and leave without at least exchanging a few words.

"Are you done with work for today?" I asked him.

"Yeah, I'm all done. What about you?"

"Me too. I'm finally finished, and I am so exhausted," I replied, with so much tiredness in my voice that it was obvious I wasn't lying.

"The people of the host country all have it tough, huh? From nobles to servants," he said with a laugh of sympathy.

"Aren't you tired?" I asked him, because, despite having had to work as a servant for a full day in a foreign country, he still looked full of energy.

"A little, yeah, but nothing major. I'm very resilient, and I've done harder jobs in the past."

"What kind of job did you do before becoming a servant?"

"I was a mercenary," he said casually.

"A *mercenary*?"

"Hm, I guess you aren't used to the concept here in your country. A mercenary is a soldier for hire. Sorcié has a proper army, so it figures

that there aren't any mercenaries, but in poorer countries a lot of people make a living like that."

Right, mercenary. Of course.

I'd heard about them in manga and novels in my previous life, but I didn't think that they existed in this world, as I'd never seen one before. Cezar was muscular enough that one could tell through his clothes, and that, together with the way he instinctively realized I was approaching him earlier, definitely made him seem like someone who fights for a living.

I was staring at him in awe, and he raised an eyebrow.

"Are you scared of me now?"

"Hngh?" I didn't understand what he meant, and the best response I could muster was a weird, meaningless sound.

"I mean, now that you know that I've made a living with a job as gruesome as that," he said with a slight grin.

I guess being a mercenary is gruesome, but...

"To be honest, there are probably some details I don't understand... but I don't think that you are a scary person," I said, and this time he raised both his eyebrows in surprise.

"Really?" he said with a laugh.

I wasn't scared of him, but I did have one doubt. "Why did you decide to stop being a mercenary and become a servant?"

Maybe it was too personal of a question to ask someone that I didn't know that well, but he seemed candid enough not to care. Indeed, he replied without thinking twice about it.

"My brother became the new head of his family, and since I owed him a lot, I decided to go help him."

I was expecting some deep, sad answer, but I was relieved to hear such a normal explanation. Still, the work of a mercenary and that of a servant were so different that changing jobs must have been tough, so I asked him about it.

"Yeah," he replied, "I feel much more constrained right now. Being a mercenary was way easier," he said with a nostalgic look in his eyes.

"But mercenaries fight in wars, right? Wouldn't that be much more dangerous than being a servant?" I asked, cocking my head to one side. Even if changing jobs was difficult, being a servant sounded easier than having to fight while risking one's life.

He nodded and started explaining. "It's true that as a servant you're not risking your life, but there's less freedom. As a mercenary you may be killed any day, but you're free. You don't serve any specific country or master, so you can go wherever you want. There's nothing tying you down, and you can travel as far as you please. That way of living suited me better," he said, and I noticed that his eyes were sparkling.

"Freedom..."

When he talked about it, the concept sounded so fascinating.

"Yes, freedom. I could decide what to do and where to go."

"So you've been to a lot of different places?"

"Yes, I've always loved traveling, so I've visited many countries."

"Oh? What kind of countries?" I asked, leaning forward with curiosity, which seemed to amuse him.

"You want to know?"

"Yes!"

"Okay, I'll tell you a little bit," he said, and started telling me about the many places he had seen. A country whose capital had a harbor

thriving with trade, one whose castles were built along a river... I had heard about other countries from Sora, but Cezar's stories were grander in scale and made even more interesting by his funny comments.

I asked him to go on so many times that, before I knew it, the sun had completely set.

"It's late, you'd better go back to your room to rest. You also have work tomorrow, don't you?" he told me.

"But I wanted to hear more stories..." I murmured to myself, and he grinned.

"I'm going to take a walk through this garden tomorrow too. Come see me, if you're free after work," he said.

We parted ways, and this time I remembered to sneak back in through the window. Since Anne had gone back to her room to sleep, I got back to my room without being noticed.

Having to be so careful all day long had drained me, but hearing Cezar's stories made me feel refreshed.

Cezar from Ethenell... He's a strange guy. We barely knew each other, but he was so easy to talk to. It felt as if we'd always been friends.

Actually, rather than friends, we felt like siblings. He kind of reminded me of my older brothers in my previous life.

I hope I'll be able to see him tomorrow too, and then I'll ask him to tell me more stories, I thought as I lay in bed. I heard some kind of growling animal, but I was definitely too tired to care about that, and I immediately fell asleep.

"Young miss, please wake up. It is morning already."

I woke up to Anne's voice, as usual. I had slept well, so I had no problem getting up.

I'm going to do my best on the second day of the Assembly too!

Today I'd be attending a tea party with the noblewomen from the participating countries. The first day was supposed to be for exchanging information between high-ranking nobles, and the second day was for exchanging information between ladies.

The place and people would be different, but what I had to do was more or less the same, so I was told to stay careful and be proper at all times.

Since this gathering was only for women, my trusted ally and problem-solver Keith wouldn't be there. But I was going to have my dependable friends Mary and Sophia by my side. Together with them, I once again stepped inside that dizzying circle of people, where different nationalities and ways of dressing came together.

Despite it being called a tea party, we weren't sitting down. Everyone had to eat and drink standing up so they could walk around and speak with more people.

I recognized some faces from the previous day, but I also saw many new ones.

Will they all ask me about the Ministry again? I feared, but after greeting one of the ladies, she asked me something completely different and completely unexpected.

"Is it true that your brother Keith is still not engaged?" The one asking was a lady from a neighboring country who looked slightly younger than me.

That really came out of nowhere! I thought, surprised, but I replied honestly.

"Yes. He still does not have a fiancée."

As soon as I uttered these words, a swarm of foreign ladies surrounded me for some reason. In seconds, I was being aggressively

interviewed, with questions such as, “What kind of girl does he like?” and “Are there already any candidates?”

Those ladies were so intense that I had no choice but to reply reluctantly. “I don’t really know about his tastes, and I don’t think there are any candidates right now,” I faltered.

This wasn’t the first time someone had asked about Keith at a tea party, but the people asking usually did so much more calmly.

After they finished telling me their ranks and what made them especially attractive, the women finally let me go. Exhausted, I found Mary, who had been looking at me throughout the whole ordeal and sympathized with me.

“Now those were some frantic ladies,” I said with a sigh, and Mary explained to me what was going on.

“Your brother is an extremely handsome youth after all. The people of our high society have become used to him, but for foreigners who see him for the first time, this reaction is not surprising. Our princes, Master Nicol, and others are getting a very similar treatment.”

“Really? Yesterday I spent the whole day with Keith, but I didn’t see that many girls approaching him,” I said, remembering the first day of the Assembly, and Mary laughed.

“Of course, they were in a foreign country together with their fathers and partners — it is natural that they would restrain themselves. But today there are only women gathered here, so they have no reason to contain their excitement.”

“Oh, I see.” I also only talked about romantic stuff with girls, so it made sense. “Speaking of... where’s Sophia?”

She had come with us, but even after doing my best to look throughout the hall, I couldn’t find her.

“She is there,” Mary said sadly as she pointed towards a small crowd of people.

“Inside that crowd?!”

“Yes. She is being surrounded and asked questions about her brother.”

Poor Sophia, through no fault of her own except having a handsome brother, was suffering the same fate as me, and with even more ladies asking her questions. I wanted to help her, but after seeing for myself how difficult it was to escape that circle of beasts, I couldn’t find the courage to step inside it.

I’m sorry, Sophia. Just answer enough questions and they’ll go away, I promise, I apologized to her inside my heart.

Mary, judging from the way she was looking at that crowd, was probably feeling equally bad for not being able to help her.

“Say, Mary, did they also surround you to ask questions about Prince Alan?” I asked her. She said that the foreign ladies had been crazy about the princes, so I figured that she also had to withstand their questions. But she shook her head.

“They did seem to be envious of me for being engaged to such a wonderful prince, but they were not so brazen as to ask anything directly of his fiancée. While they certainly seem to be a bit overexcited, all of these people still realize that they are here representing their own countries, so they would never cross the line with an engaged man. They asked you nothing about Prince Jeord, I assume.”

“You’re right. They had questions about Keith, but they only told me about how envious they were that I had Prince Jeord as a fiancé.”

“See? This is why they can’t contain themselves when it comes to handsome men who happen not to be engaged.”

Now that I think about it, it's obvious that women who are looking to get married would be targeting all the single men.

"But I'm sure that there are a lot of handsome single men. Why're they all swarming around me and Sophia like that?" I asked, furrowing my brow, and Mary laughed again.

"You are right. Our country is full of handsome people," she said, sipping her tea. Hearing that from a girl as beautiful as her made it that much more convincing.

Even for an otome game, this country had a ridiculous number of attractive people — especially in my vicinity (or rather, in Maria's, as she was the protagonist). No wonder the foreign ladies reacted like that.

"I have heard the opinions of most of the participants today, and it seems that Nicol and Keith are amongst the most popular at this year's Assembly," she said, taking another sip from her tea.

She looked so relaxed, drinking her tea in a corner, but she was actually always collecting information. *Amazing. I should really learn to be more like her.* Nicol and Keith were amazing too, though.

"That's incredible, considering how many people are here. Isn't there anyone who's popular in the other countries?" With all these participants, it would have surprised me if there wasn't.

"Hmm, well, the Prince of Ethenell is also enjoying a lot of popularity, but as he has no female relatives, there is nobody here to ask questions about him to."

How did she learn so much about everyone so fast? Also, Ethenell... That's the country where Cezar comes from. He's very handsome too. Maybe next time I see him I should ask him about the prince.

I spaced out while thinking to myself, and before I knew it, I was once again surrounded by ladies who wanted to ask me about Keith.

After a while, once the lines of people around me had gotten sparse enough for me to escape, I excused myself by saying that I needed to go to the toilet.

I left the hall and rested in a corridor not far away, sighing deeply. I was so tired. They all asked me the same questions. I wished I could just write the answers on a piece of paper and post it on a wall. I didn't want to go back... but I had to.

I was looking at the garden outside when I heard the squealing voices of ladies in love. *D-Did they chase me here to get more information about Keith?!* I braced myself and turned around, but I didn't find any noble ladies.

I did find some female servants, though. Judging from their uniforms, they had come here from abroad. They were blushing just as much as their noble counterparts, and they were all staring at something.

I followed their gazes and saw a handsome man with blue eyes and blue hair wearing the uniform typical of Sorcié servants.

“Is that Sora?” I asked myself, but I was so surprised that I blurted it out so loudly that it caught his attention. As our eyes met, he looked agitated.

What's up with that? Is that how you look at a colleague you haven't seen in a while? I was thinking, disappointed, as he started walking towards me.

“May I help you, miss?” he said with an obviously fake smile.

“What's wrong with you?” I tried to ask him, but he immediately interrupted me in a whisper.

“Don't divulge anything,” he said with that same smile.

I realized that I might have done something wrong, so I closed my mouth.

“Oh, so you have become lost. I see. I would be most pleased to show you the way,” he said all of a sudden, and guided me somewhere the group of female servants couldn’t see us.

Once there, he let out a big sigh. “You already saw Maria, didn’t you? So I’d expect you to know why I’m here,” he said, and I remembered my encounter from the previous day.

Yeah, Maria was dressed as a maid for a mission, and that was probably a secret... Ah!

“So... You’re investigating something, so it’d be a problem if people found out you actually work for the Ministry, right?”

“Exactly. You’re a *genius*,” he said sarcastically. “My mission is classified, so pretend that you don’t know me as long as I’m here. Everyone here knows that you work for the Ministry.”

As he spoke to me with such a serious expression, all I could say was “Okay.” But then I couldn’t resist asking, “But what kind of mission is it?”

“You don’t need to know. Actually, don’t stick your nose in this. You’d just make everything more complicated.”

His reply stung a little; he was a newcomer in the department just like me, after all.

“I’m busy, so I’ll be going now. You probably have your noble lady duties to attend to,” he said before quickly walking away.

If the Assembly was part of the game, I guess it’s natural for Sora to be here too.

Still knowing nothing about the Ministry’s mission, I went back to the hall, where I was once again flooded with questions about Keith.

I spent the rest of the day answering those ladies, which made me feel just as tired as yesterday, even if for a different reason. Sophia

had it even worse than me, and she looked totally spent when we silently shook hands and parted ways for the day.

I went back to my room and quickly changed, just as I had done on the previous day, and then ate some of the snacks that Anne had prepared for me. I'd been so busy during the tea party that I hadn't even managed to eat properly, and I was starving.

I wonder if he'll come by today too.

I looked out of the window, but when I saw no one there, I disappointedly went back to my snacks.

Maybe he's too busy today, I thought as I looked around in my room, until my eyes fell upon the Dark Covenant, which I had carelessly left lying around. I was supposed to take good care of it, so I quickly put it back inside my bag.

Then again, who would ever want to steal this? Nobody, except for a few select people at the Ministry, even knows it exists.

I felt like I was being watched, and I turned towards the windows, thinking that maybe Cezar had come. But he wasn't there. *I must have imagined it.*

“*Grrrrr...*”

Did I just hear something like a growling animal? I looked towards the window again, and this time I found him there, facing away from me.

He came!

I stood up from my chair, stuffed some snacks in my pockets, and jumped out of the window and into the garden, forgetting everything about the growl I'd heard.

Once again, he noticed me coming before I could say anything, and turned to face me. *He's definitely the real deal.*

“Good evening, Cezar.”

“Good evening,” he replied with a smile. “You look even more tired than yesterday. Are you alright?”

Before I knew it, I was venting to him. “I’ve spent the whole day replying to the questions from foreign ladies about one of our noblemen who still doesn’t have a fiancée, and it was exhausting.”

“Your country is full of attractive men and women. It figures that everybody would be head over heels about them,” he said with a nod.

“People from your country are too?”

“Yes, of course. It’s rare to see people this good-looking in Ethenell, and here there are so many,” he said with a laugh.

“Rare? But you’re also very good-looking!” I said, staring at his handsome face.

For a second he stared back at me, surprised, but then he started laughing again. “Hahaha, why thank you. But noble ladies tend to like a more refined type of guy, like the princes you have here in Sorcié.”

“I guess that’s true...”

Cezar didn’t look like the fairy-tale Prince Jeord, but I was sure that some girls were into the ruggedly handsome type. Maybe there weren’t a lot of those girls in Ethenell. *Speaking of Ethenell...*

“By the way, I’ve heard that Ethenell’s prince is really popular too. What kind of person is he?” I asked, remembering my earlier conversation with Mary.

“Our prince? Uhm, well... he’s... I guess it depends on who you ask,” he replied in a very roundabout way while he scratched his head.

“All the ladies say that he’s really handsome.”

"You know, he got all prettied up for the occasion, so maybe he's looking a bit better than usual... Anyway, you wanted to hear more of my stories from yesterday, right? Let's stop talking about the prince."

I didn't understand why he didn't want to talk about him, but it was also true that I wanted to hear about his stories from abroad, so I asked him to start telling them.

"Oh, right," I said, taking the snacks out of my pockets. "Eating something sweet really helps when you're tired. Would you like one?" I asked, and Cezar's eyes widened as he stared at me.

"Do you... not like sweet things?" I asked, and, after looking surprised at my question, he started laughing.

"I do like them. Thanks, I'll have one," he said, then took one of the snacks and ate it. "Wow, this is delicious."

"I know, right?! It's from a famous shop downtown. They sell so fast it's hard to get hold of them... and, oh, try one of these cookies! They're so flaky and delicious!" I said, getting excited about the sweets.

Cezar laughed yet again like a child, showing his teeth. "This also looks good, thank you."

We kept eating sweets as he told me his tales, and he actually must have liked sweet things quite a lot, since he kept complimenting the things I offered him. His stories were so fascinating that I didn't notice the time passing by until the sun was close to setting and he told me it was time to go back.

"Say, tomorrow..." I started saying, but I remembered that, on the next day, I'd be busy starting first thing in the morning with the preparations for the ball. Pretty much everyone was going to participate, and it'd start in the evening and last until late at night.

Before I could explain myself, Cezar intervened. “I’m a bit busy tomorrow,” he said, smiling awkwardly. “So it’ll have to be another day.”

There were only two days left of the Assembly: one for the ball and then one for simple parting greetings. After that, all nobles would go back to their own countries, and their servants would obviously follow them. We had known each other for only a few days, but I really liked Cezar. I didn’t want to part ways with him so soon.

“Would you like to...”

...meet again before you have to leave? I wanted to ask, but I only managed to get the first part out. The second part was drowned out by my scream of surprise, because, as I was trying to get closer to Cezar, I tripped over something and fell forward.

I braced for the impact, but instead of the hard ground I was expecting, I found myself falling into a pair of muscular arms — Cezar had caught me.

“Th-Thank you,” I said, still held in his arms.

“Be careful, it’s already dark,” he said. Then he whispered something to himself, clearly panicking. “Oh no! It fell out!”

“What fell out?” I asked, and, looking up, noticed that Cezar’s face was very close to mine.

His face, although it was as handsome as always, had something different about it: his eyes. Minutes earlier his eyes had been black, but now his right eye was a sparkling gold color.

“Cezar... what happened to your eye?”

“Oh, this?” he replied, looking troubled by the question. “I usually have black pieces of glass in my eyes, but one fell out.”

“So... does that mean that this is the real color of your eyes?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Why’d you go through the trouble of hiding it though?”

“You don’t see a lot of people with eyes like this around here, do you? Well, the same is true in Ethenell, too... My mother was born in a faraway country, where this was normal, but for me it’s anything but. People would probably get scared of it.”

He was right that this color was rare. I’d never seen anyone with beautiful golden eyes like that, sparkling so much despite the sun being close to setting and the garden getting dark. I couldn’t help but stare at his face.

“Sorry... You’re scared too, right? I’ll be going. Be careful...”

“It’s so beautiful...”

“What?”

“Your eye. It sparkles like the sun...”

“Huh?!”

As soon as I praised his eyes, Cezar froze.



“Cezar?”

All of a sudden, he let me go and looked away from me. “Excuse me...”

I tried getting closer to see what had happened, but he moved farther away. *Why is he doing this?* I thought, worried, and he started talking.

“...Aren’t you scared of me?” he asked, and his voice sounded very different from how it had sounded so far. He sounded cold and distant.

“What?”

“My eyes, or the fact that I was a mercenary. Sorry, but I don’t deserve anyone’s approval. I don’t have regrets, but I realize I’m not someone that people should look up to either,” he said, lifting one of the corners of his mouth.

I wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed, but I got what he meant. As a mercenary, being feared must have been part of his job.

“But you aren’t scary. And I really like your eyes,” I said.

I knew next to nothing about his past. I didn’t know what kind of person he was. What I did know was that he was so kind as to entertain me with his stories despite being tired, and that he liked the sweets I gave him. In my book, that made for a good person, not a scary one.

However, he froze once again when he heard my words. His last statement had made it obvious that this was a sensitive topic for him, and maybe I should have chosen my words better.

Unfortunately, all I was able to do was to honestly tell him how I felt. Maybe things would have been different if I were the game’s protagonist, but I wasn’t.

I waited for his answer. I was scared that I had hurt him, and that he wouldn't want to see me anymore.

After remaining silent for a while, he spoke. "...I can't meet you tomorrow, but the day after that, before leaving, I'll come by this garden. I'd like you to come too."

"Okay!" I said, and he ran away as quickly as a wild animal.

I still didn't know how what I'd told him had made him feel, but at least I knew that we could see each other again, and that made me happy.

I went back to my room, careful not to trip over anything. The ball was awaiting me the next day, and it promised to be the most tiresome event so far. I lost no time in diving into my bed and falling asleep.

★★★★★

Janne was waiting for me outside of my room.

"Hey, Cezar, where have you... What happened to your eyes?!" he said as soon as he saw me.

This guy has a talent for always appearing at the worst of times...

"I was going for a walk. I dropped one of the pieces of glass, but I have extras, so it's fine," I said, shoving him aside so I could get in my room.

He had known me long enough to know that, when I acted that coldly, it meant that I didn't want to be talked to.

"See you tomorrow," he said, and left.

I sat down on the couch, gave a loud sigh, and drooped backwards.

I just couldn't calm down. I'd been hiding the rare color of my eyes when in public back in Ethenell, and that went double for other countries.

My mother used to tell me that I had beautiful eyes when I was little, but all the others who commented on them did so out of either fear or disgust. Eyes like these were regarded as a positive trait back in Mother's faraway country, but in this region, just by virtue of their uniqueness, they were seen as evil and scary.

I remember being bullied about them for a long time, at the palace, after I became an orphan. My half-brothers and half-sisters, who couldn't stand me, would chase me around and call me a monster, an abomination with golden eyes. Often, they'd get tired of throwing insults at me and start throwing rocks and sticks instead.

Because of that, I'd come to hate the eyes that my mother liked so much. I was so embarrassed by them that, once I became a mercenary, I grew my hair long to hide them as much as possible.

And on the occasions when I would accidentally show them to someone, they would become terrified of me. People are scared of those who are different.

On the other hand, it was a great way to instill fear into the hearts of my enemies. The name of the "golden-eyed wolf" was enough to make soldiers tremble, and this feature of mine had become something of a weapon.

I kept my eyes hidden from people I didn't want to scare, especially girls, since the last thing I wanted was for them to start crying. Every once in a while, though, a flirty girl came close enough to see them, and the next moment she'd be running away with a horrified expression.

They were the ones approaching me at the beginning, which made it even worse. Ladies of the night, wouldn't go as far as to run away, as they were paid to be with me, but I could see the fear in their eyes as they looked at mine.

After spending years in the palace, surrounded by people who hated me, I had learned how to guess what someone was thinking just from their facial expression. I was so frustrated by the way girls reacted that I started wearing black pieces of glass when I was around them.

Katarina, the girl I had recently met in the castle's garden, was different from the others. There was something childlike about her, and even someone much less skilled than me would be able to read what she was thinking just by her expression.

Being with her was fun and pleasant, which is why I didn't want to see her face twisted with fear, much less fear *of me*. So I did my best to avoid showing her my eyes... but fate likes to play the cruellest. The pieces of glass which I put in my eyes to hide their color almost never fell out, but they happened to do so at the worst of times. I tried not to show it, but I was extremely nervous at the time.

I couldn't even look Katarina in the face. I didn't want to see that horrified expression that I had grown so accustomed to over the years.

But her words surprised me.

"It sparkles like the sun..." she told me. I was so surprised that I turned back around to see her, and sure enough, she glowed with the expression of someone who was looking at something beautiful. It reminded me of the way my mother used to look at me.

In that moment, I felt like I could honestly tell Katarina the things which I'd kept hidden until that moment. I told her that I didn't deserve her praise.

I was a child with no experience when I left the palace, and there was no way I could find a proper job and make a living. I went from one dirty job to the next because I had no other choice. I never regretted that, but I felt that nobody would ever look at me with a gaze as

warm as my mother's. I got used to being feared, and started avoiding clean and beautiful places, scared that I wouldn't fit in.

And yet, that girl, who was obviously raised in the cleanest and most beautiful of environments, didn't reject me. She looked at me without any fear in her eyes.

It felt as if her gaze had pierced all the way into my heart.

Ah, she's going to steal my heart...

But even if, unlikely as it was, she had accepted me — the Prince of Ethenell couldn't just go and fall in love with girls from other countries.

My instinct told me that it was dangerous to stay there, and I ran away. But the fact that I almost unconsciously made a promise to meet again went to show how much I already cared for her.

I liked her from the beginning, but seeing the way she looked at my eyes, and what she told me after that, risked making me completely fall for her.

And, unlike those ladies who were paid to be flattering and polite with me, she had nothing to gain from doing it. She just said what she had thought, and that's what made it so powerful.

She was doing all the right things to bewitch me, without even meaning or realizing it... That was actually scary in a way.

I'd thought I wouldn't have any problem parting ways with her, but now I was starting to feel greedy. I wasn't thinking of her as a potential wife, as Janne had said, but I would have liked to bring her back to Ethenell with me.

It wasn't as rich of a country as Sorcié, but thanks to my brother, it had become much better than before. Life in our castle would probably be close enough to what she enjoyed right now.

I had the feeling that someone as interested in other countries as she was might actually agree to come with me, even if she hadn't known me for that long.

Then I could get to know her better, grow closer, and eventually...

Well, it seems that she's already stolen my heart.

Chapter 4: The Ball

On the third day of the Assembly, we were supposed to attend a ball. I ate breakfast, and then my brother Keith visited me in my room. He said he wanted to check on how things had been yesterday, since we were separated for the whole day.

He kept asking me whether I'd done anything wrong, whether I'd caused any trouble, and so on. He sounded so much like a mother worrying about her problematic daughter that I almost accidentally called him "Mom."

I told him that the day had gone by without a hitch, and that all I had done was answer questions about him.

"Ladies really do like that kind of topic," he said, smiling wryly. He was always approached by girls so aggressively that he now hated even hearing about it.

"Wasn't there anything like that amongst the men?" I asked him.

"Most people were talking about trade and politics. But the youngest ones were commenting on the girls, too. They said there are a lot of pretty ones," he replied.

"So that happens at the guys' gatherings too, huh?"

Two days before, Mary and Sophia had received the advances of some men. It made sense that men would talk about girls too, then.

"Yes," Keith told me as I was deep in thought, "and they even talked about Maria."

"Maria? What?" Why were they talking about a girl who wasn't even participating in the Assembly?

"Even if she isn't appearing in any public gathering, some people still saw her working as a maid. Rumors of a beautiful maid with blonde hair and blue eyes are already going around."

She was so pretty that people always noticed her, so rumors were unavoidable. But, even if her mission wasn't top secret, it was still classified. All that attention couldn't be good for her.

"I wonder if she'll be okay..." I whispered to myself.

"Maria can handle herself much better than you, so there's nothing to worry about. The others and I will take care of helping her, so you make sure not to do anything. You risk making life even more difficult for her."

I had to admit that trouble had a tendency to follow me around, so he was right. I nodded.

"See you at the ball then. Listen to what the servants say and make sure to prepare yourself properly," Keith said, again sounding like our mother, before leaving me alone to prepare.

I thought of Maria. After passing out, dreaming, and learning that the Assembly was part of the game, I found relief in the fact that it wouldn't concern me, at least.

But as for Maria... anything could happen. Maybe she was going to have some kind of romantic encounter with Jeord, Keith, or another one of the love interests... But Keith sounded like he hadn't seen her directly.

I had no idea how things had been playing out, and while I wanted to ask Maria about it, I didn't even know what part of the castle she was working in.

Anyway, even if I didn't know what kind of event the game had in store, I knew that the villainess Katarina had nothing to do with it.

I must forget about that and concentrate on the ball!

I stuffed my mouth with the bread that was prepared for my breakfast in an attempt to get myself in the right mindset. Then, with my stomach full of carbohydrates, I started preparing for the ball.

This was nothing new, but the preparations that noble ladies had to go through before they could join this kind of event took way too much time.

“Young miss, please look up. No, just with your head.”

I was surrounded by servants who were cleansing my skin, putting on makeup, and whatnot. It had been almost three years since my first ball, so I was used to staying still while they fixed me up.

I just needed to sit there, and they’d take care of everything. After a few hours of daydreaming, I was told that I was ready, and that it was almost time for the ball.

That was when Jeord came to escort me to the dance hall. Being a prince, he was extremely busy during the Assembly, so I hadn’t seen him for the past two days.

“O beautiful fiancée of mine, finally we can be together,” he said, offering me his hand elegantly as he always did.

I greeted him with a curtsy, as a lady is expected to do, and took his hand. Lately Jeord had been very forward with his advances, but he controlled himself now that we were in the middle of an important international event. His lines were flirty, but his behavior was tamer than usual.

“Stay out of trouble, do not get involved in anything that does not concern you, and try to remain where I can see you,” he told me with a serious look in his eyes.

“I will,” I replied, surprised to see him with that kind of expression.

He then escorted me all the way into the largest hall in the castle, already full of people from all the neighboring countries. The international atmosphere was the same as on the previous days, but

the scale was much bigger — most of the nobles and royalty participating in the Assembly were there for the ball.

As Sorcié was the richest and safest country in the region, this year's Assembly had even more participants than usual, or so I'd been told. In fact there were so many people that I couldn't even find Keith and the others.

As I was looking around for my friends, Jeord was quickly surrounded by a group of people. Everyone wanted to greet him, as he was one of the princes of the host country. As his fiancée I had to stay by his side, smiling at everyone.

Eventually, we were joined by Jeord's two older brothers with their respective fiancées. I hadn't seen any of them since the start of the Assembly.

"You're doing great, Jeord! But if you need anything, know that you can count on your older brother, okay?" said Jeffrey, the oldest prince, sounding as casual as usual.

"And you can count on me, Lady Katarina," Susanna, his future wife, told me.

On the other hand the second-born prince, Ian, looked stern and serious. "I see the greetings are going well. Have there been any issues?" he asked Jeord.

Selena, Ian's fiancée, greeted me with an elegant curtsy and a small, friendly smile.

Jeord's two older brothers couldn't look more different from each other: one of them was always laughing and joking around, and the other was always silent and dead serious.

Even after parting with them, the greetings were far from over. We were expecting Mary and Alan to come greet us too, but they seemed to be busy elsewhere, and I was starting to get tired.

"You seem fatigued," said Jeord. "There are refreshments on that side of the hall, so you should go there and rest."

He was right, and what's more, I'd been so busy preparing for the ball that I hadn't had time to get a proper lunch. I was starving.

"Yes. I won't be long," I said, extremely grateful, and elegantly left Jeord to head towards the refreshments.

"Stay where I can see you and refrain from doing anything improper," he whispered to me as I walked away.

I nodded, but I also asked myself if Jeord had been infected with sounding-like-my-mother-itis from Keith.

Despite all the people present in the hall, the refreshment space wasn't that crowded. It didn't look like many people were dancing, either. Everyone was probably busy greeting or trading information with each other, which, after all, was kind of the whole point.

Thanking my good luck for having most of the buffet to myself, I started placing one delicacy after the other on my dish and then started to eat happily. The castle's cuisine was always delicious, but today's was incredible. I felt like I was putting tasty works of art in my mouth. Fresh seafood in marinade, tender, juicy meat, colorful desserts...

Haaah, it's all so tasty. As the food melts in my mouth, I can feel the tiredness melt away from my heart...

While enjoying the buffet, I looked out of the window and noticed that some people had left the hall for the courtyard. Now that I looked around better, I noticed that you could go directly into the garden from the terrace connected to this hall. The door was open, inviting the people who had been in the stuffy, crowded room to breathe in fresh air.

Weather-wise it was a perfect night, not too cold and not too hot, so I also wanted to step into the garden for a bit.

If only Jeord hadn't told me to stay where he could see me... but just stepping out and back in wouldn't hurt, right? Just for a second.

I was thinking whether to go or not, looking out at the garden, when I noticed a familiar figure walking across my vision.

What's she doing here, and why is she in such a hurry? I thought, seeing Maria running through the garden in her maid clothes.

I kept looking in that direction, and I noticed two men, who looked like foreign nobles, running after her. I hurried to the garden, chasing after the three of them.

Judging from how frantically Maria was running, and how creepily those two men were grinning, I had to conclude that she was being chased by them.

I wondered what had happened, and whether she was okay. But when I reached the garden, she had already gone so far that I couldn't see her anymore.

Where did she go? Is she somewhere else? Oh? There's someone there!

After running for a while, I noticed someone behind a bush, and approached it in the hope that that person was Maria.

Unfortunately, it was a pair of middle-aged men I'd never seen before.

These clearly overweight, oafish-looking men weren't even the ones that were going after Maria. I was ready to go back to running after my friend, but then I heard their conversation.

"So I can buy magic-using children in that harbor?"

"Yes. But it's illegal, so I hear they're very expensive."

“These Sorcié people, stubborn as always. Why’d they ban trading children?”

What did they just say?!

I ended up hearing something I would have been much better off not hearing. And I realized that, if they realized that I’d heard them, things would get even worse.

I tried to leave, but I was so nervous that I accidentally brushed against the bush, making a very loud noise.

“Who’s there?!” shouted one of the men.

I was scared and wanted to run away, but my body didn’t move. As I stood still, I saw an arm coming out of a different bush, grabbing me and pulling me inside while I offered no resistance.

After I disappeared between the leaves, the men started walking around, looking for the source of the noise.

“There’s nobody here... I must have imagined it.”

“We’re getting too tense from talking about this kind of stuff. There’s no way anyone would come here, so far away from the hall, but I’m still nervous. Let’s continue this conversation in my room.”

After exchanging these words, the two men started walking back towards the hall.

I let out a sigh of relief. I somehow managed to escape.

“Thank you,” I said, turning around to see who it was that had pulled me to safety.

“What?! Cezar?!” I shouted in surprise at seeing his face.

However, he looked nothing like the man who was telling me stories in the garden on the previous day. His wild hair was combed and straightened, and his clothes were that of a foreign noble.

I realized that it was him because I was staring at his face from such a close range, but I probably wouldn't have noticed just from greeting him at the ball. He looked *that* different.

"Cezar, why do you look like this? And those clothes..."

I've never seen a servant looking like this...

"Right back at you, Katarina..." he said, looking at me with a confused expression.

That's right! I've always met him after changing into my comfortable clothes and removing my makeup! After the maids have worked their magic on me, I must look completely different too.

"That would be, well... Anyway, did you hear those guys earlier? Is it just me or were they talking about some scary stuff?"

I couldn't come up with any good excuse, so I just changed the topic.

"They were talking about human trafficking, yes," he said. From the way he picked up the opportunity to talk about something else, it was clear that he'd been hiding something too.

"Truffy King...? Oh, trafficking? The crime of trading people?!"

I looked at him in shock, and he stared back at me as if I was missing the most obvious thing in the world. "I mean, you heard them, right?"

"I know, but... human trafficking is forbidden in Sorcié!"

"Sure it is, since your country is so safe and wealthy. But the same doesn't apply everywhere."

He was right. I hadn't learned about that in the seminar, but Sora had told me about that kind of thing in the past. I had just forgotten about things like this because they didn't happen in a country as peaceful as ours.

“Of course, it’s forbidden in most other countries, in theory,” he went on, “but in a lot of places, the authorities turn a blind eye to it. Even in Ethenell, the ban on human trafficking only started being enforced when the new king took the throne.”

I thought that human trafficking, even abroad, was a very rare thing. Knowing that it was that widespread made me so sad I could feel my chest aching.

“This seems to be the first time you’ve heard about it. It must be because you’ve been brought up in Sorcié.”

“...Yes. I only knew that it was forbidden, and even if I knew that some places still did it, I imagined it was a very minor problem... I was so ignorant.”

“That’s normal — people don’t go around saying that they traffic human lives, and sticking your nose into the affairs of other countries could even lead to diplomatic problems. But judging from what those guys said, the children being trafficked are from Sorcié,” he said with a stern expression on his face.

“Really?!” I asked, surprised.

“Weren’t you listening?” he asked, more surprised.

“Actually I wasn’t eavesdropping or anything, I just happened to catch some parts by coincidence. You heard the whole thing, right? Could you explain it to me?”

As he had told me, I couldn’t really do anything about human trafficking in other countries, regardless of how sad I felt about it. But maybe if it was happening here in Sorcié, where it was strictly forbidden, I could do something to help.

I looked Cezar straight in the eye, and he looked back at me, worried, while awkwardly scratching his head.

“It’s not something I’d normally want you to hear, but I guess I have no choice. I managed to hear them say that they kidnap children who can use magic and sell them to other countries, at a high price, at Sorcié’s harbor.”

“I can’t believe something like that is going on in my country...” I was so shocked that my face stiffened.

“Children who can use magic are extremely valuable, especially outside Sorcié, where almost none of them are born. They are treated as treasured possessions when they are born, and many would want one. But Sorcié is a rich, peaceful place, and even the commoners aren’t poor enough that they’d consider selling one of their children, and most magic children are born into noble families anyway. That’s why they have to kidnap them instead of buying them... But I don’t think they’d have an easy time kidnapping noble children. It’s possible that they’re just kidnapping normal commoner children and pretending that they can use magic.”

What started as an explanation eventually turned into Cezar coming up with theories as if speaking to himself. I was used to seeing him as a kind, lively young man, but his grim face now looked more like that of a talented official.

I was never particularly clever, but it didn’t take much thought to notice that he was hiding something. He couldn’t just be a servant.

Just who is he?

That question flashed through my mind, even as it was full of anger after finding out about the terrible crimes taking place in Sorcié.

“Anyway, just staying here thinking by ourselves won’t solve anything. We need to report this to the proper people and then gather information. By the way, what were you doing here in the first place?” he asked me, and his expression was now back to his usual, friendly one.

“Well, I...”

Yeah, what was I even doing here? Of course! Maria! I was so distracted by this whole thing that I forgot about her!

I wondered how much time had passed since I lost sight of Maria and her pursuers.

“I saw a friend of mine being chased by unfamiliar men who looked like foreign nobles, and I ran after them to see what was happening. I lost them, though, so I was trying to find where they went,” I explained, and he immediately looked serious again.

“Foreign nobles...? Is that friend of yours a noble lady?”

“No, she’s a commoner... well, she’s working as a maid here. She has blonde hair and blue eyes. She’s incredibly cute. Did you happen to see her?”

“I’ve been resting around here for a while, but I didn’t see any girl like the one you described. I don’t think she ran in this direction.”

“I see... But then, where did she run off to?”

I had absolutely no idea. I wasn’t that familiar with the castle, and I didn’t even know where Maria was working.

“What can I do?” I said to myself.

“I just might know where she went. Follow me,” Cezar said, grabbing my arm and quickly pulling me along with him.

“Here,” he said, stopping in front of a building within the castle grounds that I’d never seen before.

“And... what is this?”

“This is where the foreign nobles and other dignitaries are staying,” he explained.

“I see, but why would she be here?” I asked, unable to understand what the connection was. I could feel the figurative question marks popping on top of my head.

I saw Cezar’s face turn grim, and I worried about having asked him something bad.

“A pure and proper girl like you may not understand this, but if a nobleman is running after a cute maid, he probably wants to bring her back to his room.”

“And that would be...”

“To force her into doing stuff, yes.”

Stuff? Wait...!

“N-No! Without her permission?! That’s a crime!” I shouted, finally understanding what he meant. Was someone really planning to carry out a crime like that within the castle?!

“Here in Sorcié, where you treat servants like human beings, you’d obviously think of it like that. But there are also countries where servants are considered objects for nobles to use as they please.”

“But servants are people too...” I said, shocked to hear this.

“Of course, high-ranking nobles understand that the rules of their country don’t apply in Sorcié, and won’t do anything to compromise themselves. But since this year the Assembly is being held in such a safe country, even some lower-ranking nobles, who would not normally participate, came along. And some of them don’t really understand how things work here,” he explained.

He looked towards the building, then went on, “This building here is where those low-ranking nobles are staying. I think it’s worth checking out.”

Most of the windows, as expected, looked dark, as the people staying in those rooms were still at the ball. But there were a few lit ones. I walked closer to the building and squinted to see inside.

“What in the world are you doing?” Cezar asked me, sounding baffled.

“What? I’m just trying to check inside...” I said, confused, and he sighed in disbelief.

“How can you check inside from here?” he said, and since most of the lit rooms were on the second floor, he kind of had a point.

“I have really good eyes, despite my looks!”

“Despite your looks? What does that even mean? Let’s stop wasting time. I’ll go ask the servants inside, and you... I don’t think anybody will bother you, given how you’re dressed. You just wait here.”

“I’ll go with you to ask, then!” I said, partly because I didn’t want to wait there by myself.

“That won’t do. I have a feeling that things would go awry if you came with me. Just be a good girl and wait here,” he said, making it clear that his opinion was not going to change.

I had no choice but to do as he said and wait for him to come back.

“I’m going to go in and check, so *please* make sure you stay here,” he repeated himself before leaving for the building.

But how could I stay here doing nothing while my friend Maria was at risk?

I did my best to look through the windows. Even if he said it’d be a waste of time, I felt like I had to do something.

The curtains of most rooms were closed, so I could only make out the silhouettes of the people inside. I tried squinting at the gaps between curtains, but that didn’t make it any easier.

And then, after looking at one room after the other, my eyes reached the corner room on the second floor. I saw three silhouettes: two belonging to men and one belonging to a woman.

That could be Maria and the two men who were chasing after her!

I immediately ran right below that room and tried to take a closer look. I managed to peek at the woman through the gap in the curtains, and, sure enough, that blonde hair, blue eyes, and beautiful face belonged to none other than Maria.

She's here! Cezar was right!

Those two nobles had brought Maria back to their room... and she was in danger!

I looked at the direction Cezar had run off in, and didn't see anyone. He still wasn't coming back. He'd told me to stay here, but how could I do that given the circumstances?

I knew what room it was, so I just had to barge in... but I'd never been inside that building, and I didn't know how to reach the specific room I needed to get to.

And, being on the corner of the second floor, the place where Maria was being held was also the farthest from the entrance that Cezar had used.

The more time I lose like this, the riskier the situation becomes for Maria...

I was looking around in frustration when I noticed a tree with branches stretching out near the balcony of that corner room on the second floor.

I checked the tree, and its branches looked thick and sturdy. *I can climb that!*

I walked closer and tried lifting my leg up, but I couldn't do it. *This isn't going to work.*

I wouldn't have any problem climbing trees in a normal dress, but the one I was wearing for the ball was so long and burdened with frills that I had trouble moving in it, and my climbing skills obviously took a huge hit.

I'm sorry, Father. I know that this must have been an expensive dress. I promise I'll repay you when I get my salary from the Ministry, I swore to myself, and started tearing off the frills.

I must have looked terrible with the hem and sleeves all torn up like that, but this was an emergency. I threw the extra fabric on the ground and went back to climbing.

There were a lot more small branches than I thought, and I got my painstakingly combed hair stuck in them several times, until it was all mussed up. As I climbed up the tree, I thought about how the servants who had prepared me for the ball were definitely going to get mad at me.

I was now a single jump away from the balcony. My dress, which I raised up to jump, was heavier than I had thought. I couldn't go as far as I wanted to, ending up falling onto the balcony — right on my butt — with a loud thud.

"What is going on?!" I heard a voice coming from inside the room.

The brown-haired man who rushed to open the curtain and looked menacingly at me was, beyond any doubt, one of the two who were chasing Maria.

And behind him...

"Maria!" I shouted, seeing my dear friend pinned against the wall by a second, blonde man.

Her blue eyes were moist with tears, and she was clearly scared. That sight filled me with adrenaline.

I have to save her! I thought, and tried to body-slam the window, which, unfortunately, proved to be sturdier than I'd imagined.

They make it seem so easy in novels and on TV...

"Hey, who are you?! And what are you doing here?!" the man shouted to me after opening the window.

This was the perfect chance to get inside, and I did, but not before pushing the man in front of me as hard as I could. This took him by surprise, and he fell down on the floor.

I then ran towards Maria, who was looking at me with shock in her eyes. Thankfully, while she did look scared, I was relieved to see that her clothes and hair weren't disheveled.

I stood in front of her and gave the men the toughest gaze I could muster. "What do you think you are doing?!" I yelled.

The man looked bewildered by my sudden appearance. "And just who do you think *you* are?"

"I'm a friend of this girl, and I won't forgive anyone who harms her!" I said, without moving my stare away from the blonde man.

"Friend? So you're a servant too? With clothes as ragged as those?" he said as he looked at me with increasing suspicion.

Even servants were wearing better clothes than usual for the Assembly, and here I was with my dress, all torn apart and shredded from the tree-climbing, and my rat's-nest hair. If I saw anyone looking like that, I'd also have to assume that they were involved in an accident or something.

"It's a long story!" I said, trying to excuse my outfit.

In the meantime, the man on the floor had stood up and was walking towards us. "Wh-What is going on?! This filthy-looking girl just jumped in from the window! She must be a burglar!" he said rudely.

"Hey! Who are you calling a burglar? And you're one to talk after taking Maria here by force! You criminals!" I shouted back.

The blonde man suddenly started laughing. "Come on now, what are you talking about? We are nobles, and this is a servant. We can do whatever we want with her, and that's no crime," he said, proving that he was one of the stupid nobles that Cezar was talking about. His theory was 100% right.

I couldn't remain calm after hearing what he had said. "Huh? What are *you* talking about? I'll have you know that here in Sorcié you are not allowed to do whatever you want with anyone, even servants! You ignorant third-class nobles!" I shouted angrily, and the man's face turned red.

"How dare you, a lowly servant, speak up to us nobles? This will not be forgiven!" he said, and lifted his arm towards me, preparing to hit me.

"Lady Katarina!" said Maria, who was taking cover behind me.

What should I do? I could dodge this if I tried to, but then Maria'd get hit...

I decided that my only option was to withstand the hit without moving in order to save my friend.

Crash! I heard the loud noise of something breaking.

I looked around and found that the door had been blown apart so hard that it had basically turned into dust.

I remained still, trying to process what had happened. The blonde man also looked at it, with his arm still raised in front of me.

And then, I saw a familiar face walk through the door — that of blonde, blue-eyed Prince Jeord.

Why's he here? I thought, and, when our eyes met, he first looked horrified and then gave me a stare so cold I started shivering.



After that, he moved as fast as the wind and reached the man in front of me, taking his arm and immobilizing him.

“Aghhh!” he shouted in pain, but Jeord’s expression didn’t change. He seemed nothing like the Jeord I had known since we were children.

I was still thinking of what to say when Keith walked in and stood next to me. “Don’t worry, Big Sis, everything’s alright now.”

His face looked pale. As he covered me with his jacket, his hands were trembling.

K-Keith? What’s wrong?

He even looked like he was hesitating to even touch me, and I had no idea what the problem was.

Jeord then spoke to the blonde man. “You have dared do something outrageous to my fiancée, and for this sin you shall pay with your life. I will burn you for so long that not even your bones will remain intact,” he said with a terrifying voice, and summoned a flame in the palm of his hand.

It was then that I finally understood what was going on. *Do they think this man did stuff to me?*

That would have explained Keith’s reaction too. My hair and dress were all messed up, but this was because I climbed up a tree... More importantly, if I didn’t act quickly, Jeord would murder that man. *I have to stop him!*

“Wait! He didn’t do anything to me!”

As I screamed, I saw the flame in Jeord’s hand grow bigger... and then a shower of water came down, putting it out.

“Calm down. Do you have any idea of what could happen if you used magic on a foreign noble?”

It was Alan who had said that, grabbing his brother’s arm. He had probably used Water Magic to block Jeord’s Fire Magic.

Jeord, wet and angry, looked at Alan. “They have done unspeakable things to my Katarina. They deserve to die, and they will do so by my hand. I will turn them to ashes.”

“Try to cool your head. Katarina just said that they didn’t do anything to her,” Alan said while pointing at me.

Jeord looked at me, and then back at his brother. “Did you see her clothes? Her hair? How could that be true?”

Sorry, Jeord, I did all of this myself...

“She didn’t get like that because someone did anything to her — she ruined her dress and hair by climbing a tree. Look at all the branches and leaves stuck to her,” Alan said while looking at me with a mixture of pity and disgust.

Jeord threw the blonde man aside and walked towards me. “Did they really do nothing to you?”

“Y-Yes. As Prince Alan said, I was climbing a tree,” I replied, and his expression went back to the one I always knew.

I was relieved at seeing him go back to normal, but he only said, “I see...” and dropped his shoulders. He reminded me of a tired father looking at his unruly child, and I suddenly felt sorry for making him worry so much.

As Keith sighed next to me, I felt even sorrier. I awkwardly looked around and noticed that the blonde man, after being slammed onto the floor by Jeord, had passed out. The other man, too, was lying on the floor.

What happened to him? I thought, and silently looked at Keith.

“I just knocked him out,” he explained when our eyes met.

“L-Lady Katarina,” I heard a feeble voice come from behind me and turned around immediately.

Maria’s eyes were full of tears, and she was grabbing onto the hem of her dress.

“Maria, are you okay? Did they do anything to you?!”

“...I am okay, yes. They did not manage to do anything to me,” she said.

I was already relieved when I saw that her clothes and hair didn’t look messed up, but hearing it directly from her made me feel much better.

“I’m so glad!” I said and hugged her, and she started sobbing in my arms.

Even if they hadn’t done anything to her yet, being chased around like that must have been really scary.

I hugged her harder and caressed her back. “It’s okay, Maria. Don’t worry, everything’s okay now.”

After a while, when she had almost stopped crying, Nicol suddenly stepped into the room.

“I am sorry to barge in when you’re still trying to work things out, but this is not the best situation to be seen in. Please go back to your rooms,” he said with his usual lack of emotion, and I noticed that Sora was standing behind him.

I later heard from Keith that, since I disappeared around the same time as Maria, they had split into two groups to look for us.

“Sora will accompany Miss Maria, and Keith will accompany Lady Katarina. And Alan, please accompany your brother. I will take care of this incident and these two men,” Nicol continued.

Seeing him give out orders like that, I understood why people said that he was the main candidate to be the next chancellor to the king.

We all agreed to do as he said, except for Jeord. “Why do I need Alan to accompany me?” he asked.

“You know well enough,” Nicol said, staring at the prince without moving a single muscle in his face. That was enough to persuade him. In this kind of situation, it seemed that Nicol was stronger than Jeord.

We all went back to our rooms as instructed. Since I couldn’t walk around the castle in that state, Nicol gave me something that I thought was some kind of ethnic costume, something like a poncho, that I could wear on top of my dress.

As I left the room, I saw Cezar leaning against a wall in the hallway. When we passed by him, he slightly lowered his head, and Keith did the same in response. I followed suit.

“Didn’t I tell you to stay there?” I heard Cezar whisper so quietly that only I could hear it. But when I turned to look at him, he was already facing away.

“What’s wrong, Big Sis?” Keith asked, confused.

“It’s nothing,” I said, and we went back to my room.

I immediately took off the poncho-like dress that Nicol had given me. “This is so stuffy! I already feel better just taking it off,” I said, stretching out.

“Big Sister... Do you understand the gravity of what just happened? Those two men could have hurt you. Luckily it all ended well, but how can you be this relaxed?”

“I’m sorry...” I said, lowering my head, as he was completely right.

Even I, dense as I was, realized how dangerous that had been. If it wasn't for Jeord and Keith, I didn't know how that would have ended.

"I understand that you were worried about Maria, but please, try to rely more on me... and on all the people around you," Keith said, grabbing both of my hands. "I was really worried about you..." he continued with a shaking voice.

He was looking down and I couldn't see his face, but it sounded like he was crying. I'd never seen him like that, and I realized just how miserable he was feeling because of me.

"I'm sorry, Keith," I apologized again while tightly gripping his trembling hands. "And thank you for saving me."

He finally looked up, and slowly nodded.

After that, Anne and the other maids came to fix my hair and dress, while alternately worrying and complaining about me. I spent a lot of time apologizing.

They changed my dress for a new one, took out all the branches and leaves from my hair, and made me presentable again. Then I went to find Jeord and the others.

After all the trouble I had caused, I hadn't had time to properly apologize and thank them, and I wanted to do that now.

Keith and the servants accompanied me (giving me no say in the matter), and I went to where Jeord was resting — an empty guestroom.

After breaking that door and restraining that man, his clothes had gotten dirty, and he was in that room changing.

Right when we reached it, Alan walked out of the room. "Oh, you're looking decent again," he commented when he saw me.

I told him what I wanted to tell anyone involved. “Prince Alan, I am really sorry about what happened, and I am very grateful for your help,” I said, lowering my head in a deep bow.

“No joke,” he said, curling up one corner of his mouth. “I don’t know what’s wrong with you. You must be crazy to start climbing a tree during a ball.”

“Ugh... You are right,” I said, lowering my head again. I couldn’t really argue with him, or anyone else, today.

“But you’re safe now, and that’s what counts.”

His voice sounded kinder than usual, and, when I looked up at his face, I noticed the same worried expression that I’d seen on my brother earlier.

“When I stepped into that room, Jeord and Keith were already going mad, so I managed to stay calm when I saw you looking like that. But if I were the first one to walk in, I don’t know if I could have done the same. I’d probably go mad too... That’s how much I was worried about you. And not just me, but the others too,” he said without a hint of humor in his voice.

I had already lost count of how many times I’d heard those words in a single night. “I’m sorry...” I said, and he jokingly bumped my head with his fist.

“Well, you’ve apologized to me more than enough. Now please go and try to calm down that other guy,” he said, pointing at the door.

“That other guy’... Do you mean Prince Jeord?”

“Yeah, he’s steaming. Maybe you can calm him down enough that he can at least go back to the ball,” he said with a snicker.

Steaming? What does he mean?

Maybe he was angry about my recklessness. Or maybe he was angry that I broke the promise to stay where he could see me. How could I, of all people, calm him down?

I wasn't so sure that things would go well, but there was no going back now, and even Keith didn't say I shouldn't do it.

"Oh, and when you're done, go talk to Mary and Sophia too. When you disappeared, they were so worried that they wanted to go around looking for you, so we had to force them to sit down and wait."

I had to apologize to *a lot* of people.

"We can't have two princes missing at once for so long, so I'm going back to the ball. Do your best," Alan said, waving at me as he walked away towards the hall.

"...Keith, are you coming in too?" I asked him.

"I want to... But judging from his earlier reaction, I think that you should go see him by yourself."

"So I should be alone while he gets mad at me?!"

"I don't think he'll get mad at you, but as for his usual antics... I think he won't try anything right now. I'll wait here, near the door, so I can always come in should anything happen."

After saying that he gestured towards the room, and I fearfully knocked on the door.

★★★★★

I, Jeord Stuart, was an extremely cold child. I was never interested in anything, and I seldom felt any emotion.

I only needed to put on a pleasing smile and follow my instructors, and all were convinced of what a wonderful little prince I was, sparing me any trouble.

Nonetheless, my life was dull... until I met Katarina. She was the first person who I ever felt a genuine interest in. When I approached her, everything suddenly changed.

My dull world started shining with color, and I learned about new emotions which I had never felt before. All of this was because of her.

Had I never met her, I would still be ignorant of the many emotions within me, including the strong, powerful one which I first experienced today.

I was normally able to control my newfound emotions to a certain extent, but today this was not the case. Members of the royal family should never use magic recklessly. I had known that well enough since when I was a child, and I had never used it outside of classes at the academy.

And yet, on this day, I was going to use it — and to harm someone, no less. As a royal, this was unforgivable.

When I stepped into that room and saw Katarina's ragged clothes and that man raising his hand to her, I could not contain myself. I felt as if my vision had turned red and my blood had reached a boil.

I could never forgive such an affront to my Katarina!

And, lost in my anger, I restrained the man and activated my magic with the intention of burning him to ashes. It was only because of Alan stopping me that I avoided killing a foreign noble with my own hands. This was, for me, an unbelievable situation.

Learning that my heart held such strong emotions confused me, and seeing how I could not overcome them disgusted me.

A wonderful, talented prince? I, this fool who cannot even control his emotions? What an embarrassing, pathetic joke.

Alan left, and I remained alone in the guestroom, clenching my fists.

I heard a light knock on the door. I wanted more time alone, but I could not ignore it, and replied.

“Excuse me,” came a voice from outside. “Prince Jeord, it’s me, Katarina. May I...?”

She had seen me in that deplorable state just earlier, and in all honesty, I did not want to see her right now. However, shaken as I was, I could not muster any decent excuse, and allowed her to come inside. This was an unavoidable mistake, but I planned to find a reason to have her leave as soon as possible.

As she walked in, I noticed that her hair had been combed again and her dress changed to a different one, most likely by her servants.

“Prince Jeord, I am sorry that I could not apologize properly earlier,” she said with a bow.

I was so concentrated on my own shortcomings that I had not given much thought to the need for an apology from her.

“Not at all. I am sorry that I could not care for you as I should have,” I replied.

While I was so busy losing myself to anger, Keith covered her with his jacket, Alan was calm enough to analyze the situation rationally, and Nicol took charge and instructed everyone as to what they needed to do. I, on the other hand...

Now that I calmly looked back on my actions, I realized how useless I had been, and this realization made me feel like even more of a failure.

However, Katarina did not know how I felt.

“Not at all, it was my fault for acting recklessly like that, and I’ve caused you and all the others to worry so much. I’m sorry,” she said, bowing again.

She was such a genuine girl that, unlike those other two-faced nobles, she would never say something just to flatter me. She always spoke honestly, and much more so when it came to those close to her, which is why I felt the need to ask her.

I wanted to know what she thought of my breakdown, as I could expect an unfiltered answer from her. She would probably say that it was scary, and unfit for a royal. And hearing those words coming from her mouth would be a harsh, but much-needed, punishment for me.

“Katarina. When I walked into that room, I was convinced that those men had used violence on you, and I lost control. I was going to use magic on the man that I was restraining, and I did nothing to actually help you. I scared you, did I not?” I asked, and shock appeared in her eyes.

“Well, I was surprised seeing you like that, because I’d never seen you so worked up, but I wasn’t scared. After all, I was okay only because you came to save me,” she said with a smile. “If anything, thank you for being that angry for my sake. I promise that if you’re ever in trouble, I’ll also come to your rescue like that!”

As I heard her words, the profound disgust that I was feeling for myself started melting away. What was I thinking? I should have known that I could not expect any particular answer from Katarina, as she was unpredictable by nature. And her unexpected answers always managed to fill my heart with warmth.

I would have never imagined that someone could be grateful that I became angry for their sake.

“Thank you,” I said, hugging her close to my chest. Her pleasant smell and soft, warm touch filled my chest with joy.

Not that her kind words meant that what I did could be forgiven — I would have to pay the utmost attention so that the situation would

not repeat itself. Yet, there is no greater happiness than knowing that there is someone ready to accept you even when you fall to your lowest.

I knew that as long as Katarina was by my side, I would be fine.

I took my time enjoying embracing my fiancée, who, for once, did not seem to mind it. Then I finally remembered what I had to do. As prince of the kingdom hosting the Assembly, I could not simply disappear for the whole night.

Katarina had left the ball early on, and having her come back right now wearing a different dress, and, worse still, her hair undone, would likely give rise to many an unsavory rumor. I decided that having her go back to her room with the excuse that she was feeling unwell was the best option. I would return to the ball and explain that I was accompanying my tired fiancée to her quarters.

I left the room, and saw Keith waiting next to the door with a preoccupied look on his face. I asked him to bring Katarina back to her room, and made for the hall. On my way, I ran into someone whom I had already met that day.

It was Cezar Dahl, Prince of Ethenell.

“Prince Cezar?”

“I see that you have returned. Is everything alright with your fiancée?” he asked with a smile, and I had to restrain myself lest I let slip a scowl.

“Yes, owing in no small part to your help. I offer you my deepest apologies for involving you, a foreign royal, in such trouble. This night’s events came to their conclusion without any major harm, but, as they involve a foreign power, I would kindly ask that you refrain from making them known to other people.”

In other words, I was asking him to keep it all a secret. He smiled and nodded.

While we were searching for Katarina, it was he, Cezar, who told us where she had gone. He said that he had met her as she was looking for Maria and had helped her in this effort. I would have to ask Katarina about the details on a later date.

Now that I was in debt to a foreign royal, I had to pay him back appropriately. He had helped my fiancée, and he did not look like a dangerous or disagreeable person. However, for some reason that I could not quite put my finger on, I disliked him.

He reminded me of my eldest brother in how he was so likeable on the surface, but without ever showing his true intentions or opinions. Even now, as he had allegedly waited for me out of worry for Katarina, I doubted his true intentions, so much so that the fake smile I was giving him was somewhat stiffer than usual.

He looked at me and gave off a short laugh. He suddenly seemed entirely different — his wild laugh with a dangerous quality to it.

“The more powerful you get, the heavier your burden gets too. Beware your power, or you’ll lose what you hold so dear,” he then whispered to me.

I stared at Cezar in disbelief, unsure of what he had meant, but his face was now only showing the usual, pleasant smile of Ethenell’s prince.

“Let us enjoy the remainder of the ball, shall we?” he said, elegantly going back inside the hall.

I looked at him, frozen with shock, as he walked away.

I would not easily forget those words.

★★★★★

I approached Jeord's room, fearing that I would be scolded, but instead he ended up thanking me. While I was going back to my room with Keith, I saw Nicol, who was done dealing with the aftermath of the incident.

"Are you alright?" he asked me. His face was expressionless, but he was clearly worried deep down.

"Yes, thank you. I'm sorry for making you worry," I said, lowering my head, and he started patting it as he always did with Sophia.

"I'm glad," he said with a smile.

I stared at this unusual sight, but his face quickly went back to a stern expression. "But make sure not to do anything this dangerous ever again," he said.

When he spoke like that, Nicol really sounded like an older brother.

"I won't," I said. "So... what happened to those two nobles?"

When I left the room they'd forced Maria into, they were both lying on the floor, unconscious.

"It turns out that they were two mid-ranking nobles from Lousabre. That country is known for being unsafe in general, but it seems that their nobles' education isn't excellent either. I locked them in an empty room in a corner of the castle for the time being, so that my father and the others can come and take proper care of them."

Back when Keith was kidnapped, we went all the way to Sorcié's border with Lousabre to find him. I learned then that it wasn't a very safe country, but the behavior of those two men was practically barbaric.

"We still have to deal with those two, but I already talked with the high-ranking nobles from Lousabre, so you can rest assured that nothing else like that will happen," he said.

Nicol really was a talented, reliable older brother.

"However, I still have much to do," he said, and left.

I thanked him again and went back to my room. I was told that going back to the ball with a different dress and my hair undone would have made people come up with weird ideas, so I would have to rest here for the rest of the evening.

As a duke's son, however, Keith had to go back. So I was left alone.

I suddenly felt tired from all that running around and climbing trees while wearing that uncomfortable dress, and dove into my bed.

I spent so little time at the ball, and yet so much had happened in one evening. I'd never expected that some nobles would chase after Maria, trying to force her into their room... But I was glad that all ended well.

She wasn't even a villainess like me, yet she had to withstand something so scary. That poor girl.

Maybe, as the protagonist, she was just supposed to get into trouble.

Could this whole affair... be part of the game?!

The Assembly itself was an event within the game, so maybe she was supposed to get into danger, be rescued at the last second by one of the love interests, and then be comforted by him...

Yep, that was very likely.

And this meant that I probably stole someone's event... again. But since I hadn't played FL2, I didn't know who I had stolen it from.

I had good intentions, but maybe I was keeping Maria from finding love. I'd already stolen most of the romantic events from the other characters during the course of the first game...

I was really acting like a rival character, even if I didn't mean to.
What if Maria eventually started hating me for this?

Just thinking of my lovely Maria saying "*I hate you, Lady Katarina!*" made me sad.

All of a sudden, I heard Anne talk to me from outside the door.
"Young miss, Miss Maria Campbell would like to talk to you. May I let her come in?"

"Oh, of course," I replied without thinking twice about it.

But wait, why's Maria here? Did she really start hating me? She could be here to tell me to never talk to her again!

I lost my grip on reality, and I couldn't tell my nightmares apart from reality anymore.

"Excuse me," Maria said as she walked in. She didn't look well, and she was wearing a very serious expression.

Is she really going to cut ties with me...?

"I am really sorry about today, Lady Katarina," she said, bowing deeply.

I was surprised by this unexpected turn of events. *Why is she apologizing to me?*

"Maria, why are you apologizing? You didn't do anything to me," I said, and she looked up.

"You put yourself in danger because of me... If only I had been able to do something on my own, or at least run away properly, this would not have happened... It is all my fault," she said, biting her lip.

I remembered that Maria was the kind of girl who thought she had to take care of everything by herself, and who didn't know how to rely on others.

In the game, too, whatever terrible thing happened to her, she was always trying to help those around her. I thought that was a natural

trait for a game protagonist who is supposed to be loved by everyone, but seeing her behave like this in reality just made me sad.

“Maria, stand up,” I said, and she slowly came out of her bow.

I pinched both of her cheeks and pulled on them. She looked at me cluelessly, and I grinned at her.

“How many times do I have to tell you? You’re very important to me, and I like you a lot. Helping you is not a nuisance at all! I’m happy to do it!” I told her, still pulling on her cheeks. “Stop trying to do everything on your own! You can rely on your friends! Actually, you really should! Got it? Where’s your answer? I can’t hear you!” I said, sounding like the villainess I was supposed to be.

“Y-Yes,” she said, still shocked.

“Eheheh, very well. Keep in mind that you should count on us,” I said, patting her head and feeling like a cool older sister.

She nodded, and her eyes started getting a little bit teary. She must have been much more tired than me, so I told her to go back to her room and rest.

I fell asleep soon after. I had a lot to think about... but I was too tired for that.

★★★★★

“Goodnight, Maria,” Lady Katarina said.

I went back to my room, closed the door, and started crying. My tears, however, were not of sadness, but of joy.

Years ago, before I attended the academy, I used to cry into my pillow so that nobody would hear me. Those tears were cold, and made my heart feel cold as well. Thanks only to Lady Katarina, I learned that tears could be warm, and warm me from the inside too.

After I realized that I could use Light Magic, all the people around me, including my family, grew distant, and I had to care for myself without anyone's help.

All that mattered to me was how people thought of me, and I took to thinking and acting in the way I thought would be most pleasing for them. That became a normal, unavoidable part of life for me. I would have to look out for myself, while doing my best for those around me. Relying on others for help was out of the question.

It was Lady Katarina who taught me that I could, in fact, count on my friends. When I was being bullied at the academy, she would protect me, standing between me and those who meant to harm me. She was my savior.

And things did not change when we both started working at the Ministry. Lady Katarina would always protect me, even at the cost of her own safety. Receiving help from someone was so unusual for me that I could only worry that, because of all the trouble I meant for them, they would come to hate me.

But today, once more, as I silently asked for help in my heart, it was Lady Katarina's face that crossed my mind.

Two foreign noblemen approached me and forced me to follow them in their room. Thinking of my friend comforted me in this moment of fear. This was why, when she later hugged me, I could not help but cry with relief.

I am always in need of help, yet Lady Katarina does not hate me. She says that I mean a lot to her, and that I am no nuisance. She does so much for me, and I cannot do anything in return.

Even today, as my heart was still wrung by the horror of what had happened, her smile and kind words were enough to calm me down.

I really want to do something for you, Lady Katarina.

Not because I fear that you may come to hate me, as was the case before, but because you mean so much to me.

The tears subsided, and I cleaned my face with a handkerchief. I had to collect myself and focus on my work.

I will do my best and move forward, so that one day, maybe, I will be able to repay Lady Katarina.

Chapter 5: The Assembly Ends

For the first time in what felt like forever, I managed to wake up by myself.

I sat up on the bed and looked at the sun shining in through the window. Another beautiful day.

Today was the last day of the Assembly, so we would just exchange a few final farewells and it would all be over.

Counting the days I had to stay here to attend the seminar, I had been in the castle for quite a while now. I was starting to get attached to this guestroom, but this was my last time sleeping in it.

Today I'd be going back to Claes Manor, and starting tomorrow, it would be business as usual at the Ministry.

I was wondering whether taking such a long leave had been a nuisance for my coworkers when I heard a knock on the door.

“Excuse me,” Anne said, walking into my room.

The sight of me sitting up in bed must have shocked her.

“What?! Young miss, did you wake up yourself?!”

“Yes, I went to bed very early yesterday,” I replied, not sure whether I should feel amused or offended by her surprise.

I usually didn't wake up unless someone stripped all the duvets, blankets, and sheets from my bed, so I could see why she'd be shocked, but still...

“To think that you would become able to get up by yourself... Young miss, I am so proud...” she started saying, sounding honestly moved.

Now I was the surprised one, seeing her react like that, and I thought that maybe I should try to wake up by myself from now on.

Once she was done being shocked, Anne, together with the other maids, started preparing me for the Assembly. As they were doing that, we were told that I had a guest.

What am I going to do? I'm not done preparing yet! I thought, but when I heard that it was Mary and Sophia, I immediately let them in. I wanted to apologize and thank them for yesterday.

Both of their faces were grim.

“Lady Katarina, is everything alright?” the worried Mary asked me.

“Yes. I’m not hurt anywhere or anything. I’m alright!” I replied, and she immediately looked relieved.

“Yesterday Nicol told me that you were fine, but I needed to see you for myself. I know that it may be a nuisance, given the early hour, but I was incredibly worried,” she said.

Thinking back on just how many people I’d made worry, I felt bad for my actions once again. I gave Maria that speech about relying on others, but I obviously needed to learn to do the same.

“I’m sorry for making you worry. And thank you, too,” I said, bowing in gratitude to my two friends.

“Not at all! I could not do anything for you,” Mary said.

“I also wanted to search for you, but I was told not to...” Sophia concurred.

The former sounded frustrated, and the latter sad.

Yesterday, when I disappeared, Sophia and Mary wanted to join Jeord and the others in looking for me, but they were told to wait because it was dangerous.

I thought that was a good decision. Two young women had gone missing, and the last thing you’d want at a time like that is for two more to go around looking for them and disappear too.

The men who had kidnapped Maria were two ignorant, foolish nobles, and they could have hurt Mary and Sophia as well. They were smart enough to understand that, so they waited as they were told to, but they still seemed frustrated that they couldn't help.

"I'm really happy that you two care so much about me. And if you came after me, it could have been dangerous, so I'm also happy that you two waited for the others to come back," I said, taking one hand from each one into mine.

Their eyes were still a bit teary, but they looked nowhere near as grim as when they'd first stepped into my room. Then they left, saying that they didn't want to interfere with my preparations.

When I was done, I looked into the mirror. The girl who stared back at me, even if not as fancy as the one who had joined the ball yesterday, definitely looked like a duke's daughter.

I heard another knock on the door, and I immediately thought that Mary and Sophia had forgotten something in my room, but this time it was Jeord visiting me.

Why is he here already? Isn't it too early for the Assembly? I asked myself as I let him inside.

He was already done with his preparations, and I was happy to see that his tired expression from yesterday had gone back to his usual one.

"Good morning, Katarina," he said with a bright smile on his face.

"Good morning, Prince Jeord. Is it time to join the Assembly already? I think it's still early," I replied, and his smile turned into a grin.

"No, that is not why I am here. I wanted to ask you about some of the details regarding yesterday's incident."

"What details?"

I had already explained to Nicol and the others that I'd climbed into that room through a tree, that I'd found Maria, and just about everything else.

"About the man who helped you find out where Maria was."

"Ohh!"

I finally realized what he meant. That would have been Cezar, who I just so happened to run into in the garden. He was waiting right outside the noblemen's room, so Jeord must have seen him when he barged in.

"It would seem that you remember. So, may I ask you where you met him?" Jeord said, and his face now had a hint of seriousness on it.

"I was running after Maria in the garden, and I ran into him by coincidence. I asked him whether he had seen a blonde maid and said that I was looking for her, and he helped me out."

Of course I had also met him earlier, while I was pretending to be a servant, but I felt like that detail was better kept untold.

"I see," Jeord said, looking relaxed again. "It is just as he told me. I am glad that nothing improper was taking place."

"Nothing improper'?"

"Pay it no mind. In any case, do you know who that man is?"

"He is... some kind of foreign noble, right?"

After seeing him yesterday, I was convinced that he wasn't a servant, but I didn't have the time to ask him who he actually was and where he came from.

Jeord, taken aback, sighed. "So you did not know. Why am I not surprised?"

"Is he a famous person?" I asked, judging from his words that I was missing something very important.

"Yes. He was the subject of much womanly talk during this year's Assembly, but, somehow, it seems that you have heard none of it."

I wasn't the most savvy when it came to that kind of high-society chatting, admittedly. Unlike Mary, I wasn't good at asking other noble ladies for information either.

"You still had not greeted him, I believe, so that is understandable. However you will certainly have to do it today, so please try to remember what I tell you now."

"Y-Yes," I said, nodding seriously, but Jeord grinned again.

"You surely know of Ethenell, the kingdom across the sea. The man who helped you last night is Cezar Dahl, its prince."

"P-Prince?!" I yelped in shock.

He did look like a high-ranking noble, but a royal? A *prince*?! He'd even told me his name, but I had no idea.

I was sure that I'd learned the names of the royal families of the four guest countries during the seminar...

"Was there a royal family called Dahl?" I mumbled, mostly to myself.

"You probably have not heard of it during lessons. I met him for the first time during the Assembly too. Ethenell, as the new king took the throne, has undergone several important reforms. The instructors had probably simply failed to keep up to date. As he was sent here to represent his country, we now know how important of a person he is. But apart from that, we have little to no information on him."

I was listening to Jeord's explanation with my mouth open in disbelief. This meant that he was the most important person from Ethenell in the Assembly...

I thought back on our exchanges so far. He found me sleeping in the garden, pretending to be a servant, and asking for stories from abroad. This wouldn't have been that much of a problem if he was

just a servant, but since he was a royal, what I did could be considered very rude...

Jeord smiled at my worries. "Seeing how he acted yesterday, we can surmise that he is likely a good person. You need not worry too much. Of course, given the details of that incident, I asked him to keep it a secret. As such, today, you will greet each other as if it is the first time you are meeting each other," he instructed me. "Now I have work to do, so I must go. I will come back here once it is time for the Assembly."

Jeord left, and now that I was all alone, I thought about the things I had just learned about Cezar. Who would have thought that the friendly man who told me stories in the garden was a prince? He just didn't *feel* like a royal. He had the same relatable, friendly aura around him that Sora did.

But yesterday he had looked completely different — like a prince, one could say. And he was even more handsome than I had thought at first, seeing him as a servant. He was on the same level as all the other love interests from *Fortune Lover*.

Now that I thought about it, I remembered hearing from Mary that Ethenell's prince was popular with the other ladies at the Assembly. If she was talking about Cezar, that made perfect sense...

But this would also mean that I asked him, in person, whether Ethenell's prince was handsome...

Now I understood why he didn't want to talk about that.

"Haha, I guess that would make sense... but..."

I stared at the ceiling. I found out that someone I had become friends with was actually a very important person, and all of a sudden I felt an inexplicable loneliness welling up inside me.

It was time for the last farewells of the Assembly, and Jeord came to escort me to the hall where everyone would meet.

Today, “everyone” only meant the highest-ranking nobles, so there weren’t that many people around.

I started making the rounds with Jeord, greeting the various representatives from the guest countries. He was actually supposed to have finished doing this on the previous day, but he said that since he was only the third oldest prince, it wasn’t that much of a problem.

Here in our kingdom, the king decided which one of his sons would succeed him, so Jeord still had a chance of taking the crown. But the way he talked about it showed that he didn’t really care about it. And being king sounded exhausting, so I could definitely understand where he was coming from.

We met several princes and princesses, and eventually we reached *him*.

“I am Cezar Dahl, Prince of Ethenell. It is my utmost pleasure to meet you,” Cezar said, pretending we had never seen each other before.

His hair was combed, his clothes were luxurious, and, in general, everything about him was fit for royalty.

He’s incredible! He’s so good at playing this part! Wait, is he playing a part now or was he doing that before? I thought to myself while I said my introduction.

“I am Katarina Claes. The pleasure is mine.”

Anyone looking at us would have believed that this really was our first time meeting each other.



We then went on to exchange the usual lines:

“Coming all the way here must have been tiresome. Please rest once you are back home.”

“I hope we may have an opportunity to meet again.”

And so on and so forth.

I still felt a bit lonely about it, but I managed to behave like a proper noble lady throughout the whole thing.

I looked at Jeord to get confirmation of how well I’d done, but he was watching Cezar walk away, and his eyes had a mysterious glint in them.

He said he thought Cezar wasn’t a bad person, so what’s the matter?

“Prince Jeord? What’s wrong?” I asked him.

“Nothing,” he said, looking surprised by being addressed so suddenly. “Let us greet the next person.”

I looked at him, with his usual perfect smile, and realized that he wouldn’t answer no matter how much I insisted. So I just followed him as he approached more foreign representatives.

Once we were done greeting each other, there was nothing left to do on that day. Except for those who had special reasons to remain, everyone departed for their own countries, and the Assembly was officially concluded.

As all the foreign guests went back to their countries, we local guests would go back home. The servants prepared my luggage, and I was supposed to wait in my room until I was ready to leave, but I couldn’t resist going out to the garden on my own.

Two days before, Cezar had promised me he would meet me here one last time. Back then that was a promise between two friendly servants, but we now both knew that this wasn't true. He was actually a prince. Go figure.

I assumed that there was no way he would come, now that his identity was revealed, but I had to wait just in case. It felt lonely to part ways like that, with only the formal greeting back at the Assembly.

I didn't know how long I waited — it felt like it could have been several hours, or just a few minutes. Then, I heard a familiar voice addressing me from behind.

"Katarina."

I turned around and saw Cezar, looking confused. "I really thought you wouldn't come here anymore," he said.

"I also thought you wouldn't come, Prince Cezar," I replied, and his expression turned serious.

"No need to call me that. When I'm here, I'm just Cezar."

"Okay, Cezar!" I quickly said, realizing how he felt, and he smiled. It wasn't that elegant, rehearsed smile I had seen earlier at the Assembly, but his natural childlike smile that made his teeth show.

"Still, you really got me. I thought you were a servant, and then I find out you're a noble lady — a duke's daughter no less — and even engaged to a prince!" he said with a laugh, but that definitely applied to him too.

"And what about you? I was shocked when I learned that you weren't a servant, but a prince!" I said, puffing out my cheeks.

"You have a point," he said, amused.

I was relieved to see that, even now that we knew the truth about each other, he behaved as friendly as before. Seeing how tight and

proper his greetings had been back at the Assembly, I'd worried that he'd drawn a line in the sand which I wasn't allowed to cross anymore.

"Say, Cezar," I said, remembering a doubt I had, "you said that you were a mercenary before going back to your home, but was that a lie?" His nimble movements made perfect sense for a mercenary, but that was no job for a prince.

"No, it's all true. My father was the king, but my mother was just one of his many commoner concubines. I left the palace as soon as I was of age and started wandering around, and eventually I became a mercenary. But my older brother, who had defended me as a child, was still at the palace, so I went back to help him," he explained casually, as if it was the most boring thing in the world.

I, meanwhile, was just as shocked as when I'd heard he was a prince for the first time.

A prince leaving the palace to become a mercenary? What kind of fairy tale is this? It'd been easier to process if he'd just told me it was all a lie.

"That's an impressive history... It sounds like something out of a novel," is what I finally managed to say. "I wonder why none of the other ladies were talking about it."

He was a handsome man on par with the best of our kingdom, and, apparently, he was talked about a lot during the Assembly. But I heard absolutely nothing about him being a mercenary.

"Well," he replied, "I'm not hiding it or anything, but it's the first time I've joined an international event like this, so I think it's normal that there's not that much information about me going around."

I remembered that Jeord had also said that he knew next to nothing about Cezar.

"My plan was to help my brother from behind the curtains, but, as you can see, I was dragged here onto the main stage," he said.

But between his looks and how flawlessly he moved around in the castle's hall, that made no sense to me. "You're made to be on the stage of high society! You're a natural!" I told him.

"Really? I'm very good at mixing with commoners, actually," he said with a grin.

I honestly had no idea how that could be possible, given his looks, but it could just be one of his talents.

"Whoops, time is running short. I must go back and see my brother as soon as possible," he said, and his shoulders dropped.

This was goodbye, for real. We'd only known each other for a few days, but we'd definitely reached the point where we could call each other "friend."

And I really liked him, too. From the first time I met him, he was really friendly and easy to talk to. Seeing him go made me feel lonely. The next time that the Assembly would be held in Sorcié would be ten years from now. I couldn't imagine seeing him anywhere else, since he was a foreign prince.

And, even ten years later, there was no way to know whether we'd both attend the Assembly. This could well be the last time we'd ever meet.

Having to part ways with someone... It was the first time that I'd had to experience that in this life. It reminded me of when I'd departed my previous life, but with a huge difference: this time, I could say goodbye.

"We've only known each other for a few days, but I had a lot of fun. Stay safe as you go back home. I wish you the best," I told him.

He showed me his heartfelt, youthful smile. “It was fun for me as well. I wish you the best too, Katarina. Oh, and stop sleeping outdoors.”

That was the last thing he told me before quickly walking away with the wave of his hand.

I watched his back get farther and farther away, and the fragrant spring wind gently caressed my face.

★★★★★

“Are we ready to leave?” I asked as soon as I was back in my room.

“Cezar, you know it’s almost time to leave. Just where were you off to?” Janne replied, sounding annoyed.

“I was just saying goodbye to a friend.”

“Friend? Is it that servant girl you’ve been sneaking off to meet over and over?”

“Yeah. That’s the one.”

“Weren’t you talking about bringing her back home with us? Did she refuse?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

Of course, now that I knew her true identity, I could never ask her to come back with me with Ethenell. I just couldn’t be bothered to explain that to Janne, who looked surprised.

“A girl who resists your advances? Now that’s unheard of. It seems that you actually liked her, which is rare in itself... Do you want me to help?”

This childhood friend of mine never offered to do things like that, but I went ahead and refused.

“It’s not my style to keep pushing after I’ve been told no,” I said.

“If you say so...” Janne said, looking somewhat disappointed.

He was probably serious when he said that I should take her as my wife. But with Katarina, that would be impossible.

Maybe I could have had a chance if she were a low-ranking noble lady, but she was the daughter of a duke and was engaged to a prince. Anything I did to her would become an international issue.

It was clear that her fiancé loved her madly. I remembered what had happened the night before — Prince Jeord was looking for her as if his life depended on it. When I had met him during the various Assembly events, he always showed a perfect, calculated smile and elegant, polite demeanor. I thought that he was very comfortable in his role as prince, despite his young age.

But later, when I saw him near that guestroom, he was a completely different person. His elegance had given way to an anxious frenzy.

I talked to him, interested in why he was like that, and he told me that he was looking for Katarina. That was when I first learned that the two were engaged, but, hiding my surprise, I just told him what had happened so far and where I thought she could be.

As soon as I told him, he looked distraught and ran after Katarina, and it was then that I realized how much he loved her.

To me, seeing his passion was like looking at the purity of a child. I was raised in that disgusting palace, and went on to live my youth as a mercenary. To me, feelings such as these were something to marvel at.

But now, as they had to decide which of the four princes would become the next king, their country was sure to lose its beauty and tranquility. Even if the princes themselves wished for peace and equity, those around them could wish for a different turn of events.

I knew that from experience, and I decided to give him a little warning. Unfortunately, that seemed to make him suspicious towards me. The last time we met each other, I could see that his eyes weren't friendly. They weren't hostile, either, but it was obvious that he was wary of me.

I regretted sticking my nose into things that didn't concern me. I would normally never say things like that, and certainly not to foreign princes, knowing that nothing good could come out of it. However, after learning that he was Katarina's fiancé, I felt the urge to provide him with some unsolicited advice.

Maybe that was proof that I was into Katarina as well. After all, if her engagement with Jeord were to be canceled, I liked her enough to try and persuade her to come to Ethenell with me.

We just told each other goodbye, but for some reason, I felt like our paths would cross once again in the not-so-distant future. I didn't tell her about that feeling, however.

When I was working as a mercenary, I began having a similar feeling right before I received news of my brother becoming king. I had a very good sixth sense for things like these.

'Til next time, Katarina, I thought in my heart as I told her goodbye.

The Kingdom of Sorcié flourished thanks to the many resources of its land and the development of magic through the years. I had heard that there was considerable turmoil during the reign of the previous king. But now, coming here, I saw nothing but peace and harmony in this beautiful kingdom.

And the fourth prince was just as impressive as the rumors said...
Actually no, he was even more impressive.

I had so much to tell my brother, and I felt eager to see him again as I departed for Ethenell.



All the foreign guests had departed, and it was time for us to go back home.

Jeord looked busy with the aftermath of the Assembly, so I quickly said goodbye and, together with Keith, rode in the carriage that would bring us back to Claes Manor.

“The Assembly felt so long, yet so short,” I said to myself while looking at the changing view out of the window.

“The whole time I was worried about whether you would do anything problematic,” Keith, who was sitting in front of me, replied coldly.

“But I didn’t make any major screw ups, so like, it’s cool, right?” I said, gesturing to emphasize my point, but my brother grimaced.

“‘Major screw ups’? What would you call running out of the ball to climb up a tree and jump into a guest room?”

“Well, that’s... You know, Jeord said we should pretend that never happened, so...”

Yesterday’s incident was caused by the ignorance of two foreign nobles, and making that public would turn into a huge problem, which is why it was decided that we would all just forget about it.

Of course, this was on the condition that the two men would apologize to Maria and be punished for what they did. According to Jeord, since Lousabre couldn’t afford being on Sorcié’s bad side, they would probably punish those men more than enough.

And so, as far as everyone knew, I had simply felt unwell and left the ball early, before I could have done anything that could warrant being scolded by Mother.

Which is why I asked Keith to keep the whole story from our family... but he just sighed at me.

"Big Sis, listen. Even if everyone decided to keep it a secret, would you really believe that no one would tell the parents of an unmarried noble lady? And Father was at the Assembly to begin with, so our family already knows everything."

"What?!"

I felt a shiver run down my spine. I knew that Father was attending, but I assumed he didn't know anything about the incident. And if he says that *our family* already knows everything...

"Does that include... Mother?!" I asked, already despairing, and Keith nodded.

"Of course. She knows that you tore your dress apart, climbed up a tree, and barged into a guest room on the second floor."

"...Let's bring the carriage back to the castle! We'll stay there one more night!"

"Mother has already ordered both me and the servants to bring you home posthaste."

"Nooooo!"

The relief I was feeling at the Assembly finishing disappeared in a flash, as did my eagerness to go back home after so long.

I wasn't going back home. I was going back to a dreadful prison of scolding.

I don't wanna go...

When I stepped inside, I was immediately greeted by the sight of my mother, who had been told that we would soon be there.

She quickly dragged me to her room and subjected me to an endless sermon. In comparison, those lessons at the castle were short and sweet.

When she was finally done the sun had already set, and I groggily walked back to my room, carrying with me a pile of books on etiquette that I had been ordered to study.

“Whew, I’m spent...” I mumbled as I threw myself on the bed.

“Seeing that you are this tired, would you rather stay home from work tomorrow?” asked Anne, who was unpacking my stuff.

I’d almost forgotten about it, but now that the Assembly was over, I had to go back to work.

“I’ve already taken so many days off in a row, and if I stayed home I’d just be forced to study etiquette with Mother. I’d rather go,” I said, thinking that going to the Ministry, where I could also see Maria, sounded much better than staying here with Mother scolding me and teaching me how to behave properly. Plus, I still wanted to ask Maria and Sora about their secret mission.

I prepared for the next morning and went to bed. The next day I would ride in the carriage to the Ministry for the first time in a while.

On my way to my department’s office, I met Sora.

“Morning. Sorry for getting you in trouble at the Assembly,” he told me.

“You? Getting me in trouble?”

“That incident with Maria. While I went on with my mission, I was also supposed to look out for her. But when those two men started chasing after her I lost sight of them, so it’s my fault that you did what you did.”

It wasn't surprising that a girl as cute as Maria would have someone act as her bodyguard. Sora was much stronger than he looked, and he was used to dealing with all kinds of unsavory people.

"But it was me who decided to run after her. It was Jeord and the others who saved her, and all's well that ends well, right?" I said, and he laughed.

"I knew you'd say something like that. Thanks. But try to be careful, okay?"

I'd lost count of how many times I'd heard those words in the last couple of days. "I will," I said, as I had to all the others, and we continued walking to the office.

Just as we reached the door, I remembered that I wanted to ask him something. "Say, Sora, you and Maria were on a mission at the castle, right? How did that go?" I'd almost forgotten about it, given all happened in the meantime.

"Well..." he started saying, but the door opened in front of us and a familiar face came out of it.

"Oh, Mister Cyrus!"

"Katarina Claes, Sora Smith. Good morning. Back at the Ministry, I see," he said, looking exhausted, and then walked away.

I wondered why he was in our office and why he looked so tired.

"He looked so beat. Any idea why?" I asked Sora.

"He was at the Assembly too, and don't forget that he's still single. I can't imagine how many women must have approached him," he replied.

That would have explained it. Cyrus wasn't used to talking with women, especially young ones. Spending three days surrounded by them must have been draining.

And that also explained why I didn't see him at the Assembly: he was probably hidden inside a swarm of girls. I really felt for him, the poor guy.

"Good morning. It's good to see you all," I said, walking inside the door, and I heard three replies.

"Morning."

"Good morning! You must be tired after the Assembly."

"Good morning."

It was still too early for everyone to be there, but my older colleagues were already working, looking exactly like they did when I last saw them.

Laura had covered her muscular body with a cute, frilly dress, and Hart was sitting in a corner, almost invisible, staring at paperwork.

We went to greet Larna, the department director, who had come in unusually early. Normally she'd come in just in time for the start of the workday. She was a very unique woman, and she proudly said that she preferred working outside, running around from one place to the other. Seeing her sitting behind a desk was weird.

"I am coming back to work starting today, since the Assembly is over," I said, and she smiled at me.

"I know just how tiring the Assembly was for you. I'm sure you still can't give 100%, but just do what you can," she said.

For a moment, I was confused that she knew how the Assembly had been, but then I remembered that she, too, was a noble lady and was probably attending as well. But she was a master of disguise, and even the face that I was looking at as we spoke was nothing but a carefully crafted fake. Neither I nor anyone else here knew what she really looked like. Even if I'd met her at the Assembly, I probably wouldn't have noticed.

Despite attending, though, she looked as brisk as always. She didn't look tired in the least.

"Excuse me, Miss Larna," Sora interrupted my thoughts, "I would like to report on my mission."

Cyrus stopped our conversation earlier, so I still didn't know what his mission was about.

"Cyrus told me that you already reported to him earlier. Good job."

"I am sorry that I could not gain any useful information," he said, lowering his gaze apologetically. Did that mean that he had failed his mission?

"Sora, what was your mission, anyway?" I couldn't resist asking.

"I told Sora not to tell you anything so that you could concentrate on the Assembly, but I guess it doesn't matter anymore," Larna said, and started explaining.

It turned out that the daughter of a not particularly wealthy baron from the kingdom's outskirts had disappeared. Since it happened in a part of the countryside which was considered to be safe, everyone was in a frenzy. What's more, the girl was a magic user, which was rare for a noble of that rank. This made her loved ones worry for her even more.

Her sudden disappearance, while surprising, wasn't exactly unthinkable. The first assumption was that she was either kidnapped or had run away. However, the family received no notice from the kidnappers, and she had no reason to leave her home on her own.

The family then asked for the help of the Ministry, which found out something suspicious. The servants who were working in the mansion that day — both those who were supposed to be accompanying the girl and even some of the farmers working nearby — couldn't remember what happened on the day of the incident.

Their memories were clouded, and no matter how much they tried, they couldn't recall the facts. The Ministry assumed that Dark Magic was involved, and the people who were most familiar with it were tasked with investigating.

Sora and Maria visited that countryside manor, and, by sheer coincidence, Maria used her Light Magic to cure a wound on the hand of a farmer. When she did that, the farmer recalled seeing a carriage, probably belonging to nobles, running around near the mansion.

That was all they managed to gather, but at least they now knew that it was very likely that both Dark Magic and nobles, probably high-ranking ones at that, were involved. The next logical step was to send Maria and Sora, who could sense Dark Magic, to the International Assembly, where most of the country's nobles would be. They would pretend to be servants and intervene if anything happened.

This mission was a bigger deal than I thought! When Dark Magic's involved, who knows what could happen. Scary!

"I also tried to investigate a bit myself, but found nothing interesting. What about you, Katarina?" Larna asked me, and I tried to recall anything relevant that I could have heard at the Assembly.

Marriage proposals for Keith, marriage proposals for Nicol... Lots of marriage proposals... And then of course that incident with Maria and those two stupid foreign nobles. Could it be that...?

"Is it possible that the two foreign nobles who tried to kidnap Maria also kidnapped that girl?"

"Given the timing of the incident, right before the start of the Assembly, we considered the possibility of foreign nobles being involved. However, it's unlikely that anyone outside Sorcié knows about Dark Magic, and, more importantly, the kidnapping was

carried out too well. One would need to be familiar with the place. So the culprit is probably someone from within the kingdom," Larna replied.

She had a point, but after hearing all of those stories from Cezar about how unsafe other countries were, I couldn't help but feel suspicious. He even said that people abroad practiced human trafficking, and the government wouldn't even care.

Why was I even discussing human trafficking with him, anyway? I thought to myself. I was running after Maria. Then, in the garden, he saved me when I heard something dangerous-sounding from those old foreign nobles...

That's right! They were saying that one could buy magic-wielding children from Sorcié in a harbor!

I was so shocked by that information that I thought I needed to talk to Jeord and the others about it, but the whole Maria incident made me forget about it.

I explained what I remembered to Larna, and her face suddenly darkened.

"The Ministry has information on all the children who can use magic, and right now that girl is the only missing one. If those men were talking about buying a child like that, it's very likely that they were talking about the baron's daughter. Do you remember what those two men looked like?"

"I didn't see their faces clearly... All I know is that they had a lot of extra weight around their waists." To be honest, though, that applied to *most* old noblemen.

"I see. But still, how could foreigners manage to sneak into a noble's mansion, and how could they know of Dark Magic to begin with? Unless, of course, someone from Sorcié helped them..." she said,

speaking mostly to herself as she considered various possibilities with a finger on her lip.

After a moment, she spoke again. “Thank you, Katarina, that information will prove useful,” she said. “I’ll tell Cyrus about it and we’ll look further into it. You just go back to deciphering the Dark Covenant. And if you remember anything else, come and tell me.”

She then quickly left the office.

“There she goes...” I said, and then noticed Sora looking at me in disbelief.

“How does one manage to just *forget* about something like that?” he asked.

“Hm, I guess after the incident with Maria I just couldn’t think of anything else.”

Sora sighed. “Anyway,” he said, “it’s incredible that you, knowing nothing, were able to find out more information than me.” He sounded genuinely impressed.

“It was nothing but a coincidence though.”

“Coincidence, right... Just like with the Dark Covenant.”

“Yes, just like that...”

Seeing Sora’s expression becoming more serious, I suddenly felt nervous.

I’m not doing anything bad, I swear... The Dark Familiar and the Dark Covenant are just parts of the game, and I can’t do anything about that. I didn’t choose to be the villainess, so what could I do?

Maybe Sora, with some sixth sense unique to the game’s love interests, was getting suspicious of me. But what he said next disproved that thought.

"You really get caught up in the most dangerous stuff. Be *real* careful, alright?" he said, clearly worrying about me.

I felt relieved, and very happy. The people around me, far from suspecting me of doing anything bad, were always looking out for me, and that filled me with joy.

"Thank you!" I replied, and then we got to work.

I left Sora and went to the meeting room which I was using to work on the covenant, and found that Maria was already there.

"Good morning, Lady Katarina. You must be tired after the Assembly," she said, and I was relieved to see that her face, which had looked so grim just two days ago, was back to normal.

"Good morning. You must be too."

"Oh, not at all. In the end, my mission bore no fruit," she said, disappointed.

She probably hadn't heard of the latest news yet, so I repeated to her what I told Larna earlier.

"You are incredible, Lady Katarina. To think that you would obtain so much information without knowing anything about the incident!" she said, looking at me with awe in her eyes.

"It was just a coincidence..." I said, gesturing the undeserved awe away as if it was a fly.

"Larna said that she thinks a Sorcié noble must be involved and that she'll look into it. What do you think?" I asked her, and she put a finger to her chin thoughtfully.

"I agree with her. Someone from our own kingdom must be involved. I visited the town where the girl lived, and it would not be easy for a foreigner to carry out a kidnapping there," she said.

Unlike me, she had actually been to the scene of the alleged crime.

“And how did it look? I heard that Dark Magic was probably involved, but was that usual dark aura around?”

“It was a peaceful country town where you would never expect any crime to take place. Everyone, including both the farmers and the baron’s family, knew everyone else, and they all seemed to be on good terms regardless of status,” she explained. “But given that, they would probably notice immediately — and remember it well — if they saw an outsider. The fact that they did not is what felt strange. It was enough to convince me that Dark Magic was at play, even without the usual aura that comes with it. And then I cured someone’s wounds with Light Magic...”

“And when you used your magic, they remembered what happened on that day, right?”

“Yes. It was a coincidence, of course, but I think that my Light Magic counteracted the Dark Magic. I also tried doing it with other people who said that their memories were hazy, but it did not work.”

“You tried it on other people?” I repeated, surprised.

“Yes. But unfortunately none of them remembered anything.”

She didn’t know whether that depended on how the Dark Magic was used, the people that it was used on, or the limits of her own magic, but she was only able to get information from that one person, who had seen something that looked like a noble’s carriage.

“But thanks to you, we now know that foreign nobles are involved, and that human trafficking is taking place in a harbor somewhere within our country. Your help has been so useful!” she said, giving me that impressed look once again.

Oh, Maria, stop! When you look at me like that, I feel so, so...

All of a sudden, Maria dropped her gaze. “I want to find that girl as soon as possible. She is only twelve years old... She must be so scared right now,” she said, now looking horrified.

“Maria...”

After those two men dragged her into their room two days ago, thinking of that girl being kidnapped must have hit close to home for her.

“Yes, let’s do our best and save her as soon as possible. Dark Magic or not, it’s no sweat! Remember Keith’s kidnapping? And the tanuki mission? We solved those without a hitch!”

We had already been through two (three, if we count the Raphael thing at the academy) Dark Magic-related incidents, and we were successful. We even defeated a dragon during the Ministry’s examination — one or two old foreign nobles wouldn’t be an issue.

Okay, technically it was Pochi who defeated the dragon, but still... Wait, that’s right! I was supposed to keep him hidden all the time at the castle, so I forgot about Pochi!

“If Dark Magic is involved, maybe Pochi could help! Pochi!” I shouted towards my shadow, and I got a brisk “Woof!” as a reply.

I’d forgotten all about him because of the seminar and the Assembly, so I was happy to see that he was still doing fine. *I’m so glad familiars don’t need to be fed...*

“Yes! Pochi is always with you after all,” Maria said with a smile, hearing him woof.

“Yeah, he’s always there to save me when I’m in trouble,” I said proudly.

I wondered why he didn’t come out to save me while those stupid nobles were going to hurt me at the castle, though. *Maybe it’s because I didn’t call him?*

“Lady Katarina? Is anything the matter?” Maria asked worriedly, seeing me lost in thought.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Now let’s go back to the covenants! Maybe there’s some spell that can help us save the baron’s daughter!” I said.

Pochi probably had a good reason not to come out, and it’s not like I’d asked him to either.

Next time I’m in trouble, I’ll make sure to call him for help, I thought, and opened the Dark Covenant in front of me for the first time in a while.

Seeing the pages full of those complex letters I didn’t understand immediately made me feel tired.

★★★★★

“You’ve done your best, Sarah. Thank you,” he said, caressing my head, but the disappointment I was feeling at my own failure didn’t go away.

My mission was to borrow his help and sneak into the International Assembly to get close to Katarina Claes. She had the Dark Covenant, which we had been looking for. I was supposed to spy on her and, if necessary, take away her memories — but I wasn’t able to approach her at all.

It was her Dark Familiar that had kept me from my task. Once it noticed me, it did anything it could to hinder me. As soon as I tried to get close, it would come out and bare its fangs at me.

That ungrateful mongrel, intimidating the very person who created it...

And the fact that Katarina was able to go on living normally while hiding a Dark Familiar in her shadow was bizarre. The man to whom I gave the dragon familiar ended up being consumed by darkness and going insane, but nothing of the sort was happening to her.

I wanted to find out more about her, but she was too well protected. She had so many supporters that acting uncouthly could risk endangering *him*.

Ever since he saved me from that dark, terrifying place, my feelings towards him had always been the same. I'd happily give my life for him.

I couldn't let anything happen to him. The only wish I had was to protect him and to make him happy, whatever the cost. Even if it meant taking someone else's life.

★★★★★

I, Susanna Randall, better known as Larna Smith, was talking with Jeffrey Stuart, oldest prince of Sorcié and my fiancé, in his room.

"So you people at the castle already knew of it," I commented, surprised.

When I had gotten some very useful information from one of my subordinates, Katarina Claes, I rushed to tell Jeffrey about it. But he had already heard about it from somewhere else. Furthermore, he had already sent one of his men to investigate, so he had more and better information than me.

"You're as fast as always at finding out things and reacting to them, I see," I said, and he gave me his usual relaxed smile.

"You know I prefer working behind the curtains, unlike you."

That was a troubling thing to say, if I really thought about it. It could have been unfit for a prince, but it wasn't surprising coming from Jeffrey, who was so obsessed with his brothers that he'd basically stalk them continuously.

"You could have told me about your new information though. Why didn't you?" I asked, as if I wanted to scold him, and he lowered his eyebrows in a very rehearsed-looking apologetic expression.

“I only got it two days ago, and considering where it came from, I had to make sure that it was trustworthy.”

“Why? Who gave it to you?”

“The prince from Ethenell who was at the Assembly representing his country.”

“...That’s quite the source.”

“Yes, which is why I needed time to investigate properly, and, of course, to convince the prince not to talk about it outside of here.”

Satisfied by his explanation, I decided not to complain about his delay anymore.

“And it turns out that the prince got the information from the same place as Lady Katarina.”

“How so?”

“They happened to be together at the time.”

“I see...”

That meant that the sources were stating the same facts, but more importantly, I wondered why Katarina was together with Ethenell’s prince.

“I’ve written down all the details in these documents, so you can read them at your own convenience back at the Ministry. I still have much left to do now that the Assembly is over, so much so that I’ve had to cut back on enjoying my lovely brothers,” he said.

I really didn’t need to hear that last part, I thought, as he handed me the documents. Anyway, it was true that he was busy, so I quickly left and started reading while riding in the carriage that would take me back to the Ministry.

The report was a detailed, easy-to-read explanation of why Katarina and Ethenell’s prince were together at the Assembly, and how they

got their information. Jeffrey's attachment to his brothers bordered on perverse, but he was incredibly skilled at his work.

And the information on those documents, as I thought, made it seem likely that Dark Magic was at play.

Lately incidents like these had been on the rise, and I had a feeling that Sarah, the woman who disappeared from the mansion of that marquess and had tried to obtain Dark Magic, was involved. She was sometimes witnessed near the sites of crimes involving Dark Magic, but we still had no idea what her intentions were.

I could tell, however, that she probably wasn't acting alone. I believed that there was somebody pulling her strings — someone powerful who had considerable influence within the kingdom.

Now that the royals weren't fighting for the crown anymore, Sorcié was at peace. Were these mysterious figures planning to stain the country with blood once again?

If that's the case, I must stop them at all costs.

Sitting alone inside my carriage, I bit my lip.

★★★★★

A few days had passed since the end of the Assembly. After enjoying a satisfying lunch, I was working on the covenant together with Maria, when Sora, who was doing deliveries around various departments, stopped by.

"How's it going? Made any progress?" he asked, with a teasing smile.

"Spending time at the castle without thinking about it has made it even more difficult to understand," I said, puffing up my cheeks.

We heard a sudden knock on the door, which promptly opened. Maria, Sora, and I all stared, confused, as we saw Larna barge in.

"It turned out that Katarina's information was on point, and the harbor that those men were talking about is probably Ocean Harbor, where trade between Sorcié and Ethenell takes place, and we're going there right now to make sure," she said all in one breath, as if she couldn't waste a second before getting there.

We were already mentally prepared to be dragged to Ocean Harbor, but thankfully Cyrus walked in and managed to convince Larna that going there right now, unprepared, was a bad idea. However, she still insisted that we go there as soon as possible.

I thought that now that the Assembly was over I'd be able to rest for a while, but it seemed that I'd have no such luck — it was time to prepare for our trip to Ocean Harbor.



The Post-Assembly Tea Party

With the Assembly behind me, I decided to hold a tea party with my friends in Claes Manor.

The weather was clear, so I had a table prepared in the garden. It was nothing fancy, though, since the only guests would be the usual ones: Keith, Jeord, Alan, Mary, Sophia, Nicol, and Maria.

“Big Sister, I think our guests will be here soon,” Keith informed me right when all the preparations were complete, and I went to welcome them.

“Thank you for the invitation, Katarina,” Jeord said, casually kissing the back of my hand. He looked exhausted right after the Assembly, but he was clearly more than fine now, full of the usual sexiness that befitted a main character like him. The party hadn’t even started and I was already blushing.

“Hey,” said Alan, who had come with him. He looked the same as usual.

“I am most happy to be invited here, Lady Katarina,” followed Mary with a huge smile. She didn’t seem the least bit tired from the Assembly.

“Thank you so much for having us, Lady Katarina. I have brought you the latest novel, you see, it is a wonderful story about...” Sophia then started rambling. During the Assembly (or rather, during her whole stay at the castle), she had been deprived of her beloved books.

Now that she was able to read them again, her enthusiasm was greater than ever. She kept talking with sparkles in her eyes while she hugged her book.

“Calm down, Sophia, you’ll have time to talk about novels once the tea party starts,” her brother Nicol, calm as always, interrupted her. “Thank you for inviting us,” he then said to me with a smile.

That smile, too, was as powerful as always. Just seeing it made me black out for a second. I thought I'd gotten used to it, but Nicol must have become even more attractive after our stay at the castle. *Stop, please.*

"Lady Katarina, thank you so much for having me. I have made these for you," Maria, my cute Maria, said while handing me some homemade sweets. I'd secretly hoped that she'd bring some, so I was more than happy to accept them.

"Thank you, Maria! Let's go and eat them," I said, and added them to the table as we all sat around it.

"To a successfully finished Assembly!" I said, raising my teacup in a sort of workplace toast.

Jeord and Keith both raised their cups with ironic smiles.

"Huh?" Alan asked, perplexed.

Mary and Maria smiled happily while raising their cups, and Sophia, who was excited at being able to read novels again, raised hers even higher than me. Nicol did it too, but without changing his expression.

Thus began our tea party.

"I'm glad nothing bad happened during the Assembly," I said while stuffing my mouth with Maria's sweets.

Everyone around the table replied in unison.

"What?!"

Did I say something weird? I thought, and saw Keith bring his hands to his head.

"Big Sister, you said the same thing on the trip back home from the castle. Do you remember what I told you then?" he asked me with a grave voice.

I knew my brother well enough to understand that when he spoke to me with that voice I was at risk of getting scolded, so I tried my best to remember.

“You said that, uhm... tearing my dress apart and climbing up a tree were major screw ups? Something like that?”

“I’m glad you remembered,” he said with a smile on his lips but dread in his eyes.

Okay. He’s 100% mad at me. He’s just holding back momentarily because everyone’s around. I can expect to be scolded later.

“I find it unfathomable that barging into a room with two kidnappers, by yourself, hardly registers as a bad thing to you. Your perception of things is incomparable to ours,” Jeord said as he stared into nothingness.

“I agree with him. The whole dress-tearing, tree-climbing, and kidnapper-chasing thing? We considered that to be *bad*, yeah,” Alan followed, nodding to what his brother had said.

Ugh... That’s right, I made everyone worry during the Assembly...

It’s not that I’d forgotten about it, of course. But well, spilled milk and all that. And that happened *during* the Assembly, but nothing bad happened *at* the Assembly, technically.

“I’m really sorry for making all of you worry,” I said, lowering my head. I could have tried to make an excuse for what I’d said, but my friends were right, so I just apologized. I only now realized how worried everyone had been.

“But,” Maria interjected, hardly after I’d finished my apology, “it was all my fault that Lady Katarina found herself in that dangerous situation. I am sorry,” she said.

I was surprised. It was true that I'd gone into that room in order to save her, but she still had no reason to apologize. She was just a victim, dragged there by those two stupid noblemen.

"You shouldn't be sorry for anything!" I shouted, standing up from my chair.

"She's right, Maria. You were but a victim, and have nothing to apologize for," Jeord calmly agreed.

"Yes, don't worry. My sister just ran off on her own. It's not your fault," Keith added.

"Yeah. This idiot is completely responsible for whatever stupid stuff she does. Don't worry," Alan continued.

"That is completely true," Nicol finished.

Sophia and Mary were silently nodding.

They kind of made it sound like it was my fault, but, well, it was. So I joined in the nodding.

"...Thank you," said Maria, looking up at all the people comforting her. She was blushing slightly, and she was so cute it almost hurt to look at her.

"It's fine, Maria. I'll come to save you if anything like that ever happens again," I said, completely dazzled by her loveliness.

"Big Sister, have you learned nothing...?"

"I beg you, ask me for help first."

"Are you *trying* to get yourself trouble again?"

"You assured us that you wouldn't do anything dangerous anymore..."

The four boys all commented one after the other, looking at me in disbelief.

“Please try to avoid danger,” Mary and Sophia also added with sad looks in their eyes.

Ugh. I can’t really disagree with them...

I realized that I had to change the topic. The Assembly wouldn’t do, so I’d much rather talk about the seminar.

“Th-The, uhm, the seminar was hard, wasn’t it? But it was fun being all together in the castle!”

What I was trying to do was painfully obvious, but Sophia and Mary, who had spent most of their time there with me, indulged me anyway.

“Yes. Those lessons were very tiring, but it was a fun experience,” Sophia said.

“I also had fun spending time with Lady Katarina after so long,” Mary continued.

Not only did we attend lessons together, but we also ate together and our rooms were close to each other. It felt like being back at the academy.

“The shared bath was so fun too!” I said, remembering when I went there with Sophia.

“Ugh...” I heard Mary murmur while hiding her face in her hands.

“What’s wrong, Mary?”

“N-Nothing... I just remembered a sad, unfair thing that happened to me,” she explained with a sad voice.

Oh, right, she couldn’t come to the bath because she wasn’t feeling well. I’m sure she’d have liked to see the castle’s bath once. I’d better change the topic again.

“Let’s see... oh! The first day of the seminar was so hard I was close to giving up, but Keith stroked my head for the first time in a while,

and that made me feel much better. Thanks, Keith!” I said, looking at my brother.

“B-Big Sister, maybe we should not talk about that right now...” he said strangely, shaking his head.

I thought it was a happy, lovely topic, but Keith looked so displeased with it that I had to think of another one.

What can I talk about? Oh, right!

“Alan actually played some songs for me one day during the seminar! I fell asleep halfway through though. I’m sorry, Alan,” I said, talking about his practice piano performance.

It was so good that I couldn’t help but get sleepy. When I woke up Alan wasn’t there anymore, so I never had a proper chance to apologize.

“...Oh, that? I don’t really mind...” he said, looking away.

Is it me or is he blushing?

I noticed that Mary was staring holes into him. I had no idea why, but this topic wasn’t a good choice either. I tried talking to the Ascarts’ siblings next.

“Sophia, I’m sorry that I passed out when you invited me to that tea party. It was such a wonderful place, too.”

She had prepared a surprise tea party in the garden, but I suddenly passed out while we were going to Nicol’s room to invite him too. The garden looked so beautiful. It was a real shame that we couldn’t do it.

“N-Not at all, if anything, I should apologize to you,” said Sophia, looking strangely nervous as she bowed her head.

“You? Apologize to me? Why?” She hadn’t done anything wrong.

"Well, that is... you see..." She was at a loss for words, and her brother intervened.

"She must mean that she's sorry for inviting you without noticing that you were feeling unwell," he said coolly.

"Y-Yes, exactly," Sophia nodded.

"Yeah, but there was no way you could know, so don't worry. Actually, I was feeling fine that morning. You know what's weird? I don't even remember where exactly I lost consciousness. I didn't go all the way to Nicol's room, right? But I also kind of feel like I visited it..." I said, trying to recall.

"No, you never came into my room. You must be remembering wrong," he said without changing his expression.

That was likely. Right after passing out I had a dream about the game, so that had probably confused me.

"Well, a lot's happened, but I was just glad to be able to spend time with all of you," I said.

We used to gather often when we were studying at the academy, but now that we were working, we didn't have as many opportunities to meet. That made our time at the castle that much more fun, despite all that had happened. I'd had enough of assemblies and seminars, but I wished that we could all gather and have fun again.

"If you would like," Jeord said, "you may come to visit one of the royal vacation villas. There is one of them in a lovely place surrounded by nature."

"Really? I'd love to!" I quickly replied.

"That does sound nice. We should all go together, Big Sister," Keith said.

"I agree," Mary said. "Sounds wonderful, right, Prince Alan?"

“Huh? Uh... Sure does, yeah.”

“I am already looking forward to it!” Sophia commented.

“Yes, me too,” her brother agreed.

“A royal vacation villa... wow...” I said to myself, amazed. It was decided that we’d all go there together, and I couldn’t wait.

But for some strange reason, it seemed that Jeord — the one who had made the invitation — wasn’t very pleased with how things had turned out.

Nah, I’m just imagining things.

Katarina's Ranch Adventures

Manga by Nami Hidaka



TODAY, I'M VISITING A RANCH WITH MY FRIENDS!

HELLO! IT'S ME, KATARINA CLAES!

HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU THAT YOU DON'T NEED TO BE A FARMER?

BIG SISTER, YOU'RE A DUKE'S DAUGHTER.

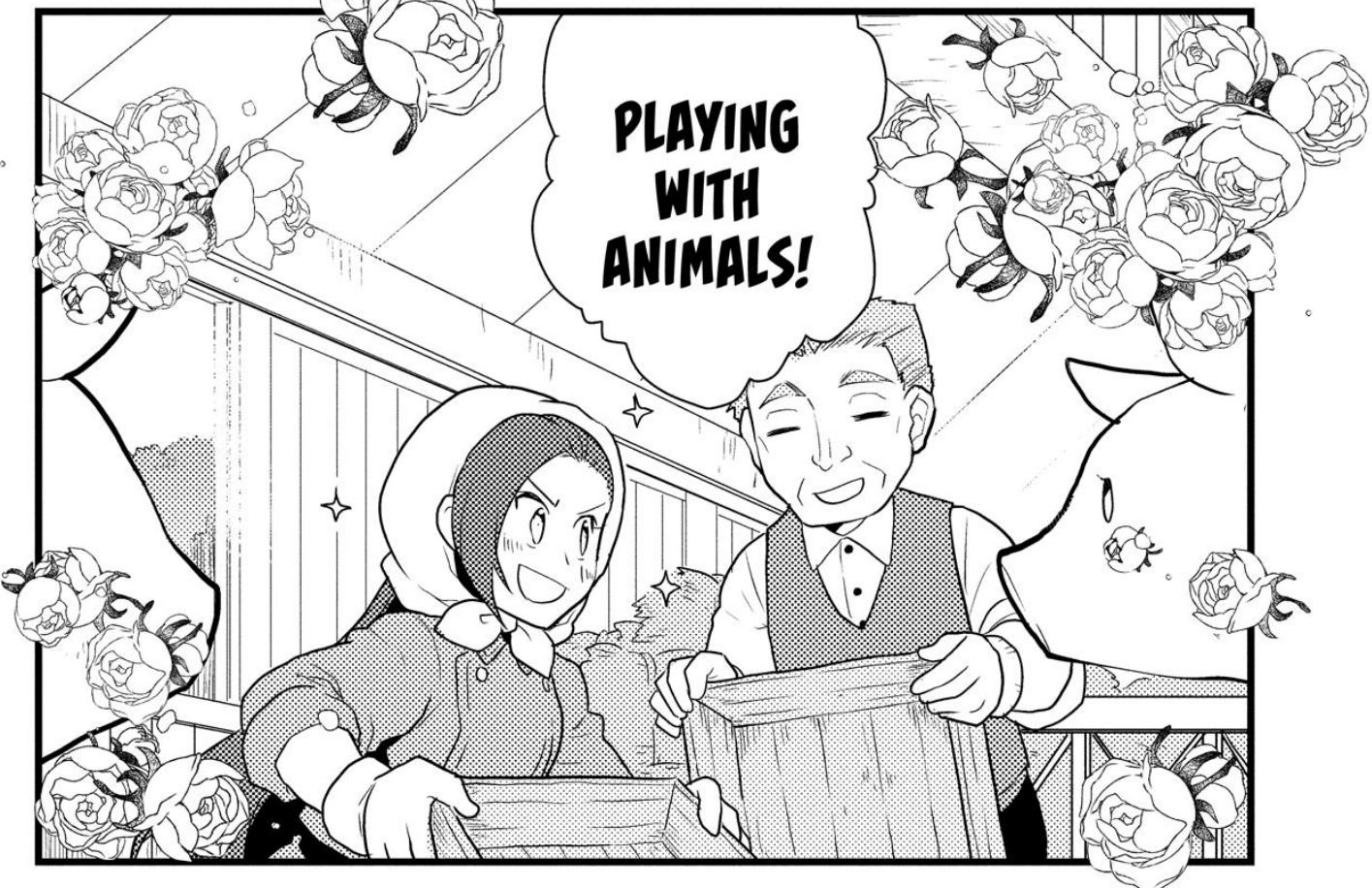
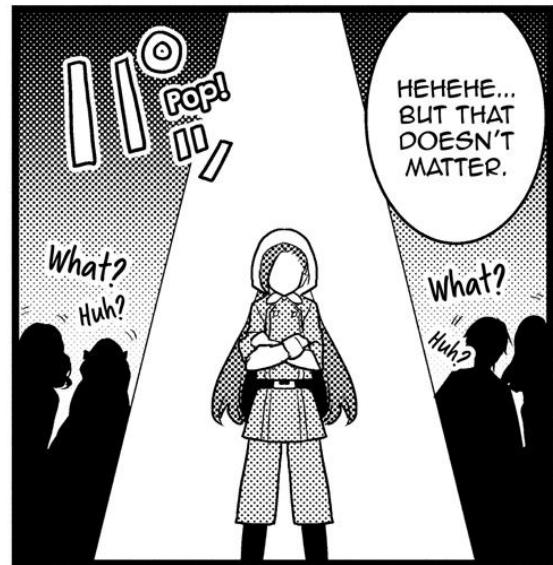
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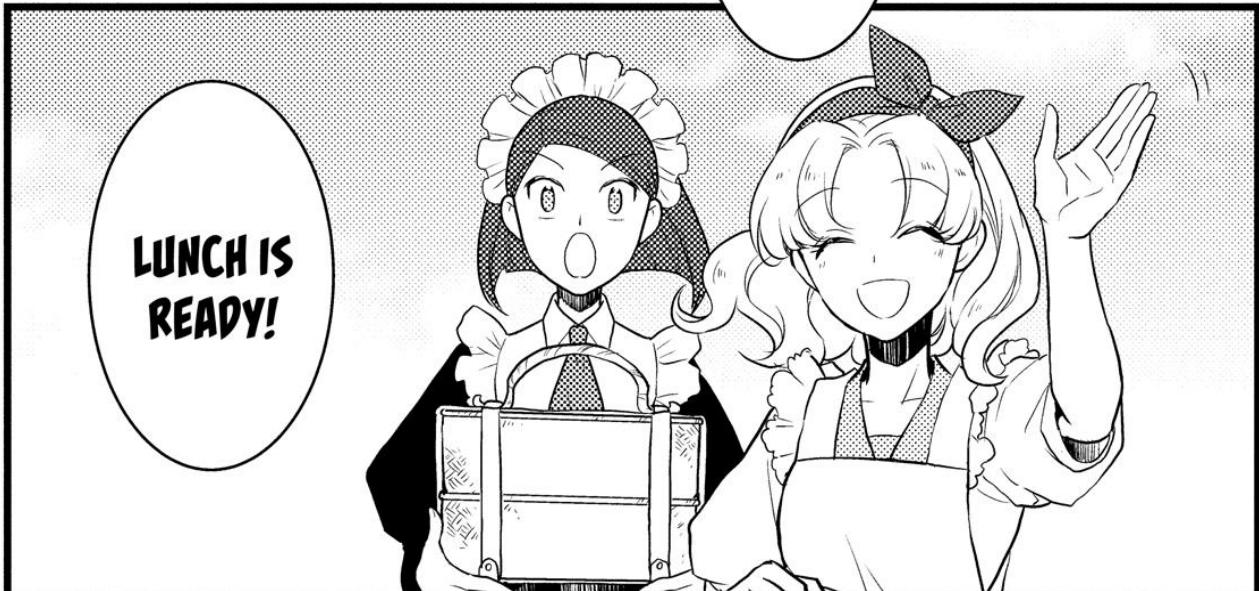
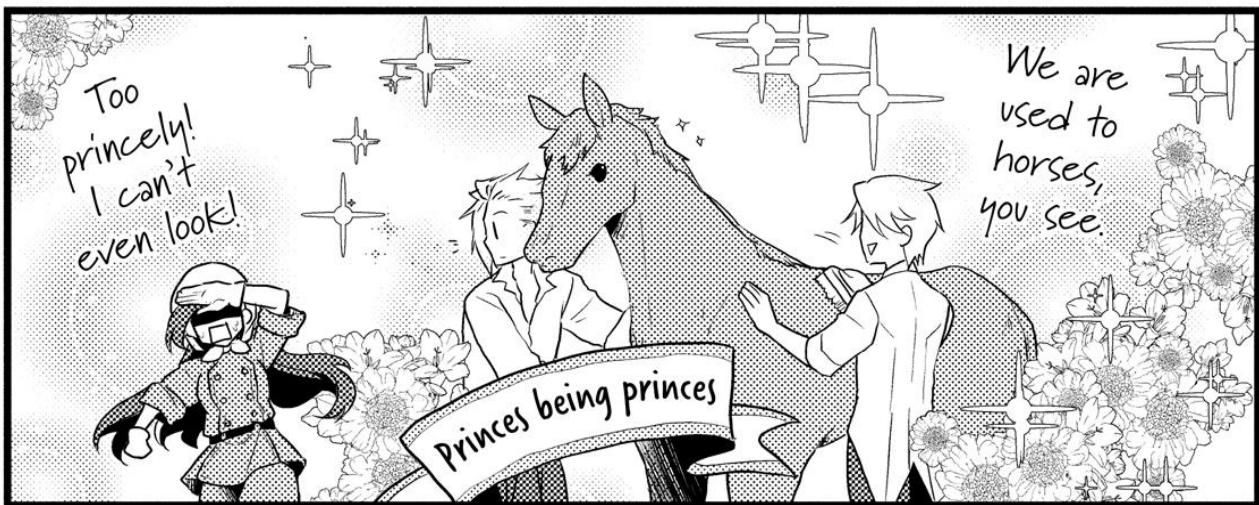
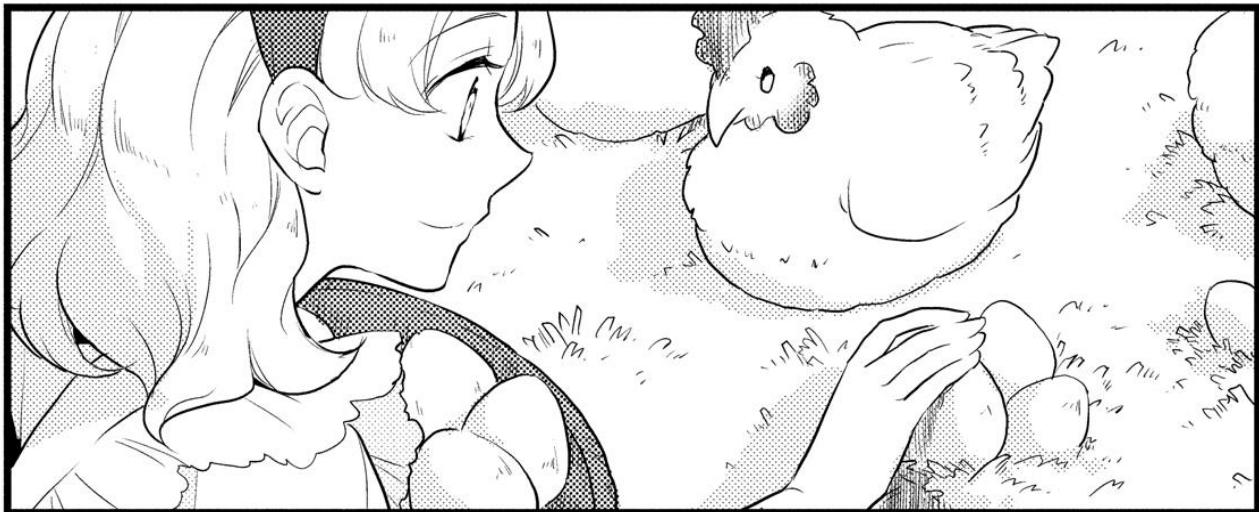
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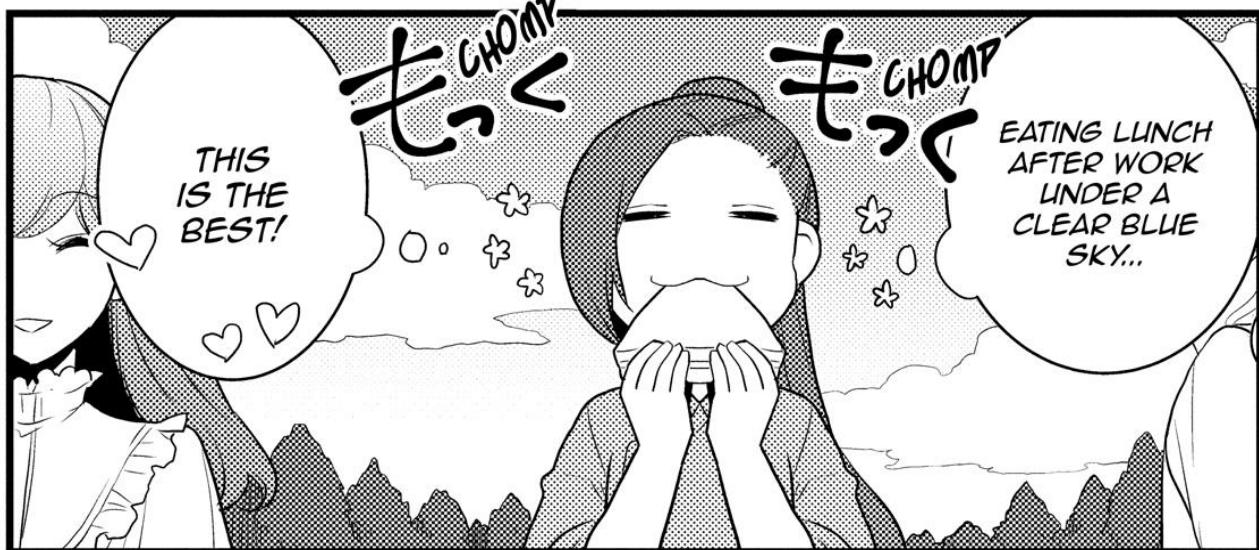
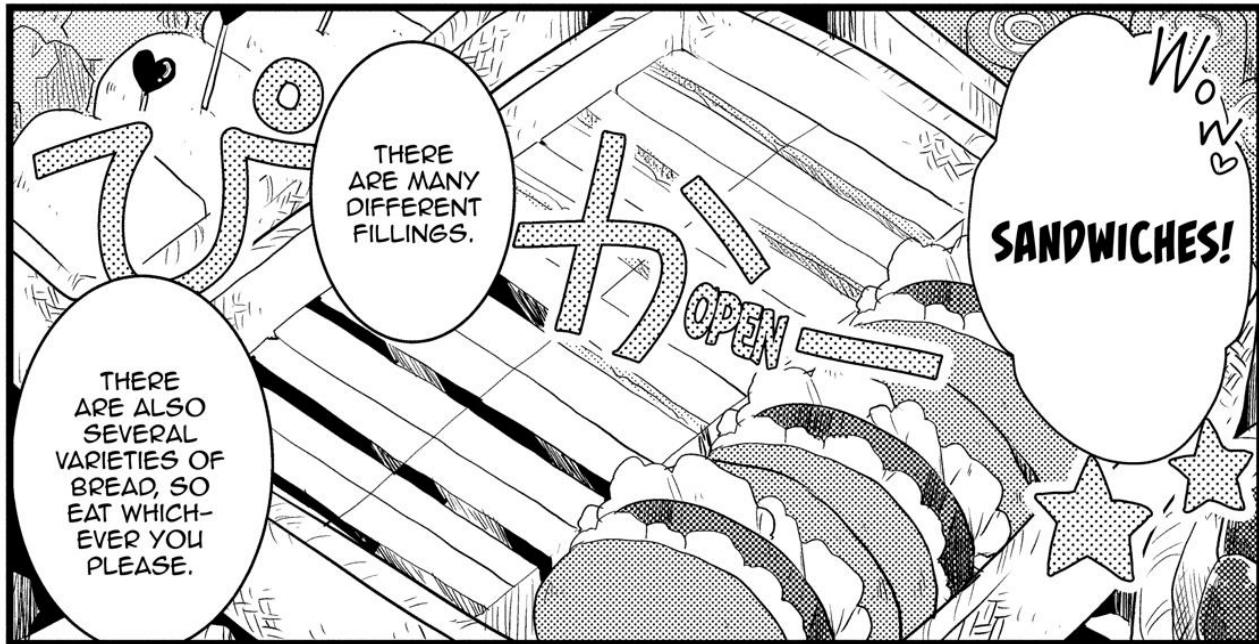
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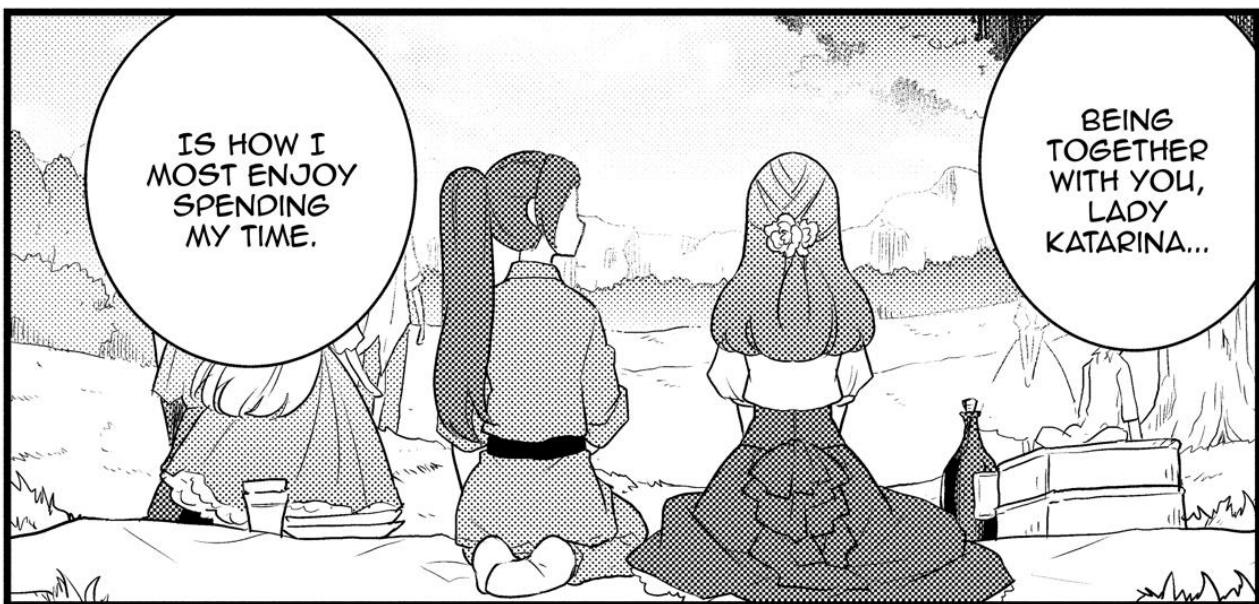
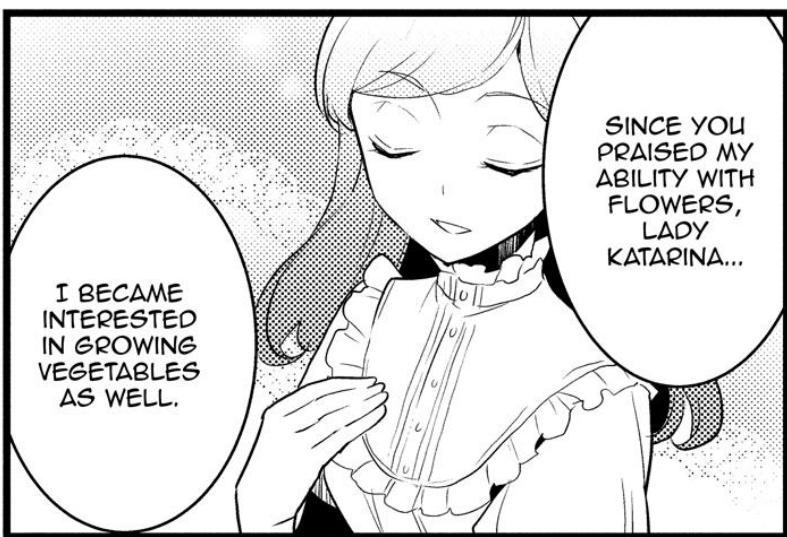
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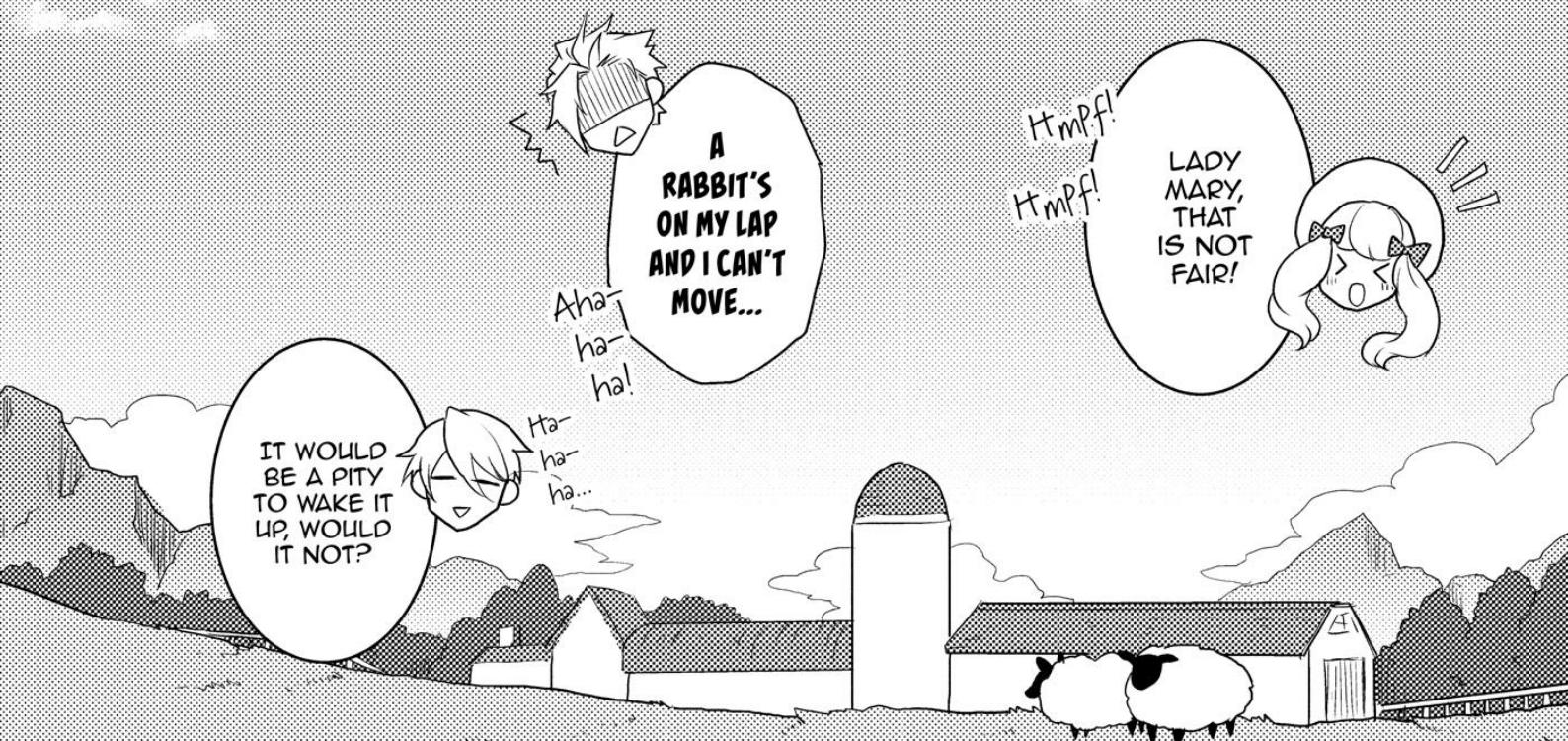
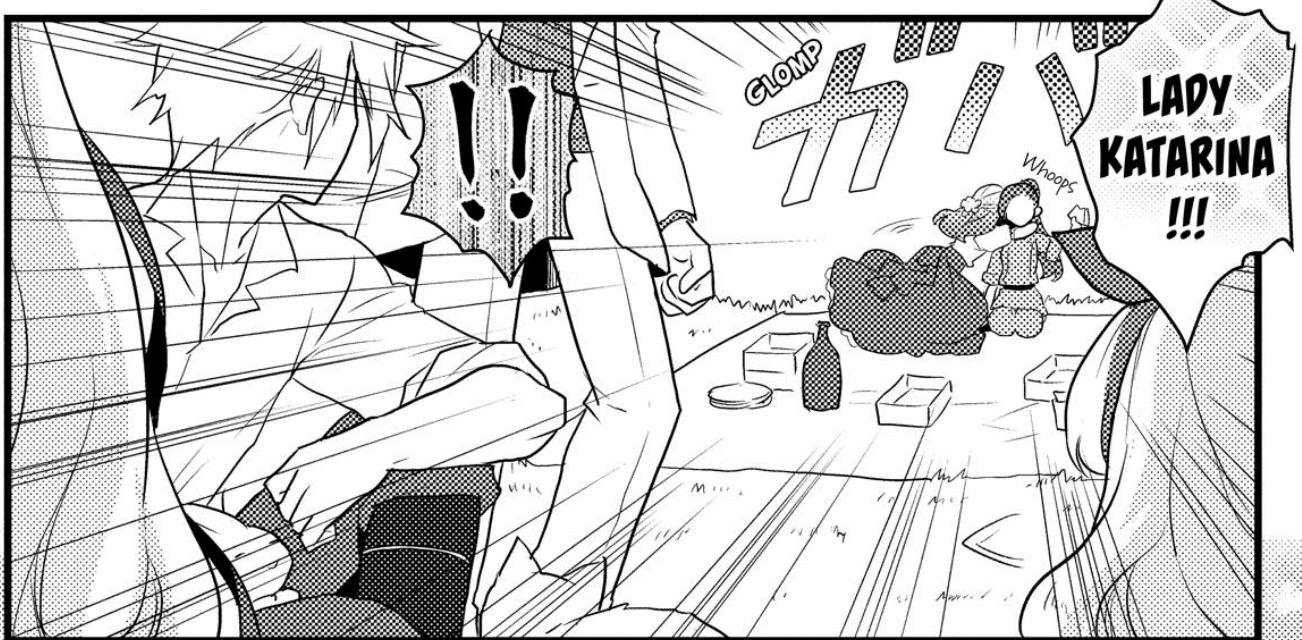
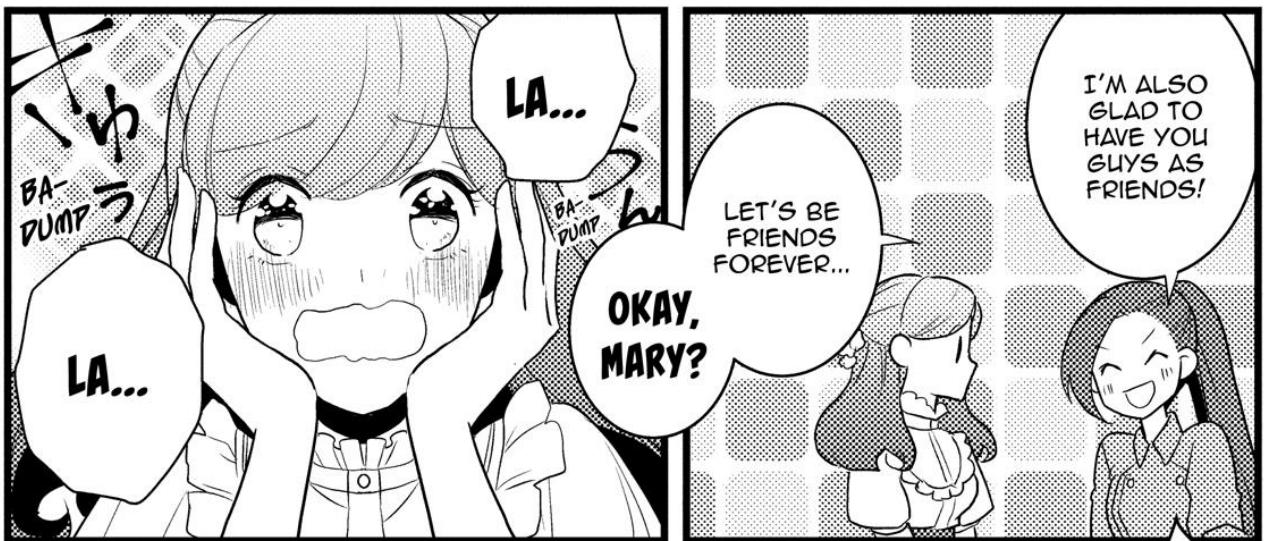
YUP YUP











Afterword

Hi everyone, Satoru Yamaguchi here. It's been a while.

My Next Life as a Villainess has finally reached its eighth volume, and this is all thanks to the people who supported me. I'm really grateful to all of you.

This time Katarina is at the castle, caught up in the huge Assembly with domestic and foreign nobles, and a new interesting character from abroad!

At the end of the volume, there are also a few manga pages from Nami Hidaka, which I hope you'll enjoy.

Once again, I want to thank Nami Hidaka for her wonderful manga and illustrations, the editors, and all the others who have helped this book make it to print.

Satoru Yamaguchi



FORTUNE·LOVER II





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My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! Volume 8

by Satoru Yamaguchi

Translated by Marco Godano

Edited by Aimee Zink

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