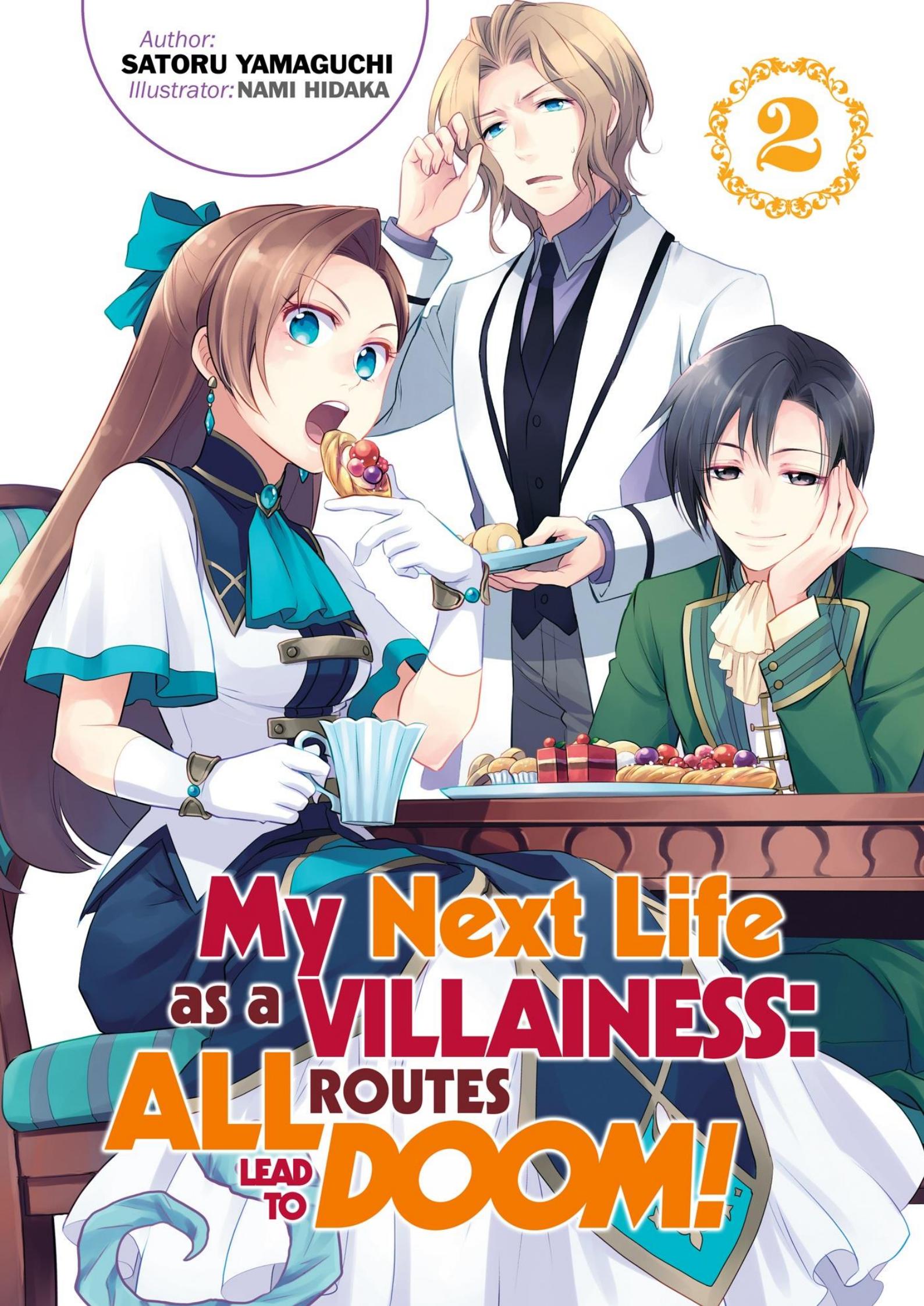


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# My Next Life as a VILLAINESS: **ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!**

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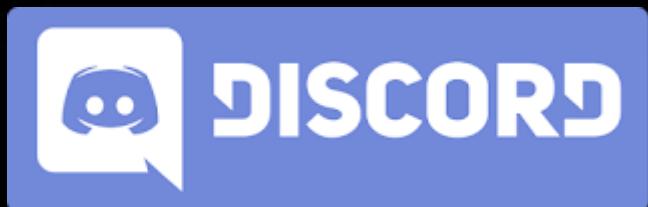
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Mary: "It won't be long until we enroll into the academy. Ehehehe. How exciting."

Katarina: "Y-Yeah, I guess..." (But only Catastrophic Bad Ends await me at the academy!)

Sophia: "Yes... it is quite exciting indeed."

>Katarina is about to embark on a new adventure...

FORTUNE·LOVER

# My Next Life as a Villainess:

## Jeord Stuart

Third Crown Prince of the Kingdom, and Katarina's Fiancé. Although he looks like the ideal prince with his blonde hair and blue eyes, he secretly harbors a twisted and terrible nature. He spends his days in boredom, never showing interest in anything, until he eventually meets Katarina. His magical element is fire.

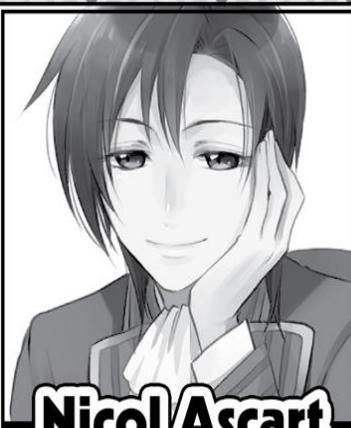
## Katarina Claes

The only daughter of Duke Claes. Has particularly angled features — Katarina herself feels like it makes her look at a villainess. After her memories returned, she underwent a class change from spoiled noble lady to problem child. Although she is pure, forgetful, and often gets ahead of herself, she is an honest and straightforward girl. Possesses below-average academic and magical ability. Her magical element is earth.

## Young Katarina

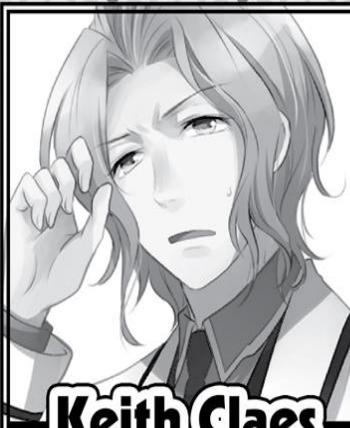
# All Routes Lead to Doom!

## Character Introduction



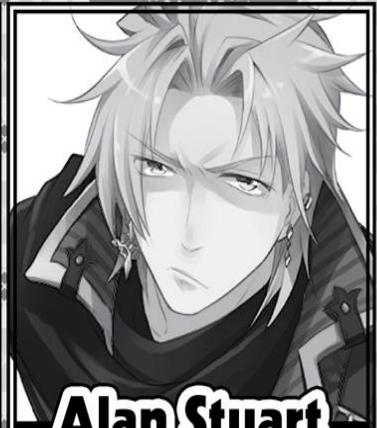
### Nicol Ascart

Son of Royal Chancellor Ascart. Possesses stunning beauty, much like that of a doll's. Loves his younger sister, Sophia, deeply. His magical element is wind.



### Keith Claes

Katarina's adoptive brother, taken in by the Claes family due to his magical aptitude. Considerably handsome, and seen by others as sexy and charming. His magical element is earth.



### Alan Stuart

Jeord's twin brother, and the fourth crown prince of the kingdom. Handsome but wild and untamed, Alan is quite the arrogant prince. Often compares himself to his genius of a 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. Faced discrimination due to her white hair and red eyes. A calm and peaceful girl.

### Mary Hunt

Fourth daughter of Marquis Hunt, and Alan's fiancée. Has lost her confidence and become withdrawn due to bullying by her older sisters.

### Maria Campbell

A commoner, but also a rare "Wielder of Light" — a girl blessed with Light Magic. The original protagonist of Fortune Lover, she is very hardworking and loves baking snacks of all kinds.

### Sirius Dieke

The eldest son of Marquess Dieke, and only child of the Dick family. President of the student council. Calm and lovable, much like a cute puppy. Ranked first in his year in both academics and magical studies.

### Milidiana Claes

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

### Luigi Claes

Duke Claes, and head of the Claes Family. Katarina's father. Spoils his daughter.

### Anne Shelley

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

# ***Chapter 1: My First Day at the Academy Approaches!***

My name is Katarina Claes, eldest daughter of Duke Claes and the Claes family heir.

When I was eight years old I hit my head hard on a rock, and in doing so caused all the memories of my previous life to flood into my mind. It didn't take long for me to realize that I had been reborn into a familiar world — one of *Fortune Lover*, an otome game I was playing before my untimely death.

In fact I, Katarina Claes, am one of the main antagonists of the game. Katarina is supposed to be a villainous noble lady who often gets in the protagonist's way and bullies her.

Katarina's fate in *Fortune Lover* is naturally most unfortunate: She is either exiled from the kingdom, or meets a gruesome end at the hands of the protagonist's love interest. Talk about catastrophically Bad Ends!

Of course, I definitely don't want to die! Although the possibility of death is high even if I just get exiled from the kingdom. That's terrible! I don't deserve that!

Due to my early death in my previous life, I want to live a long and ripe life this time, preferably with a cat on my lap as I quietly bask in the sun! Ah, such is the elegant retirement that would be! I don't want to be involved in these social politics of love and intrigue, much less get killed by them! I will definitely overcome all these Catastrophic Bad Ends, and live a full life!

And so, I became determined to come up with countermeasures against these unfortunate endings. Firstly, there was the matter of

the one who may bring such a Catastrophic Bad End upon Katarina Claes' head — to be precise, her fiancé Jeord, the third crown prince.

In the events of *Fortune Lover*, Katarina, who had been bullying the protagonist all this time, would either be exiled by him or die by his blade in retaliation for pointing her own at the protagonist.

I've planned some countermeasures against Jeord, of course; if I were exiled from the kingdom, I would use my magical abilities to earn a living. From what I recall, magical aptitude is rare in the surrounding kingdoms.

Should Jeord come at me with a blade, I would utilize my highly realistic projectile snake to strike fear into his heart. Jeord really hates snakes, you see. So in that moment, I would gracefully dodge his attacks.

To this end, I've tried my best to improve my magical capabilities, in addition to constantly refining the appearance of my highly realistic projectile snakes with the assistance of the head gardener, Grandpa Tom. I've also been taking my swordplay training seriously — all so that I could dodge when the circumstances called for it.

Another individual of concern is Katarina's adopted brother, Keith Claes. He too could potentially bring a Catastrophic Bad End upon my head. Katarina, as usual, bullies the protagonist terribly, and Keith responds in kind. To be precise, he either exiles his own sister, or ends her life with his own powerful magic. To be fair, Katarina does leave a deep scar upon the protagonist in that scenario.

Of course, I had my countermeasures when it came to Keith... to ensure that he was never lonely, I kept him company, inviting him out to play day after day. In the setting of *Fortune Lover* Keith lives a constantly isolated and alienated life until he is healed by the protagonist's gentle nature; of course, he then falls in love with her.

All I have to do is ensure that Keith is never lonely — that much is simple! He would never fall for the protagonist then. With those thoughts in mind, I took him with me everywhere I went within the manor, and eventually outside its walls too.

And so, I put in a lot of work in these last seven years. All this had to be done before I enrolled in the Academy of Magic!

Indeed, it has all paid off. On my fifteenth birthday, I was praised for my skill at the sword, and my highly-realistic projectile snakes were indistinguishable from the real thing. Keith, too, has been raised lovingly by my hand, and is no longer lonely or sad.

Truly a commendable effort, if I do say so myself! There is, unfortunately, just one thing that didn't work out — namely, my magical capabilities. Although my original plan was to bury my head in magical studies and strengthen my hand at magic so that I would have a means of earning a living if I were exiled from the kingdom, reality was not quite so kind. No matter how hard I tried or how much I practiced, my magical powers did not increase — and other than "Earth Raiser," the one spell I was capable of casting, I was seemingly unable to learn any other type of magic.

In the light of this, it seems impossible for me to earn a living with my magical capabilities — or lack thereof. I had to alter my plans due to this unfortunate development. As of now, it is my intention to till the fields as a hardworking farmer if I ever get exiled from the kingdom.

With all this in place due to my hard work over the past seven years, the countermeasures to all these Catastrophic Bad Ends are now complete, and it will soon be time to enroll in the Academy of Magic.

Slowly but surely, the white breath of winter was drawing to an end. The gardens of the Claes manor, already mostly enveloped in the warm embrace of spring, were also filled by a sizable amount of fields — my work over the past seven years, of course.

It would soon be time for me to start my boarding school life at the Academy of Magic's dormitories, so I would have to say goodbye to these fields for quite some time. I felt a slight hint of loneliness creep into my heart as I looked out at the familiar fields.

"We will enroll into the Academy of Magic soon. Very soon indeed, fufufu. I do look forward to it," Mary Hunt said, her usual lovable smile flitting across her beautiful features. In the setting of *Fortune Lover*, Mary was a rival character just like Katarina.

"Y-Yes... I suppose..." To me, setting foot into an academy where I could very well meet my doom was no laughing matter — but of course, I couldn't say something like that to the gently smiling Mary. And then...

"I am really... looking forward to it, too..." Sophia Ascatt said, smiling in a way that suggested a sincere happiness from the depths of her heart. She, too, was yet another rival character in the original setting of *Fortune Lover*.

"Y-Yes... Of course." Surrounded by their eager smiles, I found myself enveloped in a blanket of silence.

To begin with, these two individuals never had any points of contact with Katarina Claes in the events of *Fortune Lover*. If anything, they would have disliked her for her villainous ways. However, Mary and Sophia were now my close friends, having visited me in my manor regularly for the past seven odd years.

"And what exactly is it that you're all so enraptured by?" A familiar voice, and an equally familiar suspicious smile — the voice belonged

to none other than Jeord Stuart, third crown prince of the kingdom, and my fiancé.

Originally, Jeord was relatively uninterested in Katarina and hardly had any interactions with her. But for some reason he had started visiting me at my manor for days at a time, and now was an important friend of mine as well.

"Ah, Prince Jeord. We were just talking of the anticipation we felt towards our enrollment in the academy."

"Ah, I see. But of course, yes. It is worth looking forward to indeed," Jeord responded, a seemingly genuine smile on his face.

*Hmm. It would seem that even Jeord is looking forward to this...* As for me, however, this entire academy affair wasn't so enjoyable.

There was the issue of me recalling how things went in *Fortune Lover*, which made me feel depressed — after all, I would be willfully setting foot into a place where many Catastrophic Bad Ends seemed to be waiting for me! Even setting that aside, it was an academy for magical studies, so I would have to work diligently there. I really couldn't see academy life as anything to look forward to. Why exactly was everyone so fired up about this whole thing?

"Um... why is it that all of you seem to be so eager about this whole academy thing...?" I asked my friends, unable to understand their seemingly overflowing levels of happiness.

"But of course, so that I can spend all that time together with Lady Katarina...!" Mary said. She was visibly excited, her cheeks a healthy shade of crimson.

"Yes...! Exactly! We'll be able to spend all that time together... with Lady Katarina, once we go!" Sophia declared, her expression strangely similar to Mary's.

*Now that they mention it, I suppose they do have a point.* Due to the fact that I had been preoccupied by thoughts of *Fortune Lover* all this time, I had all but forgotten all about the warm days that I would spend at the academy with my dear friends.

Upon realizing this, I couldn't help but feel that sadness that had blanketed my being mere moments ago slowly lifting.

"I am sure that we will be in the same dormitory as well, Katarina. Do feel free to visit me in my room. For you, Katarina, I will prepare the most special snacks and treats," Jeord said with a strangely charming smile.

*But, yes... Ah... The most special snacks and treats! Prepared by a prince! Intriguing. Most intriguing indeed.*

"Yes. I would love to—"

"But you mustn't, Big Sister! Living spaces in the dormitories are segregated by gender! You must never do such a thing...!" Keith said, suddenly coming between Jeord and me with a flustered look about him.

Although Keith hated Katarina in the original setting of *Fortune Lover* and did his best to avoid her, he had long since grown attached to me — perhaps due to all those times I had dragged him around. Now, Keith was the very image of a considerate younger brother, always on the lookout for his big sister.

"Ah, Keith. You are correct to a certain degree — while it is true that living spaces are segregated by gender, visiting another individual's room is hardly an issue as long as permission is given."

"That is *if* it is given! Relatives would be one thing, but having Big Sister enter the room of a stranger? A man, at that? Surely that is all but unforgivable."

"What is all this talk of strangers about? I am engaged to Katarina, if you recall — hardly a stranger, wouldn't you say? What about you, Keith Claes? Are you not merely her adopted brother?"

"At the moment you are nothing more than her fiancé, Prince Jeord. Should the engagement ever be cancelled, Big Sister and you would very well be nothing but strangers."

"Ah, but do you think I would simply cancel the engagement?"

And there they went again — Keith and Jeord having their own merry conversation, with faces full of smiles. Considering that these two hardly had any points of contact in the original game, I was surprised at how they were now the most steadfast of friends. In fact, they often left me out of their little conversations... oh, what fun they seemed to be having!

Given how well my adopted brother got along with Jeord, it would be a true tragedy if they both ended up falling for the protagonist at the academy... *Ah, what a sad thought. It would really be tragic if one girl divided such a pair of friends! I hope they'll find some other wonderful girls in their lives — just hopefully not the protagonist, of course.*

"...But yes... there would be such dangers in a dormitory setting... we have to think of some sort of countermeasure as well..."

"Hmm? What is it, Mary?" I asked, noticing her murmuring. While my attention had been sidetracked by Jeord's and Keith's intense discussion, Mary's features had turned considerably dark. She seemed to be thinking of very severe matters.

"Ah, it is nothing, Lady Katarina... just some things on my mind... but yes! But of course! Master Nicol, would you happen to know the general floor plan of the academy's dormitory?"

The one Mary had called out to was Sophia's brother, Nicol Ascatt. Under normal circumstances, we should never have crossed paths at

all. He was a potential romance interest who never had a single word with Katarina Claes.

Nicol, however, had ended up becoming one of my good friends as well. Due to the fact that he was a year older than the rest of us, he had already been at the academy for a year, and was visiting the Claes manor because it was currently spring break.

Mary's sudden question hardly flustered him — Nicol simply delivered a cool, collected answer, all the while maintaining his usual stoic expression. "To a certain extent."

"Master Nicol, I hardly mind if it is a rough image — may I trouble you to enlighten me on the matter? We have to take the necessary precautions so that the enemy doesn't do anything untoward during our stay...!" Mary said.

"...I understand."

"Lady Mary, Big Brother, do allow me to assist as well!"

Mary, Nicol, and Sophia called for the servants to bring them pens and paper, before setting it all down on a table set up on the side of the fields. They all then promptly sat down and engaged in some sort of serious discussion.



"Hmm...? What are Mary and the rest doing all the way over there...?" I turned to the only person left next to me — he had been left standing on the spot, much like myself.

"You're asking me, now? I've got no idea at all," Alan Stuart said, shrugging. He was Jeord's twin, and the fourth crown prince of the kingdom.

Originally, I shouldn't have had anything to do with Alan, but for one reason or another, he had also become one of my good friends.

As for Alan's response... I could only say that I had expected as much. "I know, right...?" I said, gazing at Alan warmly.

Alan was always kind of pure and childish in his own way, and he could be particularly thick when it came to developments around him. In fact, he was this way in the original setting of *Fortune Lover* too, never noticing the feelings he had towards the protagonist. Alan the childish prince. *If I can't figure something out, there's no way Alan could.*

"What's with those eyes of yours?" Alan said, looking surprised. Did he pick up on the fact that I was ridiculing him in secret?

"Ah, it's nothing, Prince Alan. It's just... you're fifteen years of age now... Wouldn't it be best to act a little more like an adult...?" If Alan remained childish and block-headed forever, he would never be able to capture Mary's heart. That was why I offered him my advice.

"...Look who's talking. I'd throw those words right back at your face." Such was his terribly rude response. *This is why people think you're childish, Alan!*

I, however, graciously responded to him. "Ah, how silly of you, Prince Alan. Whatever do you mean? I am quite the noble lady, don't you know?"

He started mumbling something like “Eh? But no matter how I think about it you’re more...” But being the adult I am, I elegantly let it slip by. Amidst all this, Jeord and Keith’s intense conversation continued, while Mary and the Ascarts remained immersed in their serious discussion.

While I did still feel somewhat uneasy about starting life in this Catastrophic Bad End Academy, the fact that I would be able to spend time with all my friends was a relief — and the slightest hint of anticipation began to bloom in my heart.

*If at all possible, I want to overcome the otome game hell that may unfurl before me, and then spend my days peacefully with my dear friends.*

My name is Atsuko Sasaki. As of this year, I am thirteen years old. I just started at the local middle school a few days ago... and ended up in the last seat at the back of the classroom. Since then, I’ve spent my days alone, never truly settling into the new environment.

I’m surrounded by girls who came from other grade schools, and they’ve all formed new cliques and groups. I want to have a nice group of friends to spend time with too... but it seems that I’m not very good at that sort of thing. I... don’t know how to speak to them. I don’t quite know how to try to be friends with them. I don’t understand things like that.

It was the same thing in grade school — I was always troubled by it, and before I knew it, I was alone, excluded from everything and everyone. The other girls saw me as an oddity and often ignored me. Sometimes they would bully me, or even hide my things... As this went on, I eventually realized that I had become afraid of people. Before long I had started keeping to myself, never speaking to anyone around me.

And so... even though middle school is a new place and a new beginning, I can't bring myself to speak to anyone... or even say hello. And so, I shifted my gaze from the classmates around me who all seemed to be enjoying themselves. Instead, I read books that I brought from home.

These were my favorite books — manga and light novels. Books I loved reading. If I imagined myself slipping into these stories as I read them, I could forget all about my loneliness... about how I had no one to talk to. I imagined myself as the protagonist of the stories I read. Even I, who was lonely, shy and unhappy, could become a popular girl who was well-loved by everyone in these stories.

This was why I opened my book today, and set it down on the table before me, as I always did. All to escape the cruel loneliness of reality...

And so the days went on, and a few weeks had passed since I had enrolled into middle school. After the last homeroom period of the day ended, I walked towards the library, intent on borrowing books to take home with me. This had been my daily routine for the past few weeks.

After changing out of my indoor shoes, I cleaned up the belongings in my locker and walked out into the schoolyard. I shot a sideways glance at the athletics club, whose members were currently engaged in some sort of practice.

I... did not join any clubs. Honestly, I may have made a friend or two if I had joined a club of some sort... but I didn't have the courage to simply show up, all by myself, at someone else's club room.

*How nice it must be... what fun they seem to be having,* I thought, looking at the girls doing their athletics practice, some chatting and laughing as they did so. It was then that... it happened.

“Aaaaahhhhhh!!!”

I heard a strange sound from above me. It was strange... so strange, that I had to look up and see what it was. All I heard, however, was a thud — and I felt a severe impact reverberating through my body.

Soon, I felt my consciousness quickly slipping away.

“Uuuuugghh! I’m really, really sorry....!”

Someone was... crying. I could hear someone crying. Slowly, I opened my eyes... only to see the face of a young girl before me, snot and tears running trails down her face. It seemed like this... was the crying girl I had heard.

“AH! She’s awake! Teacher! She’s awake!!” The girl that I was looking at yelled before dashing away, leaving some white curtains fluttering in her wake.

*I... don’t understand. Was I... asleep?* Slowly, I turned my gaze towards my surroundings. A white ceiling, still-swaying white curtains... and in the middle of it was me, lying down on an equally white bed.

While I didn’t know where I was, this ceiling was familiar to me — it looked exactly like the one in my classroom. If I had to guess, I was still somewhere within the school grounds...

*Eh...? But I thought I was heading to the school gates by cutting through the schoolyard...* As I was still confused by my thoughts, I saw a woman dressed in white enter my field of vision.

“How do you feel? Do you feel dizzy in the head? Are there any pains in your body?” the white-robed woman inquired.

I slowly gave myself a once-over. It didn’t really hurt very much anywhere, and my head felt... fine. “I... I think I’m okay...”

Upon hearing my answer, the woman in white smiled. It was a calming smile. “I see. That’s great news. However, I still feel like it would be best for you to get checked up at a hospital in the event of any complications... I contacted your relatives a few moments ago.”

“...Eh? Hospital? Check-up...?” I couldn’t figure out what was happening around me. I stared at the woman in a daze. The woman seemed equally troubled, judging by the changes in her expression.

“Yes... I suppose this is all very sudden for you. This is the infirmary — you were brought here after you lost consciousness.”

“I... lost? Consciousness?”

*Is this the infirmary? This is the first time I’ve actually been inside... that’s why I didn’t know where I was. Then... that woman in white is probably the school nurse.*

*Even so... why am I here? I don’t have any illnesses, and I don’t recall feeling bad today... Then why did I pass out...?* The ever-increasing train of questions started to cloud my mind.

As if noticing this, the school nurse smiled at me, although her smile was strained. “Your memory loss has little to do with any physical illnesses. After all, the reason for you being here in the first place is right there.”

Saying so, the nurse pointed casually at the girl from before, who was now standing by her side. Tears and snot streaked her face, just like they had before.

“I’m sorry...” the girl said, bowing deeply in my direction. “I couldn’t resist, you see, the charm of that tree in the schoolyard... I was climbing well at first, then I got ahead of myself and one of my feet slipped... and that’s why I fell on top of you. I’m... really sorry...”

*Come to think of it, there was a strange sound... a voice, perhaps? It came from above me, right before the impact... I see. So that impact... was this girl falling down on me.*

*Even so... maybe grade schoolers climbed trees... but a middle schooler climbing trees? And one in the schoolyard, too...? I didn't understand what the girl was talking about — especially the part where she mentioned "the charm of that tree."*

I took a closer look at the girl — she was still hanging her head as she continued to apologize profusely. She was wearing our school's uniform. Her skirt, however, was caked with dirt and wrinkled. She had most likely dirtied her skirt when she fell from the tree... but wouldn't that mean that she was climbing a tree in her skirt? A tree in the schoolyard...? It would seem that the girl before me was somewhat... strange.

"Um... it's all right, really..." I couldn't mentally process this girl repeatedly apologizing and bowing to me... It was all a little too much.

"...But!!" The girl seemed troubled.

*Maybe I should repeat myself once more.* "It... really is okay. Please don't worry about it."

This was the very same girl who had landed on top of me, falling from above without warning. Honestly speaking, perhaps it would make more sense for me to be unhappy with her... but yet here she was, apologizing rapidly before me. She seemed remorseful.

For some reason, I felt like I couldn't dislike this girl — she had a strange aura about her, with her flustered face and furrowed brows.

"It was an accident... please, it's all right. More importantly... are you injured? After such a fall...?"

At those words, the girl smiled widely. "I'm fine! Thank you, Sasaki-san. You're a kind person." The girl, who had been crying up until now, was now grinning.

But... "...Why do you know my name?" Yes. *Why does this girl know my name? Did she look at the name tags on my belongings, maybe?*

"What do you mean? Of course I know your name. Aren't you in my class?"

"?!" I stared intently at the girl's surprised expression. *Come to think of it... it really does seem like I've seen her somewhere before.*

*Oh, yes... we're classmates.* I had been reading books on my own for all these past weeks since starting middle school — I hardly knew my classmate's faces, let alone their names.

"I... don't really know. The faces or names of those in our class... sorry." I felt apologetic. This girl recognized me, and even knew my name. I, however... didn't know who she was at all. *What would I do if she got upset at me? Am I being rude?*

As if sensing my unease, the girl smiled gently in response. "Is that so? Well then, I guess I should introduce myself again! I'm a first year, in class three. My name is—."

The girl introduced herself, and then stuck out her hand. Before I knew it, I was shaking her hand. The girl beamed widely at this.

"I hope we can be friends!" The girl had a firm grip. Her hands were... warm.

From that day on, my lonely life took a sharp, unexpected turn.

It was as she said — we did end up being friendly with each other from that point on. The very next day, this strange tree-climbing girl approached me, and before I even realized it, she had become my very first friend.

And then...

"Acchan! Help me!" She would say, in a somewhat pathetic voice, as she hugged me from behind.

"...What is it now?" I responded as calmly as I could.

"So there was that English assignment today... and I was supposed to do it, but I forgot all about it... I forgot the last one too! And then I got a warning... 'If you forget to do your work again, I'll have you sweeping the halls next!' That's what the teacher said!"

I stared at the face of my friend, who seemed close to tears, and sighed in exasperation. "You forget very... often." Even so, I reached into my bag and pulled out notes on my English classes. As soon as I handed it to her, a familiar smile returned to her face. "Make sure you return it before English class..."

"Ohhh! Acchan-sama! Thank you so very very much!" And with that, she was off, dashing back to her table and writing in her notebook as fast as she could.

"Seems like you've gotten used to taking care of that wild monkey, Sasaki-san," said a classmate of mine upon observing our previous interaction.

"...Wild monkey?"

"Yes, wild monkey. It's her nickname from her grade school days. I was in the same grade school as she was, you see?" the girl said, her smile bearing a hint of exasperation. "She would climb the trees in the schoolyard at break time — she climbed trees a lot, even those at the nearby hill! In fact, her rampant climbing was responsible for rumors of a gigantic monkey living in those hills, way back then..."

"That's... something else."

What the girl said made sense — if my newfound friend behaved like that in grade school, climbing trees in a skirt in middle school would hardly be an issue for her.

"She would also forget her homework and notes, just like that! The teachers always got mad at her, but the very next day she'd forget all about it... and also forget to do her homework again!"

“That’s... really impressive...”

It was as my classmate said. Although my friend seemed repentant right after being reprimanded by a teacher for forgetting something, she would immediately recover the very next day. She seemed to be a carefree person — able to forget all her troubles no matter how angry anyone got at her. Her ability to forget was indeed an enviable ability...

However, even if my friend herself didn’t mind, those habits caused a lot of trouble for others. “I guess the people around her have their hands full...” I said. The classmate who was speaking to me, however, suddenly adopted a more serious expression upon hearing those words.

“That’s true. But you know... being with her is fun, isn’t it?” she said, before starting to laugh at the absurdity of it all. Before long, I was laughing too.

After that, I enjoyed hearing many tales of my friend’s strange and wondrous escapades.

And so, before I knew it, I made many other friends — friends of the wild monkey herself, and even other classmates. The wild monkey, who had been swinging around in the hills all this time, was eventually influenced by my interests and hobbies. She became interested in manga and anime too.

Perhaps it was because of this that the wild monkey stopped visiting the hills so often. In response, her parents thanked me — although the conversation was all a little awkward. “Thank you for returning the monkey to a more human state,” they said, sounding oddly grateful.

Now, with a newfound friend who shared my interests, I found myself even more immersed in my hobby. Eventually, both of us

became full-blown otaku, and the so-called wild monkey had become my closest friend.

Time passed, and our otaku friendship bloomed. Before long it was the third year of middle school, and we had started talking about attending a nearby high school together.

"Acchan... I c-can't... can't go on. I leave the rest... to you..." With that, my best friend slammed her textbook shut, before dramatically planting her forehead down onto the stack of notes I had printed.

"Wh-What are you even saying...? It hasn't even been ten minutes since we started! If you keep this up, you'll drop out of the school system for an entire year!"

"...Nghh... b-but... reading these endless lines in this thick reference book only makes me sleepy... there's no avoiding it. There has to be some sort of curse in this terrible reference book..."

Saying so, my friend sighed deeply. And with that, the high school entrance exam study session ended, all in less than ten minutes. Although she was physically capable and did well in sports, she was apparently hopeless in her studies. It wasn't like she was bad at studying — she simply had no interest in it, and was the sort of person who didn't care about matters that bored her.

While I simply highlighted sections for her to study in school tests and the like, high school entrance exams were not quite as forgiving. *What should I do...? At this rate, there's no way we'll end up in the same high school together. She may even be held back a grade and have to study at a private tutoring center for a year. Is there some way for me to encourage this silly girl...?*

"All right! When this test ends, I'll let you play all the otome games I've been collecting up until this point! All of them!"

"O... Otome game? What are those?"

“Otome games” were my new favorite form of entertainment. In fact, I had been purchasing many such games with the New Year’s money I’d saved up. Originally, I had intended to recommend these games to her in hopes that we would be able to discuss them in our free time.

However... In the light of my close friend’s feckless attitude, her parents claimed that she would become even more lazy and carefree if she were given any money to use. So she only got the bare minimum in terms of allowance, and even her New Year’s money was forcibly transferred into her bank account.

She was unable to buy any expensive items on her own, so naturally, she wouldn’t have any otome games or the game consoles needed to play them. On the other hand, I was hardly well-off enough to buy two consoles, and hence could not gift my friend with one. I could only feel sad for her as she stared on, envious of my games.

“...But... Acchan. You know I don’t have any game consoles...” she said, visibly deflated and discouraged.

But I smiled as encouragingly as I could at my friend. “I... I’ll lend you mine! If you pass this test, I’ll let you borrow them for a while! Then you can play!”

“...Oh... Acchan-sama...!!” she said, her eyes sparkling as she abruptly stood up, staring straight into my eyes “Thank you Acchan! I will definitely pass this high school entrance exam! For the otome games!!” she declared passionately.

And so, she and I both passed our exams — although her motivations were somewhat questionable. We both worked hard, and ended up in the same high school.

There was yet another piece of good news at the end of all this — to reward her unprecedeted efforts at her studies, my friend’s

parents bought her a console in celebration, and for quite a while, we were both happily lost in the world of otome games.

Upon enrolling into high school, the number of otaku friends I had drastically increased. To buy our favorite games, she and I started working part time jobs. Some things didn't change, though — I would still cover for her when she forgot her assignments, and those peaceful days uneventfully passed us by.

The loneliness that I felt during grade school, my isolation and inability to speak to people suddenly all seemed like a lie, a bad dream. Although she was quite the troublemaker, I was content with spending my peaceful days with her — I simply could not resent her, despite all her antics.

Back then, I believed that these days would go on forever, just like they always had.

It was a coincidence that day that I had left my phone at home. During our second year at high school, my friend and I had ended up in different classes — that was why I didn't know of her absence.

*Come to think of it... she's not here to play today, huh...* That was all I thought of it at the time.

And then. Just like that, I received a notification after school. That I would never see her again.

Those peaceful days that seemed to go on endlessly suddenly ended — right there and then.

The funeral... the wake. I was there, but I didn't shed a single tear.

I couldn't believe that I would never see my friend again for as long as I lived. That I would never see her again... ever.

*This is the wild monkey we were talking about! She'll come back somehow, she'll get out of it somehow, like she always has... right? Maybe she'll just...*

After the funeral passed, the days went on as if nothing had ever happened. However, no matter how long I waited, my best friend never showed up again.

A few days later, I realized that I had an unread message on my phone — I had forgotten all about it before. I was informed of the wake via mutual friends, and so I had hardly paid attention to my phone all this time.

*When was it sent?* I opened the message — and right there, on the screen, was the name of my best friend. I looked at the timestamp. It was the day of the accident — in the early hours of the morning.

*"Acchan! I can't clear the route of the black-hearted sadist prince!!"* The words were accompanied by her usual emoji — a troubled face. If I had to guess, she was referring to a scenario in one of the otome games we played.

*Her last message was... this. Up until her final moments... she really was... just like she'd always been.*

I laughed in spite of myself. It was funny... and so I laughed. I laughed, and laughed, and laughed... until tears started flowing down my cheeks.

Before I knew it, more and more tears flowed down my face... they wouldn't stop. It was like my eyes were melting from the sorrow — the tears only kept flowing.

Although she was gone from this world, I was no longer alone... because she had opened the door to a new world for me.

I held my smartphone tight to my chest. On its screen was the last message she had sent me. *That girl... that silly girl. She'll never come back, ever again.*

The days that I would live in from now on... would be days without her. *I'll live. I'll live on... in this new world that she so kindly gifted me with.*

*So... if life is like... the stories I read. Yes, like those stories I read... if one day, my life were to end, and if I were to be reincarnated...*

*Then... please. I'd like to be with that girl... to be her friend. Just one more time.*

*And live those peaceful days, together with her... Just one more time.*

“...Lady Sophia? Lady Sophia...”

Someone was calling out to me. Slowly, I opened my eyes — it was one of my family's maidservants, staring into my face with an expression of worry. She was the voice... calling out to me.

“...Yes? What is it?” I asked, still feeling a bit out of sorts.

“...Well, you seemed to be calling out in your sleep... are you quite all right, my lady?”

“...calling out? In my... sleep?” It was only after my confused response to the maidservant that I noticed — my cheeks were wet.

*Ah... was I crying? It somehow feels like... I know the reason why.*  
“...I had... a very sad dream. I suppose that was why I... was speaking in my sleep.”

“A dream, Lady Sophia?”

“Yes... it was a really, really sad dream... but I seem to have forgotten all about it... upon waking up.”

*Yes. Although I couldn't remember the details, the sadness in my heart was unmistakable. It was a most... sorrowful dream.*

"It was probably... me remembering. Remembering the past..."

"...I see. The past..." The maidservant's expression seemed to freeze up in response to my mumbling. Her response, too, was unnaturally vague.

Up until only a few years ago, I was seen as strange... perhaps even abnormal. I was gossiped about and discriminated against, and in response, shut myself up in my room. The maidservant probably assumed I was thinking of that.

"...Um. It was not about me being a shut-in... the dream, I mean. It was... further in the past. A dream from a long, long time ago..."

The maidservant's expression changed into one of puzzlement. But I suppose that would be natural... I was still merely a child. How could I have memories from a time long gone...?

Honestly, even I couldn't remember... all I knew was how sad it was. A sad, sorrowful dream I couldn't remember...

But yet, it felt like I knew, somehow... that it happened a long time ago. Yes, a long, long time ago... Although I couldn't remember the details of my dream, I felt a profound sense of sorrow and pain gnawing away at my heart.

As if sensing my depression, my maidservant attempted to cheer me up, speaking in a more upbeat tone than she had before.

"Lady Sophia, you're due to visit the Claes manor today!"

Upon hearing those words, the sadness in my chest loosened its grip upon me — if only just a little.

*That's right. I'm going to visit Katarina today. I selected some great books to recommend to her. I wonder if she'll like them? I could feel*

the rest of my sorrow slowly fading away as I continued thinking of Katarina.

I soon dressed up and had my breakfast, performing all the necessary preparations. I then headed over to the Claes manor as usual, with my brother Nicol in tow.

Upon reaching the Claes manor, I saw Katarina in the gardens — as she usually was. She was with her adopted brother, Keith.

“Keith! This is definitely an edible mushroom, I can tell!”

“No, Big Sister. We don’t have detailed knowledge of mushrooms that sprout from these trees. These mystery mushrooms are definitely not edible...”

“No, no! What are you talking about? They’re definitely edible. After all, they smell just like shiitake mushrooms do! This is definitely some variant of shiitake. I just know it!”

“Wh-What is this ‘shiitake’... Big Sister? In any case, please put that mystery mushroom down. You must absolutely not eat it! It could cause a terrible stomachache!”

“Ah, no no. You see Keith, you don’t know that until you’ve actually eaten it! Ah... Sophia!”

It would seem that Katarina and Keith were engaged in an enthusiastic conversation. There was a large smile on Katarina’s face as she turned to face me.

I could feel the last vestiges of sadness peel away from my aching heart. It was really fortunate that I attended that royal tea party, all those years ago... and that I met with Katarina Claes on that very day.

“Lady Katarina... I-I’ve brought some new recommendations with me... they are most interesting books...”

"REALLY?! Thank you so much, Sophia!" Katarina was jumping for joy as I held out the books I had been carrying.

*The days I spent with Katarina are full of vibrant joy. I feel really fortunate to have made friends with her.*

Before I knew it... there were no longer any traces of the sadness that I had felt just moments ago. It was all gone... just like that.

## ***Chapter 2: I've Arrived at the Academy of Magic!***

As spring came to pass, I found myself finally attending classes at the Academy of Magic. As its name would suggest, the Academy of Magic was an institution where those with magical aptitude study to improve their skills.

Those who possessed such capabilities were required to attend classes at the academy once they turned fifteen years old. For two years, students from all walks of life would take classes there while living in the academy's dormitories.

The academy was funded and run by the kingdom itself, and the dormitories were considered top-class. It was quite the large campus — with the school building itself, dormitories for both students and teachers, magical research facilities, and the like.

There was a good reason the powers that be constructed such a lavish campus. Those with magical abilities, and in turn, their magic spells, were huge assets to the kingdom. After all, there were few people with magical aptitude in the surrounding lands. There were some here and there, but they were more the exception than the norm.

Our kingdom, on the other hand, was almost abnormal when it came to how many of our citizens had the innate potential for magic. The magical powers of these individuals, in turn, were used for the kingdom's expansion and progress.

This academy was the crystallization of the fortunes amassed by the kingdom's magically capable population, so that the next generation would be guided well on the use of their talents. The

kingdom, too, would stand to benefit from the discovery of magical talent. These factors were what ultimately led to the creation of the Academy of Magic.

At this academy, those with great magical power commanded much respect. In fact, the amount of influence they wielded was said to be second only to the king himself. These individuals were promised seats in the Magical Ministry — a powerful organization of mages.

And so, fifteen year old boys and girls from all over the kingdom would enroll in the academy this year. However, most of them were nobles; in fact, most of them came from families standing on the top of aristocratic society.

Perhaps this was the reason for a unique social norm: that the presence or absence of magical aptitude in a person usually determined their social standing. Some were even adopted as foster children by nobles on higher rungs of society simply because they possessed great magical power. Come to think of it, there were many nobles who found their status elevated after it was discovered that they possessed exceptional magical talent at the academy.

But of course, not all who were born with magical aptitude were nobles. While it was rare, this power would occasionally surface amongst the common folk. In such a case, even if the prospective student were of common birth, they would be allowed to enroll into the academy as long as they had latent magical powers.

From what I'd heard, the last time a student of common birth stepped through the academy's gates was around a decade ago. This streak would end, however, with my incoming class. For the first time in ten-odd years, a commoner had been enrolled into the academy.

Maria Campbell. Although she was born a commoner, the nature of her magical powers was rare — she wielded Light Magic. Amongst the five magical elements, Light was the strongest in terms of power, and it was rare to find someone capable of wielding it. In fact, there were a mere handful of them in the kingdom, from what I'd been told.

Although she was of common birth, Maria was one of the few who were capable of "wielding the Light." As expected, countless pairs of eyes were trained upon her in the academy's intake ceremony. I, too, eventually ended up looking straight at her, following the gazes of those around me.

With her flowing, blonde hair and crystal-clear azure eyes, she was quite the pretty young lady. In fact, it was easy to fall for her beauty if one stared at her for just a little bit too long. A commoner, and yet a wielder of the Light. Maria Campbell was, without doubt, the most special girl in this academy — no, perhaps the entire kingdom.

Before my eyes was none other than the protagonist character of *Fortune Lover*. With the protagonist's debut, the game would now finally begin. It would take one whole year from this point in time for the game to end. Hence begins the Grand Strategy of Katarina Claes — The War Against Catastrophic Bad Ends.

"Mere Catastrophic Bad Ends will never get the better of me...!" I said, breathing in deeply as I clenched my fists, preparing myself for the storm that was to come.

The academy's dormitories were made up of quite a few buildings, each one meant for a certain rank of nobility. There was one for royalty, another for those born to dukes, marquesses, counts, viscounts, barons... and so on. Students of royal upbringing and those from families of dukes were considerably rare, and some school years had no students of that nature at all. This year, however, they showed up in force. I heard that students from lesser

noble families were forced to take dormitory rooms one step lower than usual due to the lack of space.

Luckily my friends and I were, for the most part, somewhat higher on the nobility scale, and we had all ended up in the same dormitory building. There were gender-segregated areas in the dormitories — one wing for the boys, another for the girls. But there were shared areas too, such as the cafeteria or the student lounge, where students could mingle with their peers. And as long as the students in question had given their permission, it was possible for a student to visit a classmate of the opposite gender in their quarters.

Lastly, we were allowed to roam freely on the grounds of the academy as long as we returned to the dormitories by nightfall. Even so, this was hardly enforced unless we were out and about very late at night.

The reason for this was simple — the academy was a walled community of sorts, closely guarded and patrolled by security forces to ensure its students' safety. As a result, I didn't feel trapped by my new environment; in fact, I felt like I had a new sense of freedom. I could meet my friends any time I wanted, just like how things had been back at the manor.

A few days had passed since the inauguration ceremony, and today, Jeord had invited me to his room after dinner. "Ah, Katarina. I have procured some snacks and candies most rare and exquisite. Do visit me in my room after our meal," he said.

However, Keith had gotten wind of this somehow, and showed up when I was preparing to leave, insisting that he come along as well on my little snack visit. There was a hint of desperation in the way he spoke. *Maybe Keith can't resist the allure of rare and exquisite snacks and candies either. I should make sure to ask him to come along next time.*

So Keith and I made our way over to Jeord's quarters, and as promised, rows of delicious-looking goodies were arranged on a table. The sheer variety of it was astounding — there were simply so many kinds of snacks! *I wonder where I should start...*

As I continued to moon over the food, I spotted Jeord and Keith from the corner of my eye, seemingly engaged in conversation.

*"I had only extended an invitation to Katarina, if I do recall. Why are you here with her, Keith Claes?"*

"Ah, Prince Jeord. I had informed Big Sister's servants to inform me should any... developments, come to pass. You see, my sister does not quite have a good sense of danger, no matter how much I warn her. To think that something would happen so early into the school term... It was wise to have depended upon her maidservants."

*"Oh! What rare candies! I've never even seen some of these before. They look so delicious! I want to bite into them now!"* Jeord and Keith, however, were up to their usual happy little talks, and still hadn't taken their seats. *Ugh! Quickly! When can I sink my teeth into them?!*

"Would that not be overstepping your boundaries, Keith Claes? After all, you are but an adopted brother..."

"Prince Jeord! Prince Jeord! Can I... Can I eat this? Now?" Unable to hold myself back any longer, I interrupted their conversation.

"Ah, but of course. I prepared it all for you, after all. Eat as much as you like, Katarina," Jeord said with a somewhat twitchy smile on his face. I gratefully accepted his offer, and promptly planted myself in the closest chair.

*Keith, too, seemed to have a similarly twitchy smile. I suppose they're thinking about how I only have food and eating on my mind! But... how can they blame me?! Look at all these delicious, scrumptious snacks laid out before me! No one in their right mind would be able to resist.*

And so the three of us, finally, started having our snacks and after-dinner tea.

"Come to think of it, I just met that girl — the one with the Light Magic, prior to this little tea-party of ours," Jeord said, suddenly changing the subject.

At that very moment, my cheeks had been stuffed full of snacks, and I was just about to wash it down with a hearty cup of tea... when Jeord said what he did. Reflexively, all the tea I had just drank immediately tried to come spurting back out. Fortunately, I was quick enough to seal my lips shut, and so averted a disaster. I was *this* close to coloring Prince Jeord and his tablecloth a nice shade of tea-brown.

*That was close...* Relieved, I sank into my seat.

However Keith, who was seated next to me, seemed to express interest in Jeord's statement. "Ah, yes. Would she be the commoner who's the center of attention right now?"

"Yes indeed. I encountered her by chance during a stroll of the grounds earlier today..."

*A stroll? A stroll of the grounds and... ah!! An event! Jeord has encountered the protagonist!*

In the original setting of *Fortune Lover*, the protagonist character, curious of her new surroundings, attempts to take a walk around the academy grounds. However, the academy is bigger than she'd thought, and she gets lost. To get herself out of her newfound predicament, the protagonist then climbs a tree while dressed in a skirt, claiming that, "If I climb up this tree, maybe I can find out where exactly I am..."

It is then that Jeord, the fairytale, blonde-haired and blue-eyed prince, appears. The protagonist then blushes, having been seen by the prince in such an embarrassing state. The prince would then

become interested in this silly, tree-climbing tomboy of a protagonist — and in doing so, end up escorting her back to her dormitory.

...And here he was, telling me of the sequence of events, just like it had been in the game. I could only continue listening to Jeord in despair. *This was exactly how it turned out in the Fortune Lover scenario...* After this meeting, Jeord would start getting interested in the protagonist, and very soon, he would fall for her.

“Oh? So there are other women who would climb trees, other than Big Sister?”

“Yes... it was a first for me, as well. I have long since gotten used to Katarina’s antics, and hardly see it as anything strange... But the girl herself seemed embarrassed at having been witnessed in such a state.”

“...I agree, Prince Jeord. Under normal circumstances, any lady would be shocked if she were to be seen climbing a tree in a skirt... Most ladies would not simply say, ‘Oh, don’t worry about it! I’m a professional when it comes to tree-climbing!’ And especially not in that confident tone...”

“Well, I do say that Katarina is the exception, as opposed to the norm. Ah, but that is yet another one of Katarina’s charms... Hmm? Are you listening, Katarina?”

*Ugh... Katarina Claes, Jeord’s fiancée of convenience to stave off other suitors... Once Jeord falls in love with the protagonist, he will see her as an obstruction... a hindrance...!*

“Are you listening to me, Katarina? Ah... I suppose we have lost her, Keith. She does not appear to be taking in anything we are saying. She really does have a knack for spacing out, does she not?”

“...That is unfortunately the case, Prince Jeord.”

*Ah... this is bad, this is terribly bad! It’s only been a few days since the start of this school term, and Jeord is already being charmed by*

*the protagonist's wiles! Isn't she a little too charming? I can feel the Catastrophic Bad Ends creeping up behind me!*

The more I thought about it, the more disturbed I became, sinking into my own world. Amidst all the panic, I forgot to check one very important thing — the progression of Jeord and the protagonist's relationship...!

"Ah, now is a good time, Big Sister. We should return to our quarters," Keith said as I continued to mumble, lost in my thoughts. It seemed like the two of them found my confused state amusing. "Big Sister... We are no longer back home at the manor. You really should not be picking up strange things and assuming that they are edible..."

"It is as he says, Katarina. You are already fifteen years of age. You should really stop picking up strange things off the ground, let alone consuming them on a regular basis."

It appeared that both Keith and Jeord had gone with the assumption that I had eaten yet another unidentified mushroom or something, and so ended up feeling unwell. To their credit, such incidents had happened multiple times before...

I did have one issue with the way they described my activities, however... *I never "pick up strange things off the ground!" I only "pick" fruits off trees and plants! That doesn't count as "picking up and eating strange things!"*

Also, in the dozen or so times that I had done anything like that, only two incidents had resulted in terribly disabling stomachaches... Keith and Jeord, however, seemed to have very rigid ideas about my dietary habits. Unable to clear up the misunderstanding, I sulked all the way back to my room.

"Actually, Big Sister, I too have met with that very same girl that Prince Jeord was talking about." It had been only a few days since the shocking revelation from Jeord, and now even my brother Keith had such an experience to report.

Keith, who had come to meet me so we could go for classes together after breakfast, informed me of this development somewhat casually. Thankfully, there was no longer a risk of me launching projectile tea halfway across the room, and for that I was grateful. Even so...

"...WhaaaAAa?!" That was all I managed to muster — a strange half-shout of a sound.

"...Big Sister. What is wrong?" Keith said, approaching me with a somewhat shaken expression in response to my strange vocalization.

"Y-You... h-haven't been picking up girls, have you?!"

In *Fortune Lover*, Keith and the protagonist's encounter was triggered by a pick-up line from Keith himself. Because he was a terrible playboy in the original setting, he always had a smooth line for any woman he came across. Truly a dangerous man.

In the original scenario, he meets the rumored Light-wielding girl by chance, and out of sheer curiosity and interest, tries his hand at charming her as well.

"...Hmm? What is this... 'picking up' of girls, Big Sister...?"

"...Ah? You don't know what picking up means? Um... How do I put it... Hmm. Ah... how about this? The seduction of girls with charms and wiles, prompting them to engage in morally depraved activities..."

"M-Morally d-de-depraved?! How... why would I do anything like that, Big Sister?!" Keith shouted, his face flushed red.

*Hmm. I suppose Keith as he is now would never think of doing anything like that.* While he was indeed a deplorable playboy in the original script of the game, Keith had long since become a different individual altogether, thanks to my extensive education and upbringing. Keith as he was now was a most gracious gentleman.... although he also unknowingly stole the heart of every woman around him.

I had to find out more. Approaching Keith, who was still shaking his head rapidly with his face flushed, I presented him with another question: "All right, then what happened?"

"She was walking ahead of me, Big Sister, and then she dropped her h-handkerchief... and I picked it up for her... that's all..."

"...Handkerchief..." *That's right!*

In *Fortune Lover*, Keith fails in his first attempt to seduce the protagonist, who turns him down. That, however, only makes him more interested in her — a woman who would refuse his advances.

After her refusal, she would turn and leave, only to accidentally drop her handkerchief as she walks away. Keith would then approach the protagonist again a few days later, once again attempting to charm her with his wiles. If memory served, he says... "*Here, this is yours, right? If you want it back, come have some fun with me...*"

"...So. What happened to that handkerchief...?" Fearfully, I posed my next question.

"...What do you mean, Big Sister? I just gave it back to her after she had dropped it..."

"I... see..." It would seem that Keith didn't hold onto that handkerchief... which means that he had no intentions of approaching her with it later. But I had learned my lesson ever since the failure I had experienced during the Jeord Tea Time Incident. I had to be sure of this.

“...Well. So you met that Light-wielding girl, right...? How did you feel about her, Keith...?”

“How did I feel...? She was just a pleasant girl, Big Sister. She thanked me formally for returning her handkerchief to her...” Keith responded, seemingly confused by my incessant questions.

*Argh! That isn't it, Keith! That's not what I am asking about at all!  
You leave me no choice, little brother! A direct approach is needed!*

“Urgh! That's not what I wanted to know! Keith. How did you feel about meeting Maria? Did you hopelessly fall in love with her at first sight?! At the sight of Maria's incredible beauty?!” I demanded, placing both my hands on Keith's shoulders as I did so, holding him in place with a death grip. It was perhaps worth noting that Keith was a lot taller than me. At my words, his eyes opened tremendously wide.

“...?! F-Fall in l-love?? Whatever do you mean, Big Sister...?”

*Ah, that's the first time I've seen that in a while. I hadn't seen Keith this surprised since he was first adopted into the Claes household.  
I'm right on the mark... there's no mistaking it! Keith already has budding feelings for Maria Campbell, wielder of Light!*

“I see. I see... so you already have feelings for Miss Campbell, yes?”

“Eh...? Big Sister...? I... I don't... what are you talking about...?”

I further tightened my grip on Keith's shoulders. “No. No... it is fine. You don't have to hide it, Keith. Aren't we adoptive brother and sister?! Siblings!! So... I'd just like to say one thing, Keith... that your Big Sister would never try to come between you and your love!”

In the original events of *Fortune Lover*, Katarina cannot accept the fact that Keith, who was adopted by a duke, would dare develop a relationship with the commoner Maria. As a result, she repeatedly and drastically gets in the way of their relationship. In the end, her

behavior would cause Keith to... erase her. But of course, as I was now, I had no intention of getting between them at all!

"I for one support you, Keith! I approve of the budding love between you and Miss Campbell! Big Sister will always be on your side! She will never get in the way of your romance!" I declared profusely, all the while staring straight into Keith's eyes.

For some reason, however, all traces of emotion faded from Keith's face. *Is it me, or does Keith look a lot worse off than he did earlier? "...Keith?"*

Then, Anne's voice rang out from behind me, shaking me out of my tirade. "Young Miss, please... if you say any more than that... I think Master Keith is at his limit..."

*At his limit...? Ah! I see!* It was only then that I realized I had been shaking Keith back and forth this entire time as I spoke, all the while trapping him in my death grip. As we had just had our breakfast a few minutes ago, he was probably feeling nauseous from being shaken so hard! *Even if it was unintentional, you have done a terrible thing, Katarina Claes.*

"Oh! I am so sorry, Keith! I shouldn't have shaken you so hard immediately after your breakfast! Should I help you to the infirmary if you're feeling sick? You shouldn't attend classes in your current state!" I said, apologizing for my blunder.

Keith, still looking terribly out of sorts, reassured me that he was fine.

"But... you don't look very good, Keith!"

"No, Big Sister... it is not that I am unwell... I am physically all right, but... it is more of a mental... mental problem... yes..." For some reason, Keith started muttering things I couldn't quite make sense of, but firmly declined going to the infirmary, assuring me that he was not ill.

Unable to convince him, we instead met up with our usual group of friends before heading off to the academy's school building. But Keith didn't seem to recover on our way there. *Ohh, I've gotten ahead of myself again, and ended up shaking my brother with such force, just after he had a full breakfast!* I had truly done quite the terrible thing.

Lessons in the Academy of Magic followed a certain format — half of our classes were lectures, and the other half were practical application. The lectures featured familiar topics; history and other subjects taught by my previous academic tutors were on the list, as well as magical theory and general studies on spells. The practical side of the curriculum, however, involved us actually training in the ways of magecraft by casting real spells.

As far as schedules went, lectures typically happened during the morning, and practical sessions in the afternoon. In between was our break time. While there were dedicated classrooms for first-year students, there was no seating chart, and students were free to seat themselves as they pleased.

I, of course, was flanked by Mary and Sophia. Jeord, Keith, and Alan were seated in a row behind us. Although Keith had been seated in his usual spot for the whole morning, he didn't seem to be able to concentrate at all. He was probably still nauseous from my shaking... But of course, I usually fell asleep during lecture times, so I didn't really know if Keith focused much during these lessons.

With our lectures of the day over, it was time for lunch break — and almost as if on cue, Keith now seemed to be back to his usual self.

"All this started with me underestimating the enemy... her relative thickness and penchant for misunderstandings... all I have to do is simply... must press on... the attack from now on..." he murmured,

holding my hands tight as his beautiful face came almost uncomfortably close to mine. *What is he on about?* In any case, he seemed a lot better now, so that was a good thing indeed.

*Even so... to think that Keith, who's already popular amongst the opposite sex, would go around holding girls' hands and staring into their faces like this... what a terrifying child. I was the exception, of course, being his adoptive sister and all. If he goes on like this, even the purest of girls will be unable to resist him! They'll all fly into a frenzy!*

*Although I can't say much about his behavior today due to the fact that I caused him to become ill in the first place... Keith cannot go on doing these things so casually! As his big sister, I have to be constantly on the lookout!*

All things considered and said, however... the charm of the protagonist, Maria, was undeniably strong. To think that she would be able to stoke the interest of Jeord and even charm Keith in a matter of days... She really was impressive — above all expectations, yes.

Since it had come to this, I feel that a fresh revision of my strategies was in order... And so it came to be that we had yet another strategy meeting in our dormitory room that night.

As such, we now officially commence yet another Catastrophic Bad End Avoidance Strategy Meeting. The agenda this time would be "On the impressive charm of the protagonist, Miss Maria Campbell," if I may humbly suggest.

Meeting chairwoman: Katarina Claes.

Meeting representative: Katarina Claes.

Meeting secretary: Katarina Claes.

"Well then everyone, please let me hear your thoughts."

"If I may."

“Yes, of course. Go on, Miss Katarina Claes.”

“As it was stated in the agenda... the protagonist, Miss Maria Campbell’s charm is way too strong! It defies our wildest imagination! It seems that she has already piqued Jeord’s interest, and charmed poor Keith!”

“That would appear to be the case, yes. As expected of the protagonist...”

“However... would it not be fair to say that Jeord has yet to fall under her charms?”

“No, think about it! That Jeord, who hardly shows interest in anything, was interested in this girl’s behavior! It is only a matter of time before he’s charmed too!”

“Is that really the case? Perhaps the Jeord in the original *Fortune Lover* setting would feel that way. Jeord as he is now, however, often gives me advice about my fields and crops, and also brings me various types of candies and snacks... although he still does get bored with certain things.”

“Hmm.... I suppose you could be right. However, isn’t it a first for Jeord to be specifically interested in a certain person? Jeord is always all about Katarina! Have you even heard him say anything about anyone else in our presence?”

“That’s right! Maria is the first girl that Jeord has so openly displayed an interest in... perhaps it’s only a matter of time before he falls for her, too...”

“As expected... Maria’s capabilities are truly impressive.”

“At this rate, even Alan and Nicol will soon fall prey to her charms and wiles.”

“I’m afraid so...”

“Hmm. Is that really how it looks to you?”

“Eh?! Whatever do you mean?”

“While it’s true that Maria is academically and magically skilled in the setting of *Fortune Lover*, and is also incredibly beautiful... if those are the only factors, however, Mary and Sophia will both give her a run for her money!”

“?!”

“Both Alan and Nicol’s rival characters are similarly skilled in academics and magic, in addition to being extremely beautiful girls! Even Maria couldn’t easily gain an advantage over them!”

“Oh, I see! Given Mary and Sophia’s strengths, there’s no way they would lose the race so quickly!”

“Yes, those two would never fail so easily! If anyone were to fail in their love endeavors, it would be Katarina Claes, who is bad at both her studies and magic!”

“Exactly. The only one who would lose out when it came to love is Katarina... and that would be a good thing.”

“A good thing indeed.”

“...Hold on. Wait... wait. THAT’S NO GOOD! If Katarina loses that’s no good at all! Won’t she be headed straight for a Catastrophic Bad End?!”

“Oh no, that’s true isn’t it?! It would be no good at all if Katarina loses!”

“...It is as you say... we can’t exactly lose either... But everyone, calm down for a moment. Would a girl lacking in both academic and magical skill, as well as having the face of a villainess... ever be able to beat a pretty noble lady who was both well-read and magically-inclined?”

“...”

“...”

“...Let’s plant crops and till some fields! We could set up a farm! Just like what was recommended in ‘On Agricultural Considerations and Recommendations’! We were told that farming is all about accumulating experience! Even if we are exiled, that would all contribute to our life as a humble farmer! As I thought, we cannot possibly stop our fieldwork just because we’re enrolled in the academy!”

“That’s right! And if Jeord should ever come at us with his blade drawn, claiming that we are in the way of his love... then all we have to do is practice throwing the projectile snakes that he’s so fearful of! We have to keep up with snake-tossing practice!”

“Also, we should get permission from our teachers to continue our swordcraft training and practice! Even if we spook Jeord with a projectile snake, it will all end if we can’t dodge his blows!”

“Exactly! That too!”

“Well then... tomorrow, we’ll ask if the academy would allow us to set up a small field on the grounds, practice tossing projectile snakes, and continue our training in the ways of the sword. Does that cover everything?”

“Yes.”

With that, another Catastrophic Bad End Avoidance Strategy Meeting had come to an end. We did not, however, come to any new or astounding solutions...

“In any case... I suppose I could ask the teachers if I can have permission to till a small field in the academy grounds first thing in the morning...” And with those thoughts in mind, I slowly drifted off to sleep, in a bed much smaller than the one I was used to back home.

A few days later, I found myself in a relatively isolated corner of the academy grounds, hoe in hand. Raising it above my hand in a familiar fashion, I tilled the earth with well-practiced motions.

“Young miss... is this really a flower field?” Anne asked, suspicion plain in her tone of voice — and on her face.

“Yes, of course! A field of pretty flowers! Wasn’t I planting these because both you and Keith said that crops were definitely not allowed in these fields?”

It was exactly as I said. Although I was full of enthusiasm for a fresh field of crops in the academy, Keith and Anne were very much against it. “For a noble lady to be planting crops and tilling the earth... Doing so in her own manor was one thing. But doing the same on academy grounds? Definitely not!” they said — to which I replied... “Well then, how about a field of flowers?” For the record, that was what I wrote in my application to the academy’s administrative staff as well.

Oddly, gardening was apparently seen as a fitting hobby for nobles and the like, and I soon got approval from the powers that be to go ahead with my little agricultural project. That was why I was here working this field. Anne, however, didn’t seem very convinced.

“But... young miss. I really do not feel that those seedlings you just planted over there are flowers of any kind...”

“Don’t be silly, Anne. Whatever do you mean? They’re flowers! Look at them! Over here we have cucumber flowers, and over there we have eggplant flowers...”

“...Young miss. In other words, you are confirming what I have seen. These are seedlings for crops, are they not?”

“Hmm. Yes, I suppose they would end up as crops and veggies in the end, but before that, their flowers do bloom, like all flowers do!” I said, puffing out my chest with pride.

Anne could only stare at me, sighing deeply in response. “To think that you had agreed to it so quickly, young miss...”

“But I’ve already planted and transported the seedlings, see? It’s all right, isn’t it?” I asked, glancing up at Anne. Once again, Ann sighed, seemingly deeper than before.

“...I understand. However... you would do well to be careful. The other students and the academy cannot find out about the fact that this field is actually full of crops...”

“Thank you, Anne!” *Yes! I’ve done it, and gained Anne’s approval!* Now, all I had to do was convince Keith, and then there wouldn’t be any more complaints about my field.

“...On another note, young miss... that hoe and those overalls of yours... I cannot help but feel like I have seen them before somewhere...”

“Ah, this? But of course you would, Anne. These are the very same hoe and overalls that I was using back at the manor!”

A strange look crept into Anne’s expression as she heard those words.

“...It is as I thought... However if memory serves, I had specifically left that hoe and those overalls back at the Claes manor...”

“You sure did! And after I’d gone through all the trouble of hiding them in with my things... and then you removed them, Anne! You left me no choice, so I sent word back to the manor to Grandpa Tom! It was he who sent me these items in the post!”

“...An unexpected betrayal, Mister Tom...” Anne soon fell silent after muttering something I couldn’t quite hear. Raising the hoe over my head once more, I continued my work.

Compared to the fields back home, this one was much smaller, and considerably less tidy. As I had lectures every day, I couldn’t take

much time to work these fields, and so I had to put in a good effort when I was here.

While there was quite some complaining and sighing from Keith, I managed to convince him as well. However, it didn't take long for my friends to find out about the existence of this small field.

Upon seeing me with my gardening overalls and hoe, Alan started laughing so hard that he doubled over, hugging his stomach. "Wow, you're still doing that? Here? Really??" Jeord, who was standing next to him, seemed to have his gaze transfixed to the ground as his shoulders shook. Mary, Sophia, and Nicol were initially surprised, but quickly offered me their help should I need it.

A year remained in this otome game scenario — and today, too, I was working hard in the fields, all for the sake of overcoming the many Catastrophic Bad Ends that awaited me.

As the weeks went by, I found myself slowly getting used to life at the Academy of Magic. The lectures weren't too difficult compared to what I had learned from my personal tutors. Unfortunately, this meant that my habit of sleeping in class only got worse.

Specialist tutors were also brought in to teach our practical sessions. They all specialized in certain fields of magic, and their lessons were always interesting. My magical aptitude, however, remained relatively unchanged; I was only able to use my "Earth Raiser" spell, as usual.

While the other students hardly spoke to me on account of my high standing in noble society, everyone was polite and pleasant. The only students who seemed to take issue with me were noble ladies who couldn't accept that I was engaged to Jeord. They would often whisper veiled threats and dismissals when they passed by, and glared at me during lessons.

Among them was one particular noble lady who specifically disliked me quite a lot. I was later told that she was originally the one widely expected to have been engaged to Jeord before my arrival. This girl in particular always had something to say to me when she passed, such as “You are hardly suited to stand by Prince Jeord’s side.” Even so, the grumblings and stares of a few noble ladies were harmless to me.

My days at the academy went on this way — until the time came for a series of evaluation tests, designed to gauge the academic and magical capabilities of each student. This was also something I had seen in the game’s original scenario. All I had to do for the academic and history tests was repeat what my tutors had taught me. As for the magic evaluation test, students were to cast their greatest, most powerful spell, under the supervision of magic lecturers and teachers.

The tests came to an uneventful end, and just as expected, Keith, Jeord, Alan, Mary, and Sophia were all ranked at the top. The test rankings were monopolized by my adopted brother and friends. *Yes, yes. As expected of my brother and my wonderful friends. Most impressive indeed.*

There was also one other person at the top of the rankings: Maria, the protagonist of *Fortune Lover*. Being of common birth, there was no way Maria had private tutors of any kind. In fact, I think she was studying at a public school near her home before all this. Even so, she performed much better than most other students who were of noble birth. As expected of the protagonist.

As for my rankings, they were... decidedly average. I was right in the middle of the class. *Hooray for being average!* I cheered internally, congratulating myself on my achievements. *Come to think of it, the results of this test were exactly as they were in Fortune Lover. First was Jeord, and coming in second was Maria. Alan, who*

*was in third place, originally couldn't accept the fact that Maria had scored better than he did. Alan now, however...*

"Ain't a competition, is it? Some people are good at some things, and some people aren't. Compatibility, right? I don't get caught up in things like that," he said, somewhat casually. It would seem that Alan didn't have any feelings of hostility towards Maria at all.

Eventually, the discussion drifted away from talk of Maria.

"Yesterday, a teacher approached me at violin practice and asked if I would consider performing on the academy grounds. So... what do you think?"

"Hmm. I think that could be a good idea. After all, there are many who've been missing your performances since you went to the academy, Prince Alan."

"...What about you? Do you want to listen too?"

"Eh? Ah. Yes. Of course. I would love to, Prince Alan."

"I see. Well then. Guess I'll hold a performance or two on the grounds..." And with that, Alan turned and left, a happy expression on his face. This was a far cry from how he would storm off in the game, upset at the test results.

These developments were becoming more common — while some aspects of the game's original script remained, there were plenty of changes, too. One such change was the selection of the academy's student council. The student council was, as its name suggested, "an organization which brings about positive change and enrichment to the academy via effective self-governance by students." Quite a mouthful, isn't it? It was apparently an ambitious society that was set up at the same time as the academy itself.

In reality, however, the activities of the council were somewhat predictable; helping teachers do their jobs, settling disputes and

troubles amongst students... No matter how I looked at it, the student council existed to tend to a variety of odd jobs.

This student council, however, was quite different than the ones I had at the school I attended in my previous life — there were no votes or campaigning, or anything like that. Instead, the top students from the evaluation test were forcibly selected to be part of the council, and that was that.

I couldn't help but feel that forcing students to participate in the council was somewhat off-putting... However, most students didn't see it this way. It was apparently an honor to be selected for the council, as only the best made its ranks. As such, almost everyone at the top of the list happily accepted their assignment.

Those who were selected to be on the council were often admired by the student population. As such, Keith and my friends, having scored exceedingly well in this evaluation test, were all selected for the council — along with Maria, the protagonist.

So far, these developments were in line with the game's script. There was a difference, however... namely, the insistence of my adopted brother and friends that I, too, should be included in the council. "Please do include Katarina as well," they said. The teacher seemed quite flustered at this. I suppose my friends were concerned that I alone would be left out from their activities if they were all assigned to the council.

On another note, Anne was not with me while I was taking classes and the like, since it was her job to assist me with my life in the dormitories. Even so, she would often murmur in a concerned fashion when I was working the fields after classes. "Whatever would the young miss do if she were left to her own devices...?"

While I was happy that my friends and those around me cared deeply about my well-being, I was the sort of person who didn't

mind being on my own. Of course, I also very much enjoyed spending time together with my friends.

Although I tried to explain this point to those around me, before I knew it, I discovered that I had somehow gained the rights to enter the student council chambers — a place normally off-limits to those who were not officially in the council. In fact, I was strongly invited to visit them at their chambers. I almost felt like I didn't have a choice.

Apparently, my adopted brother and friends had done something about the rules in question... but none of them would tell me exactly what had happened, despite my questions and inquiries, so the truth of the matter still remained in the dark.

And so, for one reason or another, I soon found myself visiting the student council chambers more often than I expected...

"Please, this way, Lady Katarina," the student before me said, smiling as he offered me a cup of tea.

"A-Ah. Thank you very much."

This individual was none other than the top student of our second school year, the student council president. With a shock of red hair and ash-grey eyes, he had a welcoming and pleasant aura about him — a youth that could not help but attract others to his side.

The vice-president was none other than Nicol Ascatt, the Alluring Count. On paper, the student council's members were selected for both their academic and magical capabilities. Looking at the people in this room, however, I couldn't help but think that their looks were taken into account, too.

In addition, although there were seven newly-appointed student council members amongst the first-years, there were only two members from the second year — Nicol and the president himself. According to the president, there were originally seven members in their cohort as well. Unfortunately, all sorts of incidents started

happening in the council, with Nicol at the epicenter. Eventually, all the other members resigned from their posts.

The president himself appeared to have some resistance to Nicol's incredible allure, probably because he was so handsome himself. As expected of the Alluring Count... his charms were truly fearsome.

As such, the entrance of new first-year students into the ailing council was great news to the president, especially as the new members all came equipped with Nicol-resistance.

And so I, Katarina Claes, was welcomed into the student council chambers on my visits, even though I had nothing to do with the council itself, and was only friends with its new members. No one here seemed displeased with my sudden appearance — I was even served freshly-brewed tea.

Due to their warm welcome, I soon started to increase the frequency of my visits — and before long, it was almost like I was part of the council itself. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that my kind and caring friends had pulled me into the whole thing.

As a result of my entry into the council's social circle, I gained opportunities to interact with other members too, namely...

"Please feel free to try some of these too, Lady Claes, if they are to your liking."

My heart couldn't help but skip a beat at the sight of the beautiful girl before me, offering up a tray of snacks as I sipped on the tea that the president had brewed for me.

"Th-Thank you, Miss Campbell."

Maria Campbell smiled ever so slightly at my stuttered expression of gratitude.

Yes, I had met with the protagonist herself. On my many visits to the council chambers, I had ended up having quite a few interactions

with Maria here and there. We were now more than familiar with each other, and she would welcome me, all smiles, along with a snack tray in her hands.

That was how I started getting to know Maria, whom I had only thought of as the game's protagonist up until this point. And as I spent time with her, I began to see her for what she really was. Maria Campbell was... simply put, a kind and gentle soul. She was very capable and was greatly empathetic — she was, in my eyes, already an amazing noble lady.

Regardless of her capabilities, however, she was never arrogant. Instead, she was humble and gracious, a truly charming and wonderful girl.

*Why would the original Katarina Claes develop such a strong feeling of animosity towards this gentle girl? I couldn't quite wrap my head around it. If I had to guess, it was probably due to Maria's charm ensnaring all her potential romantic interests and friends.*

As those thoughts passed through my mind, I idly placed a pastry into my mouth. *Guh?! Impressive, most impressive indeed. This snack is a delicious morsel.*

"These pastries are... quite delicious." I said, turning to Maria as I did so.

"Yes, they are! These snacks were gifted to the council from the students of the academy."

*Ah, so that's where they're from.* Due to the fact that the council was largely admired by the student body, a number of gifts would arrive for its members on a somewhat regular basis. And since there were a fair number of students who hailed from high-ranking noble families, the gifts were accordingly expensive and high-quality.

*Ah, speaking of snacks and cookies...* “Would you be interested in baking some snacks and bringing them here to share with us, Miss Campbell?”

In the original setting of *Fortune Lover*, Maria’s hobby was baking. In fact, her homemade snacks were often shared with the other members of the council. Although they tasted quite different from the high-class snacks that were often sent through the council chamber’s doors, the homemade nature of her pastries would seize both the stomach and heart of any potential love interest.

The game’s illustrations of Maria’s homemade snacks were impossibly lifelike. I could almost taste them — and with my appetite aroused, I had found myself in a convenience store in my past life, purchasing snacks that looked just like the ones in the game.

Now that I was on the other side of the screen, I could still picture the sight of Maria’s freshly baked snacks... but now! Now I could eat them all in person! Or at least, that was what I thought as I eagerly anticipated her answer...

“...Eh?” Instead, Maria Campbell stood, frozen on the spot.

*Did she perhaps hear it as a sort of threat?!* Something like... “*Bake me snacks and present them to me!*” Panicking, I acted quickly to resolve the misunderstanding. “Ah, no, um. You see. You don’t have to make them if you don’t want to, I wasn’t...”

“...Um. Lady Claes. How is it that you know about my baking...?”

*Ah, is that what she’s confused about?* It was as Maria said, however. Never once did she announce to anyone that she liked baking. Even the player themselves would only discover this fact after Maria borrows a small corner of the cafeteria kitchen to bake some snacks for herself.

The subject of snacks was a somewhat ubiquitous one across all potential routes — it was a subject that came up after the

protagonist was suitably familiar with the love interest in question, who would then say, “Well then, maybe you could make some for me too,” or something along those lines.

Judging by Maria’s reaction, however, it seemed like she had yet to tell anyone about her hobby. *Hmm. What should I say? I can’t just be like, “Oh, I saw you baking cookies in this one game I played.”*

“Umm... Uh. Th-That was... because I heard about it from the chefs of the cafeteria, so...”

“...I see.”

Not exactly the best or most coherent of excuses, but Maria seemed convinced. I could relax... for now.

“...It is as you say, Lady Claes... although I did borrow a small space in the kitchens for personal use, I just made a small amount... Also, the snacks I make are hardly worthy of the palettes of those on the council, so...” Maria said, looking at the professionally-made snacks still seated on their tray. She seemed troubled.

Maria had a point, though. Given that professionally-made snacks from famous patisseries were lined up on the table before us, it would be daunting for an amateur or hobbyist to display their own work alongside them.

Also, cooking and baking were uncommon pursuits amongst noble ladies of the kingdom. More often than not, chefs and other hired kitchen staff were responsible for the preparation of meals.

It was perhaps worth noting that I, Katarina Claes, eldest daughter of Duke Claes, was also unable to make snacks of any kind. After all, I was a noble lady of well-established traditions and upbringing.

To begin with, the kitchens were off-limits to me even back at the Claes Manor. Back when my memories had first come back to me, I sneaked into the kitchen on several occasions — snacking on an

ingredient here, licking some mystery spice there. I even attempted to cook some of the mystery mushrooms I had found in the gardens... But eventually, the head chef decided he was having none of it. "The kitchens are a dangerous place, young miss, with knives and fire and many other risks to your health! There is no way I can stand by and see you get hurt," he said, and that was that.

*Sheltered young ladies really do have it tough, huh...* In any case, noble ladies didn't make their own snacks, pastries, or puffs. And so, everything gifted to the council was made by the hands of professionals, who were all artisans in their craft. With all this in mind, it wasn't hard to see why Maria would feel intimidated, given that she was an amateur when it came to baking snacks.

"While I am fond of artisan-crafted snacks, I also love homemade snacks and pastries!"

"Eh...? You have tried homemade snacks before, Lady Claes?"  
Maria asked, surprise written all over her face.

"Yes, of course. The previous head maid at my manor was quite interested in baking snacks, you see. She would often give me some to nibble on."

While artisanally crafted snacks were undoubtedly as delicious as they looked, the simple, yet tasty snacks the head maid crafted were also wonderful. In fact, I found myself pining for them now that I was no longer at the manor. I truly mourned their loss.

"And so you see, Miss Campbell... I find myself longing for those homemade snacks, now that I am here at the academy! I'd love it if you could just give a tiny bit to me when you bake another batch... Of course, I would pay for all your ingredients, and labor expenses, too."

*Oh, please, Maria. You simply have to give me some of those incredibly delicious snacks...* I thought as I tried my best to smile

sincerely with my villainess' face. But would Maria be convinced? Would she empathize with my desperate struggle?

"No, no! That would not do at all, Lady Claes! There will be no expenses incurred, and even the ingredients are provided free by the academy's kitchens! It is merely a hobby of mine, and I have no way of knowing if it would suit your tastes... But I can definitely bring some for you in the near future..." Maria said, somewhat flustered.

"Really? Thank you very much!" I had succeeded in my ploy — and now I awaited some of Maria's homemade snacks!

The next day, I found myself needing to change into my overalls for field work. After lessons for the day ended, I walked alone back towards the dormitory.

Keith and the rest were currently in the council chambers, busy with student council work. Today a special package had arrived for me — the specially-synthesized fertilizer Grandpa Tom made for me. So in my eagerness to fertilize the fields as soon as possible, I'd left the council chambers early.

This was why I was plodding step after step towards the dormitories, even though a familiar rumbling of protest emerged from my stomach. Of course, this was my own fault; I had forgotten to do some assignments for the lectures this morning, so I'd borrowed Keith's notes, desperately copying them over breakfast. Naturally, I hardly ate much as I scribbled while listening to Keith's light scolding.

*I suppose I could have Anne prepare something for me before I go out to the fields.* As that thought flitted through my mind, I was jolted back to reality by my sense of smell. I could confidently say that my nose rivaled that of a dog's — and right now, a delicious aroma was floating through the air.

Before I knew it, I was stumbling towards the general direction of this sweet smell, and soon found myself in a forested area slightly off the main path. Unexpectedly, I found Maria there, surrounded by what appeared to be some students of the academy.

From the look of their vibrant and well-crafted dresses, I supposed they were all noble ladies of high social standing. Maria was hugging a basket to her chest — a handkerchief sat on top of it, obscuring its contents. The aroma that had called out to me was coming from that very basket.

*So this means... No, it can't be! Could it be the homemade snacks I asked for yesterday? To think that she made them by the very next day! What a kind and generous girl!*

Overcome with gratitude and emotion, I slowly started approaching the group... and that was when it happened. A loud slapping sound echoed through the forest.

One of the noble ladies surrounding Maria raised her hand and brought it down roughly on Maria's basket. The basket sailed for a short distance, before dropping onto the ground. Now lying on its side, several muffin-like objects rolled out from the fallen basket — Maria's homemade snacks.

“So what if you have Light Magic? Don’t get full of yourself. Who do you think you are?! Look at this! Made by a commoner, made by the poor! Don’t you dare feed this to the student council! That would be too disgusting to endure!” the one who hit the basket said, before starting to...

*Wait. Is she about to stomp on the snacks that Maria made?! SHE IS!*

*What are you doing?! Those are MY SNACKS!!*

“CEASE THIS AT ONCE!” I shouted, roughly cutting in between Maria and the other students.

“L-Lady Katarina... Claes...” said the student who was just about to step on the snacks, stuttering slightly. I could see all of their pupils dilate in fear at my sudden appearance.

“You lot... WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!”

*These are snacks that Maria worked hard to bake! For me! My snacks!* I glared angrily at the noble ladies before me.

“...E-Eek!!” Almost immediately, the color faded from their faces. I did, after all, have the face of a villainess — it wasn’t just for show. With me now glaring at them, the effect was probably multiplied several times over in intensity.

*Sinners who have attempted to ruin my snacks... you will be eternally damned!* I widened my eyes threateningly, turning an even more hostile gaze at the students.

The noble ladies collectively felt my unbridled fury. “W-We’re very sorry... do excuse us...” they said, bowing their heads and pale faces, before running— no, dashing off in a fashion as elegant as possible for a noble lady.

*...Hmph. I see that my villainess prowess is doing as well as ever today. Even so...* I turned to the snacks that had fallen onto the ground. To be more precise, the snacks had rolled out onto the grass — thanks to the grass lawn present, they had not yet rolled onto the dirt.

Kneeling down, I picked up the fallen basket, before placing the snacks back into it. But as I did so, the smell of Maria’s baked goods, still as delicious as ever, assaulted my empty stomach. Unable to bear with it any longer, I reached out towards the snacks in the basket... and popped a few of them into my mouth at once.

“...Delicious.” It was indeed delicious. In fact, if I had to put it into words, Maria’s baked snacks ranked among the top of all the snacks, cakes, and cookies I had consumed up until now.

*In fact, these are too tasty! What is this calm, gentle texture? And yet, they're not too sweet, but they're definitely fulfilling! The balance of sweetness is just right — they're unbearably delicious.*

The delectable taste of Maria's snacks overwhelmed me, and I soon found myself lost in their tasty goodness. Before I knew it, I had somehow emptied the entire basket... there was not a single morsel left.

With a satisfied expression, I sighed, only to notice Maria staring at me with a mix of shock and disbelief on her face.

*O-Oh no?! My bad habits have gotten ahead of me again... how could I have eaten all of Maria's snacks?*

*Come to think of it, there were quite a few in her basket. Surely this was meant to be shared with the rest of the council...?*

*Actually... I ate them all thinking they were made for me, but... what if these snacks were meant for someone else? This is bad... bad!*

“Um... Ah. I’m sorry... it’s a bad habit of mine, getting ahead of myself and eating everything up like that...” I apologized in a panic, bowing my head in Maria’s general direction.

Maria, however, responded in a somewhat shirking manner, as if she had just seen something truly terrifying. “Ah, no... I don’t mind, Lady Claes. It is just that... the snacks had fallen onto the ground...”

*Oh. That’s what Maria’s concerned about.* I felt impossibly grateful — I couldn’t imagine how it would have turned out if the snacks were meant for someone else.

“They only fell onto the grass, Miss Campbell. They were mostly dirt free. It’s no problem, really.” After all, I had picked them up right after and eaten them all... and there was also the five-second rule with these things. So I issued my statement with utter confidence.

“...I-Is that so...” Maria replied, her smile obviously somewhat strained. Even so...

"You really are amazing, Miss Campbell. They were so delicious!" Perhaps that was an understatement — the taste of Maria's homemade snacks had exceeded my expectations several times over. They were truly delightful.

*How it melts in one's mouth... the delicate balance of sweetness... Her skill could probably even match that of professional patissiers.*

In response to my impassioned praise...

"...Thank you very much..." Maria said, smiling shyly as she stood, her cheeks flushed. Just as I was about to lose myself in Maria's lovable visage, I caught sight of Jeord, who was approaching us from the direction of the school buildings.

Jeord had apparently decided to search for Maria, worried about how she had failed to turn up despite there being a meeting at the council today. Upon seeing me kneeling down with an empty basket and a red-faced Maria, he immediately regarded me with suspicion and surprise.

Maria, however, was quick to offer an explanation "Ah, Prince Jeord... I had coincidentally run into Lady Katarina, who kindly spoke with me for a while..."

*Thank you, Maria, for not saying something like, "Oh... Prince Jeord. Lady Claes ate all the snacks that I had prepared for the student council..."*

If Jeord and Keith got wind of this, they would surely reprimand me, probably with something along the lines of "To think that you would even eat snacks meant for others... have you no shame as a noble lady?"

And so Jeord, having safely located Maria, whisked her away to the student council chambers. Of course, he tried to get me to come along too. But In the light of my impending field work and Grandpa Tom's special fertilizer, I politely declined.

With my stomach nicely filled, I headed back to the dormitories, changed into my overalls, and started walking off in the direction of the fields.

*Still... I can't believe Maria would be bullied like that...* This was the single prevalent thought that crossed my mind as I repeatedly buried my hoe into the ground.

Maria Campbell was a commoner, blessed with the rare ability to wield Light Magic. She did well in school, and had a sweet face and personality. On top of all that, she was also a member of the student council, an organization adored by the students of this academy.

If anything, Maria should be the envy of the academy. Perhaps that was why those noble ladies took issue with her, bullying her because of their jealousy and pride. That had to be why Maria was cornered by those students.

The antagonist of *Fortune Lover* was none other than Katarina herself — she was the one who picked on the protagonist on a regular basis. But this pre-designated antagonist was now missing from the overall picture.

Regardless there were prideful nobles in this academy — some of them holding court ranks. As a result, even if there was no Katarina-like antagonist to lead these nobles into bullying the protagonist, many more would appear over time — just with different names and faces.

No matter how I thought about it, those students seemed to be horrible in every way. How could they do such things to the snacks that Maria worked so hard to make? If I were a few seconds later, it would have been an indescribable disaster... the snacks would have been rendered inedible!

*Ugh! What horrible people! They're just like the Katarina in Fortune Lover! With their silly pride and noses up in the air, bullying others... hmm? Katarina in... Fortune Lover?*

*Hmm. Come to think of it... there was a scene like this in the game. Yes, one where Katarina bullies Maria, just like the incident I witnessed today... what exactly happened during that scene?*

*Let's see... Maria baked snacks for everyone at the council, and was just headed that way when she was cornered by a group of sneering girls... who dashed her creations into the ground, before stomping savagely on them.*

The one who comes to her aid is none other than Jeord, a potential love interest of the protagonist. Jeord would elegantly send all the bad nobles packing. He would then pick up one of the snacks on the ground, and eat it. "Most delicious, I must say," he would declare, smiling gently at Maria.

In fact, I remembered getting quite excited at seeing Jeord's smile on the screen. It wasn't his stereotypical fake smile, but a truly gentle one.

*I see... so today's events were that particular scene from the game?* I had hardly noticed the similarities, probably due to the fact that the ringleader of the bullies wasn't Katarina Claes. The more I thought about it, the more sense it made — that was why Jeord had appeared immediately after the bullies had run off.

*After all, that encounter was one of Jeord's in-game events. Ah, right. I see. So it was one of Jeord's events... Hmm? So... Wait. Does that mean that I snatched one of Jeord's events away from him?!*

*Wait. Under normal circumstances, Jeord was supposed to be the one who saved Maria... but instead, I intervened. The bad nobles were sent packing not by Prince Jeord, but me, the villainess-faced Katarina Claes... And I ended up eating all the snacks before Jeord got here — and so he never showed that gentle smile to Maria.*

*Oh... oh no. I'm really sorry, Jeord... How could I have taken up a romantic event of one of my important friends...? At this rate, Maria and Jeord's romance won't progress! I, Katarina Claes, deeply apologize.*

*Hmm...? Actually, isn't that a good thing? After all, if Maria and Jeord get along too well, Katarina will be treated as an obstacle in the way of their true love, and eventually meet a Catastrophic Bad End...*

*Hmm. Then haven't I done well? Oh, yes I have! Good job, Katarina Claes! To think that I had coincidentally played a part in avoiding a Bad End for myself! A great job indeed.*

*All right! I shall return to my tasks with renewed vigor!* Filled with resolve, I started scattering the special fertilizer Grandpa Tom had sent me, ensuring that it covered a good part of the field.

Unfortunately... I was a little too excited and scattered too much fertilizer. It was only with Anne's assistance that I managed to retrieve the excess. I ended up working deep into the night and almost into the dawn as I listened to Anne's reprimands.

A few weeks had passed since the incident where I accidentally replaced Jeord in one of his events. Ever since then, I found myself getting along much better with Maria, who has started baking snacks for me on a regular basis.

"Please help yourself, Lady Claes," Maria would say, smiling as she offered me a tray of those irresistibly delicious snacks. As a result, I often found my feet gravitating towards the council chambers.

If the other students knew about this, they would surely be filled with jealousy and hurl curses at me behind my back. After all, I was truly living the luxurious life — with Maria's delicious snacks and the student council president's amazing tea.

While Maria's snacks were in a class of their own, the president's tea was formidable too — one would hardly think that he was the son of a noble, given how skilled he was at the craft. For some reason, his tea often had a gentle flavor to it.

On another note, the president and Nicol were apparently distant relatives of some kind, and the two had met several times during their childhoods. In other words, this was why the president was armed with Nicol resistance.

It would seem that the president himself, despite his puppy-like looks and lovable personality, was actually quite an accomplished person. Nicol, being Chancellor Ascarr's son, was capable in his own right, but the president went beyond even that. He was top of his year in both academics and magical capability — a young man of fearsome parameters, no matter how one looked at it.

The sight of him brewing tea with a faint smile on his face had a cute charm to it, even though he was a year older than me. A surprising observation, if I may say so.

And I couldn't help but notice that he also seemed impossibly fast at his tasks and responsibilities. The president processed documents and forms on his desk at a seemingly impossible pace — all with his calm and gentle smile on his face. The dissonance between his work ethic and calming presence was stark indeed.

Given that the president was a capable and lovable individual, it was only natural that he was popular amongst the student populace — like Keith and the rest of my friends. He apparently had a fan club, too. If the rumors were to be believed, the number of students in that club rivalled that of Nicol's fans.

With all that in mind, I couldn't help but wonder if the students who were chosen for the council last year were truly only bewitched by Nicol.

In the original setting of *Fortune Lover*, the president only played a minor role, and hardly had much screen time. As he was now, however, it would make sense if he were a potential love interest of some sort.

To think that the very same president was now pouring tea for me, and constantly refilling my cup as soon as I asked... if the other students found out about this, I would truly be the subject of their curses. I suddenly felt very grateful for the fact the council chambers were off limits to all except council members.

I got along well with other student council members aside from my friends. However, I didn't have much contact with them once I was outside the council chambers. The president was a year older, and hence took different classes. But Maria was in the same year as I was, and naturally took the same lessons as I did.

While I had assumed that we would get along even outside of the council, I couldn't help but notice that Maria placed some distance between us once we were out of the council chambers.

I suppose it was due to the social standing of Keith, my friends, and me — we stood at the pinnacle of noble society. Maria aside, most other students avoided me too. Unless they were of considerable peerage, few would speak to me in a cordial manner.

In fact, even Maria herself faced a similar problem in the original setting of *Fortune Lover* — her potential love interests hardly interacted with her much outside of the student council chamber's confines.

As the player progressed and scored points with the relevant love interest, they would become fond of Maria, and eventually spend time with her even outside of council activities.

At this point in time, however, it seemed like Maria didn't have much in the way of potential love interests at all. Although everyone was friendly with her, no one appeared to be particularly smitten.

In fact, I had become a slave to the perfectly-balanced sweetness of Maria's snacks. If there was anyone who would be smitten with Maria, it was none other than me.

With how things were, no one else in the council seemed interested in approaching Maria very much at all. In fact, Maria probably spent most of her time outside of the council alone — and it was during these times that she was bullied by Katarina in the game's setting... and at present, other nobles with similar intentions.

I felt like I should do something about these incidents. With that in mind, I found myself approaching Keith, my wise adopted brother. Keith did have a simple but effective idea — that Maria should simply stay with us outside of council hours.

We were, after all, children at the pinnacle of this kingdom's noble society. Keith reasoned that if Maria stayed close to us, even the most highly-ranked nobles in the academy wouldn't be able to lay their hands on her.

When I found myself panicking, having forgotten to do some assignments for one lecture or another, it was Maria who lent me her easily understandable notes, and also Maria who patiently explained all the theories and concepts to me.

When I said, "Oh, please do make more!", it was Maria who took the effort to bake her delicious snacks, and also Maria who served them to me on a tray, smiling all the while.

Before I knew it, I had become very fond of Maria Campbell — the protagonist who was originally the arch-enemy of the antagonist Katarina Claes. This was why I couldn't continue to ignore the things

that were happening to her. I could not simply avert my eyes and pretend she was not suffering.

*All right! I no longer have to wait for a love interest to latch onto Maria, given how slow they've been this entire time!*

*I will do all I can to close the distance between Maria and I, so that we can be friends and have fun even outside of the council chamber's walls!*

It happened a few days after I had made up my mind and steeled my resolve. I found myself searching for Maria during a lunch break, thinking that this was the day when I would invite her to have lunch with me.

My friends and I often dined at the cafeteria during lunch break, but I had personally never seen Maria during these luncheons. I had read in the script of *Fortune Lover* that Maria felt intimidated by the sheer number of nobles in the cafeteria, and as a result returned to her dormitory during break time, preparing her meals there and then eating them somewhere else.

With that information in hand, I searched the grounds for a place where one could probably have a meal — and soon came across Maria, seated at a solitary bench on the fringes of the academy's courtyard.

Maria, however, was far from alone. She was surrounded once more by the same noble ladies that had bullied her several weeks ago. While there was still some distance between us, I could hear the nobles somewhat clearly, their voices carried by the wind.

"You filthy commoner! Just because you have some Light Magic, you got selected for the council! Don't get ahead of yourself!"

"You get special treatment because of that silly Light Magic of yours, don't you? They had no choice but to put you on the council! Simply disgusting!"

"That's right! You probably just got preferential treatment in your student evaluation tests! It has to be that!"

The noble ladies surrounding Maria pelted her with verbal abuse. Amidst all that, one of them raised her hand high — and from her palm, a red, flickering glow phased into existence.

*That's... Fire Magic!! She's going to hurt Maria with it... there's no mistaking it!* My feet sprang to life. I had to close the distance between Maria and the fire-handed student.

*Maria is in real danger! But... I'm still too far! There's too much distance between us... if it's come to this...*

"COME FORTH! EARTH RAISER!" I shouted at the top of my lungs. At my command, an earthen wall about ten centimeters in height rose up between Maria and the fire-handed noble lady who had been relentlessly approaching her target.

And of course, she then spectacularly tripped, landing most inelegantly on her behind.

*ALL RIGHT!!* I thought, visualizing myself standing in place, in a flex- pose reminiscent of gym models. *Behold, the power of my Earth Raiser, honed through long years of practice and training!*

With their leader now fumbling around on the ground, the group of bullies now seemed confused and alarmed. Not letting this opportunity go to waste, I sprinted towards Maria and placed myself between her and the bullies.

Turning to the nobles, I glared at them with my villainess' face. "YOU LOT!! What do you think you're doing?! To say that she gets preferential treatment because of Light Magic... talk about baseless

accusations! You listen here, this academy is a complete MERITOCRACY! There is no preferential treatment here!!”



After all, if there really was preferential treatment at the academy, the daughter of Duke Claes would hardly only have middling, average grades.

"You also got one thing wrong... Maria is hardworking! The reason why she scored well is because she worked hard! Because she gave her all!"

And that was exactly right. While I'd thought that Maria was some invincible genius when I played *Fortune Lover*, in reality, Maria was hardworking and earnest.

When I forgot to do my assignments or take notes, Maria showed me her textbook and taught me what I needed to know. From the detail of her annotations, it was plain to see that Maria worked hard on a daily basis. Maria was no genius — she simply worked hard, and did her absolute best.

"Also... those in the student council and myself? We don't stand with her because she wields Light Magic! We do because she tries harder than anyone else, and gives her all at everything... and that's why we're with her! Because we LIKE her!" I declared, continuing to stare at the bullies with my villainess glare. I allowed a suitably evil smile to creep into the corner of my lips. "You lot... If you dare keep this up... I'll see to it that you meet a... Bad End."

Yes — a Catastrophic Bad End — just like the original Katarina Claes. And with that, the noble ladies, perhaps having experienced true fear upon seeing my ultimate villainess death glare, bolted off in unison, once more dashing in a fashion as ladylike as possible.

*Hmph. What a spineless bunch. Small fries like that cannot possibly hope to stand up to the force of nature that is antagonist villainess extraordinare — Katarina Claes! BWA HA HA HA HA!* I found myself mentally laughing in a most villainess-like fashion.

And so, I ended up using the villainess-like features of Katarina Claes with extreme prejudice. Having chased away the ill-intentioned nobles, I turned back to Maria, only to find...

*What...?! Maria's crying! Droplets of tears are flowing down her face?!*

"M-Maria?!" Panicking, I approached Maria, placing a hand on her shivering back. *She must have been afraid... to be surrounded like that, to have been threatened with fearsome magic. She must... have been scared.*

I slowly rubbed Maria's back, attempting to soothe her. For a while, we remained like that, with my hand moving in a now well-practiced motion. The silence was broken by Maria, somewhat stutteringly.

"Ah... Um... Lady Claes, my name..."

*Hmm? Name? What's she talking about?* I gave the matter some thought before an answer flitted into my mind. *Ah, come to think of it, I ended up calling her "Maria," like how I usually refer to her in my thoughts. Up until now I had always called her "Miss Campbell"...*

"Ah, yes... about that. I apologize, suddenly referring to you as if we're the best of friends..."

Maria shook her head, as if to dismiss my panicked concerns. "No... I do not mind at all. In fact, there is no need to call me "Miss." Please just refer to me as 'Maria'..." she said earnestly.

Overwhelmed by just how lovable she was, I found myself calling her name without a second thought. "Thank you, Maria." For some reason, I felt like we were now suddenly closer than ever.

Maria's smile seemed to light up her blushing face. "Ah... Um. I-If... you would forgive my impudence for..." She seemed to be acting a little strangely. In fact, she was now staring intently at me. "Um... Could I please call you 'Lady Katarina,' just like everyone else on the

student council...?" she asked, her words carrying as much weight as a confession of love.

Once again, I felt my heart involuntarily skip a beat. "Of course! Feel free to call me whatever you like, Maria. After all, are we not already friends?" I said with my best smile.

While Maria's tears had almost all dried up mere moments ago, they were now streaming down her face once more. Again, I found myself desperately attempting to comfort her.

After quite some time, Maria finally calmed down, and as if on cue, Keith appeared from behind some trees. He had apparently been searching for me on account of my absence from the cafeteria.

The three of us ended up going there together, whereupon I wolfed down my lunch as quickly as I could in the company of my friends. Maria even shared a little of her homemade lunch with me — and it was truly delectable, just like her snacks were.

Maria and I were much closer ever since that day, and we were now spending time together even when outside of the council chambers.

*But... someone like that showing up! Threatening another person with magic like that, unbelievable... That singular thought invaded my mind as I lay on my dormitory bed at the end of the day, sending an involuntary shiver down my spine.*

If I hadn't stopped that student there and then, and she had turned her flames on Maria... I'm sure she wouldn't have walked away from that unscathed.

Threatening another person with magic like that is a crime. If she kept it up, she would definitely be exiled from the country or worse — just like Katarina Claes in *Fortune Lover*.

*...Come to think of it, Katarina herself did similar things during my playthrough of the game.* For some reason, something about those thoughts caused me to crawl out of bed. I reached for some papers that I hadn't read in quite some time.

Said papers were the collection of documents that I had written upon realizing that this was the world of *Fortune Lover*. It contained memories of my past life, as well as information on the game. Yes, in my hands was none other than the "Archive of memories on the game I played in my past life.."

I was searching for a very specific thing — information on a certain event...

One afternoon, Katarina and her groupies surround Maria, as usual. After peppering Maria with a seemingly endless stream of verbal abuse, one of Katarina's flunkies summons a ball of flame into her palm, motioning to hurt Maria with it.

Just as the flames are about to strike her, Maria feels her entire body lifted upwards — and finds herself in the embrace of an earthen golem. The golem is several times bigger than the average person, and it seems to be protecting her.

This particular sort of magic is that of Keith Claes, who just so happened to be nearby. Keith's earthen golem carries Maria off to safety, eventually returning to where he's waiting a short distance away.

There's a reason why Keith himself didn't intervene: the leader of the bullies was his adoptive sister, Katarina Claes. So he didn't want to show his face, on account of an encounter with her being "troublesome."

Upon being lowered to safety, Maria bursts into tears, terrified and traumatized by the earlier encounter. Keith, in turn, would gently comfort Maria as he held her in a somewhat awkward hug.

Given that he was usually a playboy, seeing Keith hug Maria in such a hesitant fashion was... cute. Very cute. At least, from the player's perspective...

*Hmm. So... I did it again?! I ended up stealing someone else's event again! And to make things worse, it was one of Keith's!*

*What have I done?! I even swore that I wouldn't interfere with his affairs in love and courtship, but I, Katarina Claes, have accidentally stolen one of his events! Oh, my dear brother... I am so sorry.*

*With this... Maria and Keith's romance may never develop in the first place. Ah, I am truly sorry, Keith... but. Hmm. Actually... isn't this actually a good thing? After all, if Keith falls in love with Maria, Katarina would become an obstacle, and hence meet a Catastrophic Bad End...*

*Hmm. Actually, well done, Katarina! You're great, Katarina!*

*I've coincidentally dodged yet another Bad End, just like the time with Jeord! Ah, this is wonderful. To think that I'm such a capable individual!*

And so I continued showering myself with praise, and eventually fell asleep in the best of moods.

The one significant takeaway from this event was that I became a lot closer with the protagonist, Maria Campbell. This was a huge advantage — if only because I was now able to check in on Maria's love interest situation.

But of course I could. After all, Maria and I were now close friends. After all, questions like “So... do you have someone you like? Who is it?” would hardly be out of place in a gathering of girls.

With this, determining the object of Maria’s affections would be far too easy...! Or so I thought.

Unfortunately, my grand plan didn’t quite work as well as I had intended it to. When I had casually asked Maria, “Hey, Maria... Do you have someone you like?”

“I... I really admire and... respect you, Lady Katarina...” Maria said, her cheeks flushed a deep shade of red.

*Well... that's very kind of you to say, Maria, but that's not quite what I meant...*

On top of that, Maria’s response immediately drew similar declarations from my childhood friends — Mary and Sophia.

“Me too, me too! I admire Lady Katarina more than anyone... More than anyone!”

“You c-can’t have her all to yourselves... Lady Maria, Lady Mary! M- Me too... I admire you too, Lady Katarina...!”

They each chimed in like this. *Ah, I really do have such lovable and amazing friends. But my dear friends... I wanted to speak of romantic love... not friendship...*

After that, our little group stopped talking about love interests altogether, and the conversation instead deviated to some sort of Katarina-praising contest.

While I did feel honored to be spoken of like that, I couldn’t find out anything about Maria’s love interest in the end... and time slowly passed us by. But alas... few things go according to plan in life.

As I got closer to Maria, I realized that there was another layer to her charm. For instance... the delicious snacks that Maria baked

almost seemed to be tailor-made to my tastes. And she'd also take very easy-to-understand, gently annotated lecture notes for me. And then there was how she would sometimes smile shyly when our eyes met, with that lovable, faint smile of hers.

If I were a man, I would already have been hopelessly smitten. I had only accidentally taken some events for myself, and yet, I already felt powerless in the face of Maria's overwhelming charm and lovability. It was easy to understand why all the love interests in *Fortune Lover* easily fell for her.

In the light of my deepened friendship with her, I couldn't help but feel an impending sense of danger, brought about by Maria's impossibly powerful charms...

"So... How did that feel? Was that natural at all?" I asked, only for Anne to raise one of her eyebrows.

"...Do excuse me, young miss. But what exactly... what exactly is this?"

"What do you mean, Anne? Don't you see? I'm practicing how to toss my projectile snake toy in the most natural fashion possible!"

*Ah, you can be so silly sometimes, Anne. I already explained it several times before I began...*

"...Yes, it is as you say, young miss. You did, in fact, inform me about this... practice of yours several times. However... I still do not quite understand what purpose this practice serves..."

"But I already told you all about it, Anne! In case it's ever necessary, I need to be able to momentarily frighten my opponent... and create an opening for myself!"

"...Young miss. I... I am sorry, but I do not understand this 'ever necessary' moment that you are speaking of..."

"Oh, you know, when things come down to it! Quickly now, I'm going to toss it again, please tell me how natural it looks..." I returned the projectile snake toy to my pocket, before once again practicing the motion of my throw.

"To begin with... I hardly think that tossing a snake toy from one's pocket is natural behavior of any order..." Anne seemed to be mumbling something under her breath — her words didn't reach me, however, as I was engrossed in perfecting my snake toy toss.

And so I continued practicing and perfecting my projectile snake toy throwing, all for the sake of avoiding a Catastrophic Bad End at the hands of those who had fallen for Maria's irresistible charms.

Meanwhile, I also managed to widen the fields a little — more crops on the horizon!

Maria Campbell... that is my name.

However, few people call me by that name. Everyone calls me this instead: "The special child, wielder of Light Magic."

I was born and raised in a small town a short distance away from the kingdom's capital... and I was only five when my Light Magic manifested.

A friend who had been playing with me tripped and fell, hurting their leg in the process. The open wound on their skin looked like it really, really hurt. *If only I could help heal it*, I thought. So I touched the wound ever so slightly.

And with that, a bright, dazzling light erupted from my hand. The wound that I was touching started to close before my eyes. Light Magic was the magic of healing, or curing illnesses and injuries. However, I knew little of such things at the time.

Had I been born to a noble family, I would have had some chances to study magic. But I was born to a common family. At the time, I hadn't yet even started attending school — and so there was no way I could have known anything about magic.

The friend whom I had healed with my light was the same. All I did was stick my hand out — and then there was a bright light... and then the wound was gone.

She seemed frightened, surprised, afraid. My friend screamed, before pushing me away and fleeing. In my confusion, all I could do was sit in place. My mother eventually came looking for me.

Quite some time passed before I told my mother of the truth of the incident. As soon as I had done so, however, I was dragged to the town's public office, where I was subjected to examinations. The results were clear — I was soon designated as "a potential wielder of Light Magic."

Before my magical abilities manifested, I was a common child, the same as any other. My family wasn't especially wealthy. My father was courageous and dependable, while my mother was gentle, and loved baking snacks as a hobby. I lived happily with my parents.

If there was ever anything special about me, it would be the beauty of my gentle and kind mother; she was said to be the most beautiful woman in the town. I mostly took after my mother, and was well-loved by my father, and all my fellow townsfolk.

However... that all changed when my "Light Magic" manifested. Most wielders of magic in the kingdom were of noble descent. Cases in which commoners had magical capabilities were exceedingly rare.

Rare as said cases may be, they were still possible — although most of such children were born of affairs, the child of a commoner with a single noble parent. As a result, when my magical capabilities came

to light... my mother was suspected of being unfaithful. Perhaps it was because I took after my mother too much, and hardly had any of my father's traits.

My mother's beauty hardly helped... and soon the rumors began to swirl that she had had an affair with a nobleman somewhere. My mother did no such thing, but rumors spread quick in small towns like ours. Our familial bonds suffered immeasurably as a result.

Eventually, my father, who would always come home immediately after work to speak to my mother and I, stopped coming home at all. My gentle and kind mother, who had always smiled, now had an expressionless gaze on her face, her eyes permanently downcast. Although she had loved baking snacks and cookies and cakes before, that was now all but gone.

All because of my magic...

The changes didn't end there, however... The townsfolk, who were all kind to me before, now kept me at arm's length. The friends that I used to get along with so well no longer wanted to play with me.

People suspected me of being the illegitimate child of a noble somewhere, or a strange, abnormal child with magical capabilities. I was now a presence that could not easily be accepted by the people of this small town...

Everyone regarded me with awe. They never approached me, they were afraid of me, and they went to extreme lengths to avoid me — all because of my Light Magic.

Even so... I couldn't simply give up, not even when faced with all these things that were out of my control. I wanted my father to come home. I wanted my mother to smile once more... To play with my friends once more.

And so I worked hard... I helped out with the chores as much as I could. I never said anything selfish or demanded anything for myself, and I desperately threw myself into my studies.

After all... if I tried really hard, if I was good and did the right things, I believed that one day, everything would go back to how it used to be — that I would have my happy life back.

Before I knew it, everyone started regarding me with a sort of silent, but distant awe. “Maria Campbell is a special child,” they would say. I had started going to a nearby school, and scored high grades in my studies there. The teachers praised me.

However... nothing changed. My father did not come home, and my mother’s gaze remained downcast. Although the other children didn’t exactly ignore me or bully me, no one wanted to play with me.

No matter how hard I tried, no matter how many people called me “special”... nothing changed.

Eventually, those around me started whispering... “Because she’s the illegitimate child of a noble, they let her cheat...” or “She’s just tricking them all with her magic...”.

*What do I have to do... to get along with everyone?* That was the thought that was always on my mind.

One day, a female classmate of mine brought some homemade snacks and treats to class. All my classmates happily ate them — they seemed to be having fun. *If I made snacks for everyone like that girl did, would I get along with everyone better?*

Before my magic manifested, I often made snacks with my mother. The snacks that I had baked with her were very, very delicious. After I returned home that day, I started to recall the steps that my mother had taught me, and for the first time in my life, started baking snacks and treats myself.

With quite some effort, I finally completed my endeavor. Although they didn't taste as good as the ones I had made with my mother back then, they still had a very nostalgic taste. They filled my heart with warmth.

And so I kept practicing, again and again, until I was finally confident in how they tasted. Then I brought my snacks to school...

And just like my classmate had done before, I laid out my snacks on the lunchroom table that all of my classmates were seated at. However... not a single snack was eaten by any of my classmates. Not a single hand reached out to them.

At the end of our lunch break, everyone returned to their seats. I packed up the uneaten snacks, placing them into my bag. As class ended, all my classmates left and went home, leaving me alone in the classroom.

I took a single snack out of my bag, and put it into my mouth. Although I was usually cheered up when snacking on treats like this, now I was crying instead. I didn't understand why the tears wouldn't stop, as drop after drop fell from my cheeks.

I continued crying as I ate, snack after snack, treat after treat. Eventually, I finished them all, and once I got home, I immediately crawled into bed.

"Aren't you going to have dinner?" my mother asked in a monotone voice from beyond the door to my room. It was as if taking care of me was only some sort of obligation.

"I am not hungry today," I said.

My mother's response was as monotonous as ever. "I see," she said, and walked away.

The teachers in my school, my classmates, the people in town, and now my family... everyone calls me "special." But that "special"

meant that I was “abnormal.” No matter how hard I tried, no matter what I did, I would always be kept at arm’s length and regarded with fear.

*I don’t want them to call me that anymore... I don’t want to be called a “special child who wields Light Magic” anymore!*

*I’m not some illegitimate child of a noble! I’ve never cheated with my magic...! All I’ve done is work hard so that everyone would accept me, would approve of me! I... I only did my best...*

No one would look at me. Even my mother averted her eyes.  
*Anyone... please. Anyone is fine... please, just... look at me! Look at Maria Campbell!*

The law of the land stated that all those who had magical capability had to attend the Academy of Magic once they came of age... once they were fifteen.

*The Academy of Magic... surely all the students there will have magic of some kind. Maybe I can just be a normal child there. If I enroll in the academy... maybe I’ll be able to make friends.*

Those were the thoughts that filled my mind as I curled up on my bed, in my dark, lonely room. Slowly but surely, hope sprung from the depths of my heart.

*If I enroll in the Academy of Magic...*

And so, with the hope that I had nurtured in my heart all this time, I went to the academy... only for it to be all shattered even sooner than I expected.

The students of the academy were all children of nobility — their noble sons and daughters. The very existence of a commoner like me was an abnormality. To make things worse, the unusual nature of Light Magic was known even amongst the common folk, so I knew that I was a rarity even amongst those who did wield magic.

As a result, I only continued to stand out. More and more factors made me abnormal and strange, and I soon realized that I would not be making any friends. In fact, I was soon bullied for having Light Magic “despite being a commoner” — apparently, it was seen as a gesture of arrogance.

Little changed in the academy. Things were just how they were back when I lived in my hometown — it was difficult just to get through the day. However... I thought that if I tried my best, if I did the right things and was a good person... then surely things would change. So I continued working hard.

A few weeks after starting at the academy, a student academic and magical aptitude test took place. I suppose there was some value to all the hard work I had put in, as I achieved good grades for those tests. As a result, I ended up becoming part of the student council.

The other members of the council were of high social standing. These were people whom I would not ever speak with had I lived in that town all my life. Our second-year seniors were socially important people, too. Surrounded by such individuals, I couldn't help but be reserved. But it didn't take me long to realize that these people hardly thought about social station or position. They were all kind and friendly, never putting on airs.

In particular, there was one person who was particularly kind — a certain Lady Katarina Claes, the eldest daughter of Duke Claes. For some reason, she was very well-loved by most of the other council members, and an exception was made to allow her into the council chambers even though she was not a formal member. She treated everyone the same way, be they noble or commoner. Lady Katarina Claes was always gentle and warm.

The student council chambers soon became the only place in the academy where I could rest my heart and soul.

"Would you be interested in baking some snacks and bringing them here to share with us, Miss Campbell?"

One day after lessons, Lady Katarina asked such a question. It was all so sudden — I found myself freezing in place.

"...Um. Lady Claes. How is it that you know about my baking...?"

It was true, however, that I had continued baking ever since that incident. My mother's recipe reminded me of the past. I always felt a little better after eating those baked snacks and treats. Even though I had faced hardship and difficulty ever since enrolling into the academy, I still continued baking, borrowing a small corner of the kitchens to do so.

However, I had done all of this in secret... and I had never spoken to anyone on the student council about it. So why did Lady Katarina know about this? I couldn't help but look at her ponderingly.

"Umm... Uh. Th-That was... because I heard about it from the school chefs, so..." Lady Katarina replied.

While it was true that I had asked the chefs to keep it secret, it was possible that rumors of my activities had leaked out one way or another...

"...It is as you say, Lady Claes... although I did borrow a small space in the kitchens for personal use, I just made a small amount... Also, the snacks I make are hardly worthy of the palates of those on the council, so..."

I looked at the delicately crafted snacks laid out on the council chamber's table. I had never seen such expensive-looking snacks in all my life. The council ate them on a regular basis — I could hardly present my cheap-looking, homemade snacks next to them. I withdrew into myself.

“While I am fond of artisan-crafted snacks, I also love homemade snacks and pastries!” Lady Katarina continued.

“Eh...? You have tried homemade snacks before, Lady Claes?” I was surprised. After all, the nobility of this kingdom hardly did any work in the kitchens. As a result, even the snacks they ate were crafted by artisans and professional chefs. I had assumed that nobles would never eat anything that was homemade by amateurs.

“Yes, of course. The previous head maid at my manor was quite interested in baking snacks, you see. She would often give me some to nibble on. And so you see, Miss Campbell... I find myself longing for those homemade snacks, now that I am here at the academy! I’d love it if you could just give a tiny bit to me when you bake another batch... Of course, I would pay for all your ingredients, and labor expenses, too,” Lady Katarina said, smiling charmingly as she did so.

“No, no! That would not do at all, Lady Claes! There will be no expenses incurred, and even the ingredients are provided free by the academy’s kitchens! It is merely a hobby of mine, and I have no way of knowing if it would suit your tastes... But I can definitely bring some for you in the near future...”

Even though I knew that my snacks were hardly worthy of being eaten by a noble like Lady Katarina, I found myself agreeing, having been pulled into the entire affair by her smile. And then, to someone like me...

“Is that so? Thank you very much!” Lady Katarina said, once again giving me that charming smile.

Perhaps Lady Katarina was being considerate to me. I was a commoner, and was always alone... baking snacks in a small corner of the kitchens. Maybe she had heard the rumors that I had eaten all those snacks by myself, and had asked to try some out of sympathy for my situation.

However... Lady Katarina was a very gentle and kind person. Even if this was about sympathy, pity, or just social formalities... It was the first time that... anyone had asked to taste the snacks that I made.

I found myself in a buoyant mood. Immediately after returning to the dormitories, I prepared my tools, and then went to the kitchens that very night to bake the snacks Lady Katarina had requested.

This was the first time I would be baking snacks and treats for anyone else — ever since the time I cried and ate alone.

The next day, I headed to the dormitory's cafeteria before going to the student council chambers. I warmed up the snacks I had left in the kitchens ever so slightly — so that Lady Katarina could enjoy the snacks I had baked just a little bit more.

And so, with my basket full of warmed treats, I headed in the direction of the council chambers... and that was when it happened.

On my way to the school buildings from the dormitories, I was stopped by several female students. From the look of their expensive, vibrantly-colored dresses, I could tell that they were high-ranking noble ladies amongst the general peerage.

"We have... some matters to discuss." With that, the group forcefully escorted me to a nearby forested area. Once we were away from the path, the noble ladies started yelling at me, hurling verbal abuse of all kinds. "You filthy commoner!" they said.

This had happened many times ever since I started at the academy. I kept my eyes downcast, staring at the ground, hoping that the noble ladies would eventually calm down and leave. However...

"And what is this?" one of the noble ladies said, pointing to the basket I was holding to my chest.

“...Ah... this... these are just some snacks I made, as a gift for the student council...” I found myself answering truthfully out of surprise at being abruptly questioned. I soon regretted my clumsiness in doing so, however...

Upon hearing my answer, the noble ladies’ expressions collectively changed. While their faces were flushed red with anger before, they now seemed even more... upset. They were furious.

*Now I’ve done it...* My careless words had agitated the noble ladies even further. And then — with a loud crack, the basket that I was holding was brutally slapped out of my hands, falling roughly onto the ground. The freshly warmed-snacks rolled out of the fallen basket and then came to a stop on the grassy ground.

“So what if you have Light Magic? Don’t get full of yourself. Who do you think you are?! Look at this! Made by a commoner, made by the poor! Don’t you dare feed this to the student council! That would be too disgusting to endure!” the noble lady screamed, before raising her foot in preparation to crush the fallen snacks.

I had never felt such anger directed at me before. Nothing I had felt in my life could compare to this. I could only stand, dumbstruck, as I stared at what was about to unfold before me. It was then that it happened.

“CEASE THIS AT ONCE!” A sudden voice, ringing out in the air. It was confident, dignified. A head full of beautiful brown hair. Azure eyes, staring straight ahead — her appearance was as dignified as her voice.

Why would she be here, of all places? Wasn’t she always at the council chambers after lessons...? This person placed herself between me and the noble ladies, as if to shield me from their anger.

“L-Lady Katarina... Claes...” the noble lady who was about to step on my snacks muttered, as if in shock. Although I was surprised and

stunned at this turn of events, it seemed that the nobles who surrounded me were even more taken aback. Their eyes were open wide.

“You lot... WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!”

All the color drained from their faces at Lady Katarina’s harsh inquiry. But of course they would feel that way... Lady Katarina Claes was the eldest daughter of Duke Claes, and also the fiancée of the third crown prince of the kingdom, Prince Jeord. The student council, which was admired by the student populace, adored Lady Katarina. In fact, her bright and personable nature was secretly admired by many anonymous individuals in the academy itself.

If one were to upset Lady Katarina Claes, not only would they find it difficult to live on in the academy — they would also find themselves hard-pressed to remain in the kingdom at all.

And before I knew it, all those noble ladies who were so angry before were now impossibly meek and quiet...

“W-We’re very sorry... do excuse us...” Saying so, they bowed to Lady Katarina, and then, as if engaged in a fierce competition with one another, ran away as quickly as they could from where we stood.

All I could do was stare on quietly in the light of this sudden development... until I realized that I had to quickly make my way to the council chambers. I had to bring my baked snacks and treats to the council... and it was then that I remembered. My snacks were no longer in my arms. Instead... the snacks I had baked were now scattered on the ground.

*Ah... I can’t possibly bring these snacks to the council chambers now. I felt an old memory flood my mind... of the time when no one would eat any of the snacks I had baked — of how they were left sitting on the cafeteria table... even though I had worked so hard to make them. No one would even reach for them.*

Still rooted to the spot, I could only watch on as Lady Katarina knelt down, slowly picking up and returning the fallen snacks to the basket. I panicked at the sight of this. How could I let Lady Katarina pick up fallen objects from the ground? As I was about to raise an objection, Lady Katarina opened her mouth wide, and then promptly placed a snack into her mouth. And then —

“...Delicious,” she said, smiling gently.

Snacks that had fallen onto the ground... I had thought that I would have to eat them all by myself, just like I did back then — but there she was. Lady Katarina was eating the snacks I had baked... saying they were delicious, and smiling as she did so.

The sight was too much for me to bear. I could only stare at Lady Katarina with wide eyes. Before long, she had eaten all the snacks that I had baked. I met her gaze — her azure-blue eyes were staring deep into mine.

“Um... Ah. I’m sorry... it’s a bad habit of mine, getting ahead of myself and eating everything up like that...” Then she bowed, lowering her head. But... I couldn’t even begin to understand why she would apologize for eating my baked snacks.

“Ah, no... I don’t mind, Lady Claes. It is just that... the snacks had fallen onto the ground...”

Lady Katarina, however, had a confident look about her as she responded. “They only fell onto the grass, Miss Campbell. They were mostly dirt-free. It’s no problem, really.”

I no longer knew how to respond to what I had just heard. All I could do was muster a strange smile. “...I-Is that so...”

Lady Katarina then went on to earnestly, fervently praise the snacks I had made. I had never been praised like this before. I felt so happy, but yet so embarrassed, that I could feel my face heating up.

It was then that Prince Jeord came along from the direction of the student council chambers. He had apparently come to look for me, on account of my being late for the meeting we were supposed to have.

Prince Jeord, however, looked at Lady Katarina suspiciously — she was hugging the snack basket close to her chest, still kneeling down on the ground, and my face was a deep shade of red. I came up with the best explanation I could: “Ah, Prince Jeord... I had coincidentally run into Lady Katarina, who kindly spoke with me for a while...”

I didn’t want to tell the prince about the bullying. It would be unbecoming for the council to worry about me. As if understanding how I felt, Prince Jeord turned to Lady Katarina, and soon we were all talking together.

On our way to the council chambers, I could still feel my flushed cheeks. Prince Jeord turned to me with an indecipherable smile on his face. “You should be more careful, Miss Campbell. She is quite the charmer, you see.” I didn’t quite understand what he meant.

Ever since that day, I made snacks for the council on a daily basis. Lady Katarina, for her part, seemed very happy at this development.

It didn’t take me long to notice that the bullying and gossip seemed to decrease after the incident in which Lady Katarina shielded me — and hence, I let my guard down. It was then that it happened... on the lunch break of a certain day.

The cafeteria in the academy was a grand and respectable structure, and was regularly patronized by nobles of all kinds. With the academy itself having many students of noble birth, it goes without saying that many of them chose to have their meals there..

Just like how we were segregated into different dormitories by social status, seats in the cafeteria were also split up in such a way.

Being a commoner myself, however, there didn't seem to be a place for me. After all, there was only one eating area in the academy... and it was mostly filled with noble students of high social standing.

I was far from being able to use the cafeteria myself, being all too aware of my own status as a mere commoner. This was why I often prepared lunch boxes in my dormitory room, and then had my meal alone somewhere in the academy's central courtyard.

That day was like any other — I sat down on a small bench in the courtyard, just like I always did, and was about to open up my lunch box. And then it happened. Before I knew it, I was once again surrounded by noble ladies I did not recall crossing paths with before.

"You filthy commoner! Just because you have some Light Magic, you got selected for the council! Don't get ahead of yourself!"

"You get special treatment because of that silly Light Magic of yours, don't you? They had no choice but to put you on the council! Simply disgusting!"

"That's right! You probably just got preferential treatment in your student evaluation tests! It has to be that!"

The noble ladies surrounding me peppered me with verbal abuse. I kept quiet, just like how I always did, waiting for their fury to subside. Their words were the very same words that I had heard ever since I enrolled into the academy... no, these were the very same words that I had heard from the beginning of it all.

*"Because you wield Light Magic."* Those were the words that had plagued me ever since my magic manifested itself. No matter how hard I worked, or how hard I tried... it would all be because I "wield Light Magic" — and that was all anyone would say.

*If they wanted it so badly... if I could just give it away to someone. I would do it in a heartbeat... I don't need this... I don't need this at all!*

*I just... I just!* It happened when I was lost in my thoughts and an unending torrent of verbal abuse. One of the noble ladies raised her hand — and in her palm was a ball of flame, burning bright and red.

Up until now, I had been slapped in the face countless times, stomped on the foot more times than I could remember, and was regularly bullied in all sorts of ways. But... magic like this... was a first. I stared at the red-hot ball of fire. It didn't feel real to me — all I could do was stare at it, as if it were some otherworldly object.

Just as the bully took a step forward, the flames in her hand raised high... I thought I heard a clear voice ring out. Then, without warning, the bully who had been approaching me menacingly all this while fell on her behind, right before my eyes. Before I could even react, a familiar, dignified silhouette entered my field of vision.

“YOU LOT!! What do you think you’re doing?! To say that she gets preferential treatment because of Light Magic... talk about baseless accusations! You listen here, this academy is a complete MERITOCRACY! There is no preferential treatment here!! You also got one thing wrong... Maria is hardworking! The reason why she scored well is because she worked hard! Because she gave her all!”

Shielding me from the bullies was once again... Lady Katarina Claes.

Yes. It was just as Lady Katarina said. I’ve always worked hard. I never cheated on my tests, either. All I did was work hard... I just did the best I could. And yet, no one noticed my efforts... or so I thought. In spite of everything, this person... she noticed. Lady Katarina Claes noticed. I opened my eyes wide and stared straight into Lady Katarina’s back.

As I continued staring, dumbstruck, she continued, “Also... those in the student council and myself? We don’t stand with her because she wields Light Magic! We do because she tries harder than anyone

else, and gives her all at everything... and that's why we're with her! Because we LIKE her!"

At her words, I felt my eyes getting hot. Before long, tears were streaming down my cheeks. Ever since the day my magic had manifested, everyone had said I was special, but they had treated me like an abnormality. No matter how hard I worked or how much I tried, my efforts would simply be dismissed. All because I had this "special power," or perhaps because I cheated. Everyone saw me as "the special child who wielded Light Magic." No one would ever see me as Maria Campbell — just a human being, just a girl.

Even so... Lady Katarina... she noticed. She noticed that I tried hard. And she liked me not because I was some special child with Light Magic... but because I was Maria Campbell. And with that, I felt a wave of emotions well up within me and spill forth. It was as if a dam had burst open deep in my heart — the tears simply would not stop flowing.

Lady Katarina approached me as I continued crying, before placing a hand on my back. The gentle warmth of her hand caused the question in my heart to leave my lips before I even noticed it.

"Ah... Um... Lady Claes, my name..." Lady Katarina always referred to me as "Miss Campbell." But just now, as she was reprimanding the bullies, she had called me by my first name — "Maria."

"Ah, yes... about that. I apologize, suddenly referring to you as if we're the best of friends..." Lady Katarina said, looking quite flustered.

I shook my head vigorously from side to side. "No... I do not mind at all. In fact, there is no need to call me 'Miss.' Please just refer to me as 'Maria'..."

Lady Katarina simply smiled gently at my request. "Thank you, Maria."

Upon hearing her distinguished voice call out my name, I mustered up all the courage in my being.

"Ah... Um. I-If... you would forgive my impudence for... Um... Could I please call you 'Lady Katarina,' just like everyone else on the student council...?" I said, desperately asking the question I had in my heart.

Lady Katarina seemed momentarily stunned, and then — "Of course! Feel free to call me whatever you like, Maria. After all, are we not already friends?" she said, with that same gentle smile on her face.

To think that she, a noble, would call a commoner like me, a friend... I found myself crying once more, just when I had finally calmed down.

*Anyone... please. Anyone is fine... please, just... look at me! Look at Maria Campbell... That was what I had always wished for. If I worked harder... if I go to the Academy of Magic, then...*

With each and every hope I had cradled in my heart cruelly dashed to pieces, I had thought that my wish would never come true — and yet...

Tears continued flowing down my cheeks as Lady Katarina's warm hand gently moved across my back. I was... glad. That my dream all this time had finally been fulfilled... And for a while, we sat like that. I eventually calmed down, and Master Keith came by to pick Lady Katarina up. The three of us then headed to the cafeteria...

I found myself blushing as Lady Katarina held her hand out to me. Upon seeing this, Master Keith sighed, as if exasperated. "...Again?! Just how many people must you charm...?"

I wonder what Master Keith meant.

Ever since then, I became closer with Lady Katarina and her friends, even outside of our activities at the student council. We took classes together, and after our lessons, we all headed straight to the student council chambers.

When I took out the snacks that I had intended to gift to the council, Lady Katarina was overjoyed. I was glad, too, although I had to avert my eyes from Lady Katarina, feeling a little embarrassed by my grinning face.

I noticed that as I looked around, the other student council members were all smiling kindly at Lady Katarina too. Prince Jeord was of course, his usual smiling self, and the usually stoic Master Nicol had a faint smile about his lips.

I continued looking around the room... *Hmm? Something feels... off.* I moved my eyes to that person once more. As expected, he had his usual gentle and lovable smile.

*...Was I just seeing things? For a moment there, I thought he had the coldest expression on his face... It was gone as soon as I had shifted my gaze back to him — as if he had the same gentle expression about him all this time.*

That was why I had assumed it was just some sort of mistake on my part. After all... how could such a kind and gentle person ever have a look as cold as that... and to be glaring at Lady Katarina? It was all but impossible.

“Maria... these snacks are... delicious!” Lady Katarina said, a wide smile on her face, as I was lost in thought about what I had just seen.

*I felt a wave of happiness wash over me once more, and soon enough, those thoughts were gone as quickly as they had appeared. I should put even more effort into my snack-making, so that I can see this smile tomorrow, too!*

It had been ten years since my Light Magic manifested. I had worked hard all this time, hoping that my wish would one day be granted. And now, after all this time... it finally had.

## ***Chapter 3: Summer Break is Here!***

The first summer break since I had enrolled into the academy arrived. While the summer breaks here were nowhere near as long as the ones I had taken in my previous life, what mattered was that the Academy of Magic actually had summer breaks in the first place.

Over the break, most students would return home. I, Katarina Claes, was no exception to this. I went back home to Claes manor, where I was once again free to refine my anti-Catastrophic Bad End strategies. Firstly, I teamed up with the head gardener, Grandpa Tom, to enhance the realism of my projectile snake toys. This would be important if Jeord ever came at me with his blade.

I also read many books on agricultural methodology and theory, once again working the fields with a renewed passion — just in case I ever got exiled from the kingdom, and had to make a living as a farmer. However...

“No matter how I think about it... ah. I really do need to see the real thing...” I muttered, unwittingly drawing the attention of my adopted brother, Keith, who had been next to me all this time.

“...Whatever are you up to this time, Big Sister...?”

“The fields, Keith! I want to see a real agricultural field!”

“...Fields? Whatever do you mean by real? But there is a field right here!” Keith said, pointing to my many small fields that had slowly started invading the Claes manor’s gardens, surprise written all over his face.

I had to set Keith straight about fields. “I mean *real* fields, Keith! Not these ones set up by hobbyists in some sort of garden! I want to see large, industrial-scale fields, run and owned by farming families!”

“...Why?”

“But of course, Keith! Should certain events ever come to pass, this would ensure that I would be able to live as a capable farmer!” I said, puffing my chest out with pride. Keith, however, simply held his head in his hands.

“...I no longer know where or what to start commenting on... where indeed...”

I continued extolling the virtues of having a look at “real, industrial scale fields of farming families” to a seemingly exhausted Keith. Soon enough, he gave in and agreed.

A few days after I Keith had agreed, he accompanied me as we sneaked out of the mansion, intending to go look at real agricultural fields... in disguise.

The reason we were in disguise was somewhat simple — if the daughter of a duke just showed up in the middle of some fields, the farmers who worked it would be shocked. My mother, in turn, would surely be angry at the developments. A disguise would help prevent this from happening!

And so I dressed up as the daughter of a merchant family. Now that no one knew I was a noble, I was able to take an educational tour of the fields without causing a ruckus.

“As expected... the fields of a real farming family are really something else! The scale, structure, systems... all so very different!” I said, staring out of the horse carriage we had borrowed from a merchant family after the tour had ended.

The scenery outside the carriage was quite enjoyable. For a while, only large fields rolled by as the carriage moved along. But then the scenery started to change, and we were soon able to spot buildings in the distance.

“Ah! What is that, Keith?”

“Oh... that is a small town, Big Sister.” Keith said, looking out of the same window I was.

“Wow, there’s a town in a place like this!” I had been far too excited on the way to my educational tour, and as a result, hadn’t noticed the town at all.

“Indeed. If memory serves, this happens to be Miss Maria Campbell’s hometown.”

“?!”

*What?! To think that this place was Maria’s hometown! Come to think of it, she was indeed born in a small town some distance away from the capital, or so I had heard... but here, of all places?* I was surprised at the coincidence.

*I see... so this is Maria’s hometown... Hmm... now that I think about it...*

“Then... wouldn’t Maria be in that town right now? She did say that she would be going back to her hometown for summer break...”

“Hmm... Indeed, Big Sister. I do recall her saying something like... It can’t be! You don’t mean to—”

“Let’s go visit, Keith!”

“...I knew it...”

Although Keith claimed that “We would be a bother, we should really refrain, Big Sister...” I insisted that “We would visit only for a while!” Eventually, I managed to convince him, so Keith and I both headed for Maria’s hometown.

The town was a short distance away from the capital. It did indeed turn out to be small — just as I had heard from Maria. Although we had come all the way here in a great hurry, I realized that I didn’t

quite know where Maria lived. Undeterred, I asked some of the townsfolk we passed by, and we were soon pointed in the direction of her house. I supposed this town was like the rural boonies that I had lived in in my previous life, where everyone knew each other's faces and names.

Once we had the relevant information in hand, I charged all the way up to Maria's house with Keith.

"Yes, and... who might you be...?" The woman who appeared in the doorway of the home was considerably beautiful — and resembled Maria strongly. I guessed that they must be related.

"Ah. I am Katarina Claes, a friend of Maria's. Would Maria happen to be available?" Although I had greeted the woman with a cheerful smile and upbeat tone, she seemed terribly surprised — enough for it to show on her face.

"...Maria is... momentarily out. I think she will return soon... If you would like, would you prefer to wait inside?" With that, the woman invited Keith and I into her home. Although the Campbells lived in a normal house, one that most of the common citizens lived in, it was noticeably clean and tidy.

The woman introduced herself simply: "I am Maria's mother," she said.

*A-ha. Related by blood, as I thought.*

Even so... the more I looked at her, the more I felt like she was much prettier than my mother, although she also had a bit of an ephemeral feeling about her. At the very least, Maria's mother didn't seem like she was capable of giving her daughter a terrifying villainess face, even if there was somehow a mistake in the works.

Maria's mother invited us to take a seat at a table — the Campbell's dining table, presumably — and then presented us with tea and snacks.

"Are these Maria's homemade snacks, too?" I asked, looking at the snacks that she had given us.

Maria's mother, however, seemed even more surprised at this.  
"...No, I purchased them from a bakery in town. If I may ask... is she still baking snacks?"

"Yep! Maria is really good at what she does, I always ask if she can make them for me!"

"...You've been eating the snacks that... my girl makes?"

"Yes, all the time! They're always so delicious!"

For some reason, Maria's mother turned her gaze towards the ground at my words, before murmuring a response in a somewhat weak voice. "I... see..."

Shortly after the door opened, and in came Maria, holding bags of groceries in her arms. While she was shocked to see the two of us seated at her dining table, her surprise didn't last long.

"I thought I wouldn't be able to see you over this summer break, Lady Katarina... but I am so glad that we were able to meet," she said, seemingly pleased at the sight of Keith and me.

After that we spent hour after hour talking about one thing or another with Maria. Before I knew it, the sun had started to set, and we quickly made to leave the Campbell home.

As we had been in disguise for most of today, the horse carriage that we arrived in did not belong to us — it had been loaned to us by a merchant family we knew. Even so, we couldn't just have a carriage stop outside a commoner's house for such a long time, as it would draw a lot of attention. As a result, we had the coachman wait in the carriage at a plaza some distance away.

"I really should walk you to your carriage, Lady Katarina..." Maria said.

But I convinced her that she didn't have to go through the trouble. "This is just fine, Maria." After all, it would soon be time for dinner — Keith and myself aside, Maria would surely be busy with the preparations.

"Lady Katarina, Master Keith... Thank you very much for coming all the way here today."

"No, not at all! In fact, I should apologize for suddenly showing up at your door, Maria..."

"That's right, Big Sister. I do apologize that she hardly thinks these things through. I will ensure that word is sent ahead of time on our next visit."

After that short exchange, we turned and made to leave — and it was then that Maria's mother, who was silent with her head bowed for almost the entire time, approached us. And then...

"...If I may... please. I humbly leave my daughter in your care..." Maria's mother said, bowing to us deeply. The sight of Maria's beautiful mother, who Maria so closely resembled, bowing to us with such a serious expression was enough to make me a little nervous.

"Of course! I hope that we get along from here on out, too." I replied, bowing accordingly.

And with that, we turned once more, walking towards the parked horse carriage with quickened pace.

I was born in a small town, a short distance away from the capital. I was said to be the most beautiful girl in the town, and all the townsfolk were kind to me.

When I came of age, I was engaged to the most courageous, dependable, and popular man in the town. After we wed, I took on the Campbell name. We received the blessings of all the townsfolk,

and had a wonderful wedding. A few years later, my daughter was born to us — she resembled me closely.

I named my beloved daughter “Maria.” I had a wonderful husband and a sweet, wonderful daughter. My days were filled with happiness and joy.

That happiness, however, was all shattered the day magic manifested in my daughter.

“Magical aptitude” was a rare thing amongst the people of this kingdom. However, most of those who wielded magic were nobles. Few commoners would ever find themselves with magical aptitude.

Due to the rarity of a commoner wielding magical powers, rumors spread that Maria was a child born out of an affair with a noble. Nothing but rumors, of course. I had never once betrayed my husband, and Maria was undoubtedly our daughter. However, talk of my supposed unfaithfulness spread like wildfire throughout the town.

My husband reassured me at first. “Don’t worry. I don’t suspect you of anything,” he would say. However, the rumors became inflated over time, and perhaps it was all too much for him. Before I knew it, my husband stopped coming home altogether.

Even the townsfolk, whom we had gotten along with so well all this time, started distancing themselves from me. Before long, I had become fearful of their gazes, and started turning my eyes to the ground.

*We were so blessed and happy before... Why did it all come to this? If only my daughter didn't have any magical aptitude... If only I never had such a child... I caught myself with such thoughts. It surprised me to realize that I had started resenting my daughter.*

Maria had done nothing wrong. Even though I understood that logically, I couldn't quite control how I felt. As a result, I did all I could to avoid my daughter's gaze.

Even though I did next to nothing for my daughter, Maria excelled in spite of her circumstances. She was able to perfectly carry out her household chores and errands, and also scored high grades at the local school she attended.

Although everyone praised my daughter for being special, there were hidden barbs in their words. They meant that Maria was "special" because she was the love-child of myself and a noble, or that she had cheated at her tests with the aid of magic.

There were also many who offered to adopt Maria. *If I accept one of those offers... perhaps everything would work out.* I had such thoughts often, but in the end, I found myself unable to accept those offers.

I was a terrible mother, continuing to avert my eyes from Maria. My daughter, however, merely kept smiling — as if her life depended on it. Even though she knew that I was a fool of a mother, Maria did not wish to let go of my hand.

To be honest, I had long since noticed. Although Maria was praised as a genius, or as a special child, I noticed... I knew. I knew more than anyone that Maria worked hard, that she did her absolute best...

At the sight of that, I felt my resentment towards Maria slowly evaporating. However, I continued to avert my gaze from my daughter, because I feared what I would see should I look at her once more.

Maybe... just maybe. My daughter would no longer forgive me. Perhaps she could no longer overlook my transgressions. Perhaps her eyes would be filled with distaste, disgust... or even scorn and disdain.

Our eyes continued to avoid each other, and eventually my daughter came of age — she was fifteen, and left for the Academy of Magic. The house became quiet and incredibly lonely without Maria.

A few days ago, Maria had returned home, apparently now on summer break. She now had a much brighter, cheerful expression on her face, especially when compared with how she was when she had left.

What exactly happened to my daughter across these few months? I would come face to face with the answer a few days later.

“Yes, and... who might you be...?”

It was a little after noontime when I heard the knocks. Upon opening the door, I found a young lady and youth, both about the same age as Maria. Although they were dressed in clothing that children of merchant families often wore, there was something different about them. They carried themselves with a regal aura.

“Ah. I am Katarina Claes, a friend of Maria’s. Would Maria happen to be available?” the brown haired-girl said, as the youth next to her bowed politely.

*Maria’s... friends?* I was shocked at these words. After all, Maria had been treated as an abnormality and oddity ever since her magic had manifested... as far as I knew, Maria had little in the way of friends.

“...Maria is... momentarily out. I think she will return soon... If you would like, would you prefer to wait inside?” From the way she stood and the dignified air about her, I assumed that this girl and her companion would hardly want to enter a house like this. Maria’s friends, however, didn’t seem to mind.

Our house was small and cramped — we didn’t even have a guest parlor. I had no choice but to seat them at the family dining table.

The girl and her companion, however, didn't display the slightest hint of dismay at this.

I quickly moved to prepare the best tea we had, in addition to laying out the best snacks the bakeries in this town had to offer. And then...

"Are these Maria's homemade snacks, too?" the girl suddenly asked.

"...No, I purchased them from a bakery in town. If I may ask... is she still baking snacks?"

"Yep! Maria is really good at what she does, I always ask if she can make them for me!"

"...You've been eating the snacks that... my girl makes?"

"Yes, all the time! They're always so delicious!" the girl said with a smile.

A few years ago, Maria had brought the snacks that she practiced so hard to make to school. That evening, however, she returned with reddened eyes. Ever since, I had never seen her bring her homemade snacks to anyone, or anywhere.

My daughter, who would always force herself to smile in my presence, often cried alone, trying her best to not make a sound. I was a failure of a mother, who never did a thing for her. *Yet, in spite of all this, you've finally found friends... who will eat the snacks that you put so much love into.*

After a while, Maria returned from her errands. Upon seeing the two seated at the table, she immediately broke into a bright smile. It was a smile that I had not seen for years — one of true happiness.

In these few months, my daughter had made such good friends, and was now able to happily smile once more. If my daughter

changed... I had to change, too. I could not simply remain like this forever. If all I did was look at the ground and continue averting my eyes from Maria... perhaps one day I would be left behind. I had to change.

As the sun started to set, the girl and her companion turned to leave. It was then that I chased after them as quickly as I could.

"...If I may... please. I humbly leave my daughter in your care..." I bowed deeply.

The girl, however, merely smiled kindly. "But of course! I hope that we get along from here on out, too," she said, bowing in reciprocation.

Watching them walk into the distance, I finally turned, only for my gaze to meet with my daughter's. How many years had it been since I had met Maria's gaze? Her eyes were glistening with tears. And soon I found my vision distorting, too.

There was not a touch of distaste, disgust, disdain... or even scorn in her eyes. Instead, reflected in her eyes was surprisingly... happiness. While we would not be able to return to how we were just overnight... perhaps, with time, we could both regain our lost days...

I approached Maria where she stood as the tears continued welling up in my eyes, before holding her shivering body in a tight embrace. Maria, who was just a little girl before, had already become as tall as I was.

After I unexpectedly met Maria and her beautiful mother, who looked all too similar to her daughter, I was in quite a good mood all the way until the horse-carriage we had borrowed arrived at the

Claes manor. I hummed a tune as I skipped straight through the manor's front doors.

"Big Sister, if you go through the main doors with those clothes still on..." Keith seemed to be muttering something, but I couldn't hear him over my humming and skipping.

And then, as soon as I turned a corner in the manor's hallways... I ran into none other than my villainess-faced mother, whom I unfortunately resembled. With her upwards-slanting, almond-shaped eyes, she stood in the hallway, like some sort of indomitable sentry.

"...A-Ahh... Mother..."

"Welcome back, Katarina," Mother said, smiling. But her eyes weren't smiling in the slightest. Almost immediately, an uneasy atmosphere filled the air. "Why, aren't you dressed in quite the strange attire?"

"Ah... Um. This is..." I panicked, only realizing now that I still had my merchant clothing on.

"Well, my questions on the clothing can wait. We can have a good discussion about it later... But Katarina, today while attending a tea-party at a woman's association I frequent... I heard the strangest, strangest rumors. Rumors regarding the Academy of Magic, of course. Would you happen to know anything about that...?"

"...Strange... rumors?"

"But of course, Katarina. Very strange rumors, if I do say so myself. Of a certain individual who has set up a crop field in an isolated corner of the venerable Academy of Magic..."

"..."

"In addition, it would seem that this person was a student at the academy! I do wonder, though. Would such an individual exist, Katarina? A student, the child of a noble family... working in a field?"

"..."

"Isn't it the funniest thing you've ever heard, Katarina? But of course, no matter how I thought about it — about a noble child who would work in a field at the Academy of Magic, I mean — only a certain individual comes to mind. Perhaps we should have a... talk in my room, Katarina."

With that, I was forcibly dragged into Mother's room, before being harshly lectured for three hours. From then on, I was forbidden from going outdoors during summer break, no longer allowed to have snacks, and no longer allowed to work in the fields.

I did, however, receive assistance from Keith immediately after — he managed to convince Mother that I was growing a field of flowers at the academy. With that, she reluctantly withdrew the punishments that she had doled out to me.

But still... what an eventful start to the summer.

It had been a few days since my visit to Maria's. I was relaxing and not doing anything in particular at Claes manor — quite the fulfilling time, in my opinion — when all of a sudden Jeord invited me on a hike.

"It is quite hot, Katarina, no? Perhaps we should go dipping in the cool waters of a nearby lake."

It was as he said. With the summer heat at its peak, going swimming in a lake sounded wonderful. It just so happened that Keith was away for some social gathering of young noble lords, and I was free either way. So I agreed to Jeord's proposal and started getting ready to go.

Under Jeord's recommendation, I ended up in the same horse carriage as him, and soon we were on our way to the lake. For some reason, it felt like Jeord had moved strangely close to me while we were in the carriage. Perhaps it was just me overthinking things. But just as I had arrived at this conclusion, the carriage came to a sudden stop.

*Eh? What's this? A malfunction of some sort?* I thought, surprised, only for the door of the carriage to slam loudly open. There, wheezing and breathless, was none other than my adopted brother, Keith.

"Haa... Haa... Big Sister, are you all right?" Keith said, gasping for air between breaths. *What's that supposed to mean?*

"What are you talking about, Keith? I'm fine. There's nothing wrong, I was just following Prince Jeord to the lake for a swim."

"...But... that is precisely where the danger is..."

"Hmm? More importantly, Keith. Weren't you away for that gathering of young noble lords today? Whatever are you doing here?"

Yes, Keith had left early in the morning. Why would he suddenly show up halfway on the road to the lake? Upon closer inspection, I recognized the silhouette of a familiar vehicle, the Claes carriage was a short distance behind him. I hadn't asked Keith where exactly this gathering was held — maybe it was somewhere close to here? I posed the question to Keith.

"Well, not quite, Big Sister... in fact, it was held in a completely different location. I just so happened to run into Prince Alan before the gathering started. I heard from him that Prince Jeord had chosen to skip this gathering, and that he was here himself. That left me with a lingering feeling of dread... and I rushed back to the manor on

gut instinct. As expected, Prince Jeord had left the grounds with you, Big Sister... All I could do was chase after you in a panic."

*Oh, I see! In other words... Hmm. I suppose Keith really did want to go out and have fun with Jeord and me. He must have been lonely, being left to his own devices like that! And here I was thinking he was already quite the adult... I suppose my brother still had a childish side to him. Fu fu fu.*

"I understand, Keith. You were upset at having been excluded from this activity, yes? Well then, let us go together."

"...Ugh, you really do not quite understand, do you Big Sister? In any case... I will be coming along too, Prince Jeord."

"...To think that I had specifically chosen this time, and even brought her all the way out here... I really am surprised at your dedication, Keith. But it is quite the pointless thing you have done, you fool of a brother..."

Following this, there was a short discussion about if I should switch to the Claes carriage Keith had taken here. In the end, for some inexplicable reason, the three of us found ourselves seated in Jeord's carriage.

Jeord and Keith sat next to each other, once again speaking enthusiastically, both with wide smiles on their faces. I, on the other hand, was left out of the conversation again, and instead decided to entertain myself by gazing at the passing scenery.

When we finally arrived at the lake, I was impressed by the cool and grand beauty of it all. Before I knew it, I was running this way and that, taking in the sights. But as expected, all that running soon tired me out, and I eventually wandered back to the carriage to fall asleep on the comfortable upholstery.

"Truly, she is ever so defenseless, is she not? Tell me, Keith. How exactly has the Claes family raised her?"

“To my knowledge, she was raised just as any noble lady should be...”

As I flitted in and out of my dreams, it almost seemed like I heard Jeord and Keith both give out loud, exasperated sighs.

A few days after our enjoyable and fun hiking trip, I found myself attending one of Prince Alan’s performances with Mary.

Alan was going to be playing the piano for the entirety of his performance today. The crowds his concerts drew were truly remarkable. The older noble ladies in attendance, in particular, were impressive in their own right. Although they quietly listened during the performance, the sheer volume of their cheers after he finished a piece was reminiscent of the idol concerts I’d attended in my previous life.

Amidst the thunderous applause, the performance ended — and soon, Mary had joined Alan, making the rounds as they accepted bouquets from the audience.

“Prince Alan, it was a wonderful performance, as always!”

“Yeah. Thanks.” Alan’s brusque response was in stark contrast to how he was during his performances. Whenever he was performing, there was always a more mature aura about him — sometimes it almost seemed like he was gleaming in the spotlight. What a pity that the performance was over!

“Come to think of it... that last song in your performance today — it’s the first time I’ve heard it. The cheers and applause were something else altogether... what exactly was that song, Prince Alan?”

The applause after that one piece had been significantly louder than the rest. In fact, thinking back on it, some of the audience sounded like they were literally wailing... and that one older noble

lady seated behind me had her cheeks flushed red, saying softly “Th-That song is...” as she started fidgeting and whispering excitedly.

“It’s the first time I’ve chosen to play that song, see. It’s called... ‘For you, my beloved.’”

*Ah, I see. It’s a love song.* Considering that Alan’s repertoire didn’t usually feature songs like this, it was evident why the audience was riled up. Even so...

“I see... ‘For you, my beloved,’ was it, Prince Alan? So were you thinking of someone you liked as you were performing the piece?”

Perhaps it was his fiancée Mary — or maybe even the protagonist Maria. Maybe even the childish Alan had become more of an adult. It was with those thoughts in mind that I had asked the question, even throwing in a faint smile for good measure.

“Eh? Someone I like? Wh-What’s that supposed to mean...”

“Hmm? But isn’t it that sort of song, Prince Alan? The sort of song that you play while thinking of the person you love, I mean.”

“M-Maybe that is the case... but i-it’s not like I have anyone I like...”

*Oooh. This reaction means that Alan did indeed have someone in mind as he played!* Maybe it was Mary, or even Maria — whatever the case, Alan walking the road to adulthood was a good thing.

“I-I... not really...” An intense blush had come over Alan’s features — he seemed to be muttering something to himself.

“Prince Alan, the ladies are waiting for you. Perhaps it would be best if we greeted them posthaste,” Mary said, sending Alan off to address the crowds, all the while flashing a few glances in my direction. Her expression seemed a little forced, and I couldn’t help but feel a little worried for her.

In the original setting of *Fortune Lover*, Mary had loved Alan greatly. I could not feel a shred of that looking at Mary now, however

— it didn't seem like she loved Alan very much at all. Or perhaps she just wasn't interested in seeing the ladies in the audience fuss over him. Either way...

"...Um, Mary?" I supposed I should say something to her in this situation.

"...Oh, that was most dangerous. He was a sliver away from becoming aware... To think that I've made so many preparations across the years to ensure that he would not notice... This calls for additional measures of obfuscation afterwards... I simply cannot have any more enemies surface at this stage..." Mary stood, muttering to herself, a serious expression on her face as she did so.

*As expected, Mary does like Alan more than she lets on after all! And in spite of the haphazard way she usually treats Alan... Perhaps there's another side to her love? Or maybe this is how she shows it?* With those thoughts in mind, I silently prayed that the individual Alan had thought about while playing that love song was indeed Mary, and not Maria.

The day after the performance, I found myself heading out on a shopping trip with Sophia. Although my summer break was not quite as long as the ones I had in my previous life, I found them incredibly fulfilling. In fact, I had all but forgotten about the homework issued to us over the summer. Those thoughts had long since sailed into the event horizon.

The plan for today was simple — we were to visit various bookstores in town. Romance novels usually started trending in towns like this one, so we might even find a few diamonds in the rough if we tried.

Sophia, in an effort to be less conspicuous, braided her hair and tucked it into her hat. Nicol was with us as an escort as usual — a normal occurrence, considering how much he loved his sister.

However, between Sophia's hair and Nicol's ravishing appearance, the siblings stood out whether they liked it or not. In fact, I could already feel the passionate gazes of both men and women around us... truly impressive.

I, however, had lived my daily life surrounded by these beautiful people. I soon forgot about the passionate gazes of the townsfolk, and was instead preoccupied with taking in the town's sights and sounds, zipping around here and there.

Although we had originally intended to only look at bookstores, we ended up visiting cute general stores, and even stopped at patisseries and candy stores, taken in by their delicious display stands.

Sophia, however, was not quite used to the town in general, and ended up being dragged here and there. Before I knew it, it was time for Sophia to return home, and for me to return to the Claes manor.

"Haa! Today was so much fun!" I said, armed with bags of snacks and various trinkets in both my hands — proof of my conquests.

Sophia agreed earnestly. "Yes... It is the first time I've enjoyed myself... so much, while walking about in town..." she said, a healthy shade of crimson creeping into her features.

Given that I had dragged Sophia all over town today, I was almost ready to think that she would no longer want to go on such trips with me, saying something like "I... don't want to come here with her anymore..." So Sophia's statement brought a much-needed sense of relief to my heart.

Soon enough, it was time for us to return by carriage.

"Ah! Lady Katarina... I enjoyed myself so much that I had forgotten... th-the most important thing I needed to do today!"

"Eh? What is it all of a sudden, Sophia?"

Sophia seemed to have been overcome by a sudden realization.

"Ah, I, um... I f-forgot to purchase the one thing I... really wanted. I will quickly... go and fetch it."

*Ah, she's forgotten to buy something, I see.* "In that case, I'll come too!" I offered.

"N-No. Some of my servants will come with me... I'll be fine! Please wait here with my brother, Lady Katarina... Um. Do your best, brother!" With a strangely suggestive smile, Sophia turned, before rushing off in the general direction of the shops.

After that, I found myself alone with Nicol. "Ah, off she goes..." I murmured.

"It does appear so."

And that, as usual, ended my conversation with Nicol. But it would be a little awkward if we stayed quiet forever, so I, Katarina Claes, decided to rack my brain for a suitable topic of conversation. Before I could speak, however, Nicol broke the silence first — a rare occurrence indeed.

"Thank you very much for today. It is the first time I have seen Sophia this happy on a trip to town."

"Oh, it was nothing. I had quite a bit of fun too!" To be precise, I felt that I was the one who had the most fun on this trip — so much so that I should tell Nicol that I would love to come on such a trip with the two of them again—

"Katarina Claes." For some reason, Nicol was now looking straight at me with burning flames of passion in his jet-black eyes. I felt my heart skip a beat — it was like my entire being was trapped in his dark irises.

"My sister and I... are truly fortunate to have met you."

"Ah? Um, Master Nicol?" I stuttered, feeling myself slowly being sucked into his gaze. To make things worse, Nicol was now speaking in a such a honeyed fashion....! Frozen to the spot, I could only watch as Nicol extended a single hand to my cheek.

"I know that an eternity is too much to ask. So... just for this moment. Please let me be by your side."

Nicol's almost-whispered words hit the circuitry of my mind with overwhelming force. I could feel my mind shorting out. I could no longer understand his words — I could only feel my head spinning from the sheer force of the Alluring Count's devilish charms.

Sometime during my mental short-circuit, Sophia returned. And so we boarded the carriage and set off on our journey home... But I had been done in by the devilish powers of the Alluring Count, and couldn't come up with a single topic of conversation I could have with Nicol on the way back.

With this, the fearsome power of the Count was once again made fresh in my mind. From what Nicol had told me during my birthday party last year, I had deduced that Nicol's love interest was a married woman, or perhaps a man. Given his terrifying powers, I felt like there was no one alive who could withstand his advances...

All I could do was pray that Nicol does not go astray as he walked his path of forbidden love.

Over summer break, I found myself at a dance party organized by some noble house, and it was there that I ran into the student council president. The president was very popular at the academy — it perhaps goes without saying that he was popular at the dance party too.

In particular, he was often approached by noble ladies around his age. Apparently, the president had not yet formally announced a

wedding engagement. A rare thing, given that he was the oldest son of a Marquis, and that he was seventeen years of age.

Ah, but of course, the Claes family had someone like that too — my adopted brother, who still hadn't issued a formal declaration of engagement.

The president, much like Keith, would immediately deflect any talk of potential partners and engagements... *I suppose some people have that luxury.*

Or perhaps the members of his fanclub were similar to the fans of the Alluring Count, who, through surveillance and interference, placed immense pressure on anyone who dared approach Nicol. Of course, they would all have to give up eventually...

Curious, I greeted the president, deciding to find out why exactly he refused all those noble ladies. "Perhaps you aren't very interested in marriage proposals and engagements, President?"

Upon hearing my question, a somewhat troubled expression came over his lovable face. "Ah, it is not quite like that... You see, everyone is so wonderful. It is very difficult to decide."

*Oh! So the president's case was less like that of Nicol's, and more like Keith's... being unable to decide, they just keep refusing everyone who asks. If that is the case...*

"Perhaps there is someone that you already have in mind...?"

It did seem like Keith, at least, already had someone in mind. Come to think of it, I had that feeling for quite a while now — ever since way back then. Although I had originally assumed that his love interest was Maria, I realized that that couldn't be right, as he had seemed that way even before meeting her. Was it someone else, then...? But yet, he was now obsessed over Maria — or at least it seemed that way? Hmm. I didn't really get it.

Was the President rejecting all potential partners because he already had someone in mind? Curious, I asked once again.

“Someone I have... in mind?” For an instant, the President assumed a somewhat harsh expression. In that moment, he seemed very different from his usual self. I started to panic — perhaps I had upset him with my apparently rude questions.

“Ah, um, I...”

“No one.”

“...Eh...?”

“It’s as I said. I have no one in mind,” the president said, as his sharp gaze — as sharp as his words, met with my own. I felt an involuntary shiver go down my spine.

“U-Um... President...?”

The President had become markedly different from his usual, calm self. I found myself unable to relax at the sight of this.

“Yes. The dance begins soon, Lady Katarina. Your partner, Prince Jeord, is already waiting for you in that corner over there,” the president said, once again with his usual smile and calm air.

*What? Did I imagine all that?* Although there were still some questions left in my mind, I ended up lost in a passionate conversation about romance novels with Sophia and Maria — and I forgot all about that strange conversation we just had.

My short but fulfilling summer vacation eventually came to a rapid end. But...

“Keith, please! I still haven’t finished this... and this... and that!”

“...Big Sister. What exactly have you been doing for the entirety of this break...? You have not done any of your homework or

assignments! How many times have I reminded you, Big Sister? How many times have you said ‘I promise it will be done’? And in the end you have not even touched a single... question. Whatever will you do? We are already slated to return to the academy tomorrow...”

“B-But! I’ve done a little bit...! Just a little!”

“And by a bit... would you happen to mean these few words, written in this one book?”

“...I’m sorry, Keith...”

“In any case... I suppose I do have to take responsibility for taking your words at face value, Big Sister...”

*My words at what value now...? Ugh... how could you, my brother...!*

“We have no other choice! We will have to ensure that it is done before we return to the academy! I will help, Big Sister.”

“...All right...”

That was why I ended up staying up all night just two days before we returned to the academy, doing my utmost best to complete the assignments I was given. I felt like my head was swirling, my thoughts shrouded by a severe lack of sleep.

Come to think of it, however, this was how I finished my summertime assignments in my previous life, too. Ah... how nostalgic.

## ***Chapter 4: The Approaching Footsteps of Destruction***

“So how is it? *Fortune Lover*, I mean. Have you played much?” my otaku friend, Acchan, asked with a slight grin over lunch break.

“I’ve done the arrogant prince and the playboy, but I just can’t deal with that terrible sadistic prince... The rival character, that villainous noble lady, interferes too much!”

Acchan’s grin seemed to only widen as I sighed, complaining about my lack of progress. “Heh heh. I’ve already cleared all the routes!”

“Eh!? All of them!? Already?”

“Yep! The four potential love interests were a given, but I’ve also cleared the hidden character’s route! It’s all done!” Acchan said, a seemingly invincible smile on her face. Once again, I found myself gazing at my otaku friend with a newfound respect.

“Ah... as expected of you, Acchan... You’re so fast! Wait... so there was a hidden character, as expected?”

“Yes. If you clear the routes of the four main characters, that hidden one opens up. So... do you want to know who it is? Do you?”

“W-Wait! Don’t tell me... no spoilers!” I said, covering my ears.

Acchan smiled mischievously, leaning in slowly as she did so. “The hidden character is...”

“Nooo! Lalala! I’m not listening!!”

“Young miss, it is already morning. Please wake up.”

“N-No... I don’t wanna... I don’t wanna hear it...!”

"Young miss. Please do stop lazing around. If you do not wake up soon, you will miss your morning lessons."

"...Hnn...?"

My personal maid, Anne, was the first thing that I saw as I opened my eyes. To be precise, it was Anne standing with her hands on her hips, in quite the imposing pose.

"Ah... Anne. Good morning."

"Yes. A very good morning to you too, young miss. If you are indeed awake, then please do make the adequate preparations."

As I stared at Anne, who was weaving through the room and preparing one thing or another, I started to remember something about the dream I had just seen. The cogs in my mind had barely started moving.

"I feel like I... just had a really... important. Dream..."

"...A dream, young miss?" Anne responded, having noticed me murmuring to myself.

"Yes... a dream that I was having... right up until just now. For some reason, I feel like it was a really important dream... But of course, we usually forget dreams immediately after waking..."

"...Is that so? I did hear you talking in your sleep, young miss... but they really did not seem like words of much importance to me."

"Hmm? Is that so?" *Then maybe it was just... my imagination?* It was no good. I couldn't remember what kind of dream it was at all. Though if Anne said it wasn't important, then it probably wasn't.

*Was I just imagining that it was important? Am I just overthinking things...?* Having no choice but to draw such a conclusion, I started my preparations for morning classes at the academy.

Before I knew it, half a year had passed since I had started at the Academy of Magic. The seasons started to change, too — the colors of autumn soon gave way to the frosty winds of winter.

I was now steadfast friends with Maria, the protagonist of *Fortune Lover*. And I had gotten closer with some of my classmates outside of the student council, too. All in all, I was very much used to life at the academy.

Of course, I found myself fighting with my constant drowsiness, and my magic had not yet bloomed either. In other words, everything was going just fine. No matter how many tests and examinations the academy issued, all I had to do was look at my friend's notes, study what I could, and then I would pass with average grades.

Nicol and the president, in particular, were quite good at tutoring me on various subjects, and I was very much indebted to the both of them. I had made many truly wonderful friends.

The fields were doing well, and I had slowly perfected my projectile-snake tossing motions. From my perspective, I was fully prepared for any kind of incoming Catastrophic Bad End.

There was, however, one thing I still could not determine — the all-important information on who exactly Maria's love interest was. It was the same for all the other potential love interests. I had no idea who they liked, which was troubling, considering that the information in question could heavily influence events in the future.

No matter how much I asked Maria who she liked, she would always derail the conversation by responding with "I really respect you, Lady Katarina."

Maria had no idea that she was incredibly popular. "The boys in the Student Council are all dazed by your charm, Maria!" I would say.

"That is all but impossible, Lady Katarina. After all, there is already someone else that everyone has been charmed by," Maria said, with a notably surprised expression.

*How could it even be possible? The charismatic love interests of Fortune Lover leaving behind the charming Maria, and instead looking at someone else...? There's no such person.*

While I did think that Maria was doing her best, as usual, I supposed this was none other than her protagonist traits kicking in. Notably, her amazing capacity to be "dense," and have creative "misunderstandings."

Even Keith, who had assisted me when I investigated Maria a while ago, muttered, "Really... how dense could you be?" Judging from his words, I guessed that even Keith thought that Maria's denseness was on another level. Even the potential love interest characters would have a hard time keeping up with this... density.

And so, I continued living my peaceful life at the academy, with everything going well, other than that one question about who Maria and the others liked. Perhaps that was why it felt so, so sudden.

Finally... the gears were set in motion. The game was afoot.

On the lunch break of a particularly chilly day, I headed towards the cafeteria with a few of my classmates.

Usually, my friends, brother, or members of the student council would be with me. Today, however, they all seemed somewhat busy, and told me that they would join me at a later time.

In retrospect, that was where it had started — where it was... different. All of my friends in the council had become busy at the exact same time, and all of them were unable to go to lunch break, needing some time to finish extra work. Although this did happen at

times, I had never seen an occasion where they were all absent at once.

I hardly questioned this turn of events at the time. My mind was filled with thoughts of what that afternoon's offerings at the cafeteria would be. That was when it happened — all of a sudden, without me noticing, as I idly strolled into the cafeteria.

"Katarina Claes. We have some important things to talk about." Standing before me as I took my first step into the cafeteria was a noble lady of considerable social standing.

To be precise, she had been the one who was widely thought of as Jeord's fiancée — at least, until I came into the picture. While she often hissed insults at me under her breath and spent a good deal of her time staring at me, I had never seen her speak to me upfront and in person.

However, with her similarly upward-slanting eyes and thin lips, she shared similar villainess features with me — and at one point, I had even thought of her as a villainess-faced comrade of sorts...

The mean-faced student narrowed her eyes, as if to accentuate her antagonistic qualities. She also refused to move from where she stood. Unable to process the situation, I could only stand rooted to the spot, staring straight at the noble lady in question.

It was then that I noticed the dozen or so other students behind her — and much like their ringleader, those girls were staring at me too. As expected, the students behind her were the very same ones who often gossiped behind my back.

This seemed like a scene that was somewhat... familiar.

"Katarina Claes. We will expose your numerous wrongdoings today, here and now!" the noble lady before me said, her voice echoing loudly off the cafeteria's walls.

Under normal circumstances, the cafeteria would be a hive of activity — natural, given that half of the academy's populace was usually gathered here at this time. Now, however, the room was silent, and I could suddenly feel the gazes of all its patrons focusing on me.

As if pleased by this development, the girl's lips curled upwards ever so slightly. All I could do was stand and stare, too stunned to even speak a word, having suddenly been thrust into the center of it all.

*My numerous wrongdoings...? But what could those be? Me tossing projectile snakes? But it's not like I've thrown those at other people. I don't feel like I've done anything to cause trouble...*

*Or is it because I had tilled a field on the academy grounds? That I carried out agricultural activities at a place as prestigious as this...? Is it something like that?*

The noble lady before me, however, hardly cared about how I was lost in thoughts, merely continuing her statement.

"You, the eldest daughter of a duke and Prince Jeord's fiancée, have been observed abusing your power and social standing on multiple occasions, using these privileges to oppress those who have no choice but to bend to your will! Not only that, you have also been bullying Maria Campbell, wielder of Light Magic, and favored member of the student council! Time and time again, you have subjected Maria to horrible bullying and intimidation!"

"!?"

Her phrasing reminded me of a particular scene — and it was then that I remembered... that I had seen this all somewhere before.

This was the one event I had witnessed countless times when playing through *Fortune Lover* — the public prosecution of Katarina Claes. Here, the many sins and wrongdoings of Katarina the villainess

would be laid bare, and she would face the collective public judgment of the student body.

To think that I had been on alert the entire time, earnestly avoiding Bad Ends of all types... and here I was, right in the middle of this terrible situation.

I gazed blankly at the noble lady standing before me, still in a daze. Everyone was staring at me with faces full of tension.

But then... something about all this was... off. While this event was unmistakably “the Public Prosecution of Katarina Claes,” the ones who had confronted her with these sins were none other than the members of the student council — in other words, all the potential love interest characters of *Fortune Lover*.

In the case of Jeord, he would be standing in front of Maria, as if to shield her. In the case of Keith, he would be doing that instead — but either way, I saw no sign of them now.

I was confused. Why were these noble ladies standing where the student council should have been, and why were they accusing me of these supposed wrongdoings?

“Playing dumb won’t save you! I have proof of your wrongdoings right here, in my hands! We even have witnesses!”

Saying so, the girl raised a sheaf of papers to my face, before tilting her head slightly, gesturing to one of her subordinates, who was still glaring at me.

Written on the paper were countless instances bullying and hurtful behavior directed towards Maria. I had no memory of any of these events, of course, but I was made out to be the culprit and perpetrator of these acts on these papers. In addition, the so-called witness testified that they saw me hurt Maria on multiple occasions.

As the accusations were rapidly slung at me, I, as well as all the students in the cafeteria, could only listen on in a stunned silence. Soon, an uneasy blanket of silence covered the cafeteria.

The students of the academy seemed to collectively hold their breaths, as if they were watching for some sort of reaction. It was then that they arrived — Maria and my childhood friends, the members of the student council. Having entered from an entrance directly opposite to mine, they appeared behind the group of noble ladies who were accusing me, and soon approached us.

“What, exactly, is transpiring here?” Jeord said, amidst the painfully still and tense atmosphere. He eyed the noble ladies and me with a questioning gaze.

In response, the noble lady who was once the most promising candidate for the position of Jeord’s fiancée began explicating my various supposed misdeeds once more, just as she had done before.

The student council members before me — my childhood friends, my adopted brother, and even Maria’s expressions began to slowly twist. *Ah, this was exactly what happened during the Public Prosecution of Katarina Claes... However, under normal circumstances, only Jeord or Keith would be here...*

Maria’s current expression was just like how it was in *Fortune Lover*, as she stood behind Jeord or Keith.

In the original setting of *Fortune Lover*, Maria would muster up her courage — and with unwavering eyes, step out from behind Jeord or Keith, confronting the villainous Katarina, whose evil acts had been finally exposed. And then say...

*“This is the truth, and nothing but the truth! I have always been bullied and hurt by Lady Katarina Claes!”*

The students in the cafeteria, in turn, would be in awe at Maria’s dignified attitude, silent strength, and courageous stance.

As I was reminiscing about *Fortune Lover*'s scenario, the noble lady had finally finished rattling off her lengthy list of accusations. And then, just like it had happened in the game, Maria stepped out from the shadows, emerging at the front of the crowd.

Having awakened the memories of my past life, I was not like the original Katarina Claes. Unlike her, I hadn't done anything wrong. Even so... things were really progressing like how they did in the game. At this rate, I would soon come face to face with a Catastrophic Bad End. I would either be exiled from the kingdom where I stood... or be killed by Maria's love interest at the time.

*Do I have a projectile snake in my pocket right now...? If I were exiled from the kingdom, would I be able to at least take my favorite farming hoe with me...?*

Maria's eyes were filled with an an aura of unwavering will, just like how I remembered them. And then, slowly, she spoke.

"These are lies! These accusations are nothing but lies and slander! I have never once been subject to any of these things by Lady Katarina Claes!" Her dignified voice echoed throughout the silent cafeteria.

And then, Maria turned her gaze to the noble ladies, as if to shield me from harm. "To come up with false accusations like this... how DARE you insult someone I hold so dear?!" It was a voice I had not heard before — a steely, determined voice.

Although the noble ladies initially froze up at Maria's unprecedented reaction, they soon resumed their assault. "Whatever are you talking about, Maria Campbell! We are doing this for you! We are exposing Katarina Claes' wrongdoings out of consideration for you!"

"That's right! These aren't lies or slander! We have written testimony, evidence, and even a witness! You are the one who is being deceived by that evil woman!"

"Exactly! To be tricked by such a detestable woman... how pitiful, how sad! Maria Campbell... WE are your allies," the noble ladies kept going, each bolder than the last.

"But alas... to claim circumstantial evidence such as this, as real evidence? Most amusing, is it not...?" Jeord said, holding the sheaf of papers in one hand.

Although Jeord had suggested that the situation was amusing, there was not a single trace of a smile on his face. Instead, his expression was stoic, almost chilling. If the usually stoic Nicol was the one who had delivered this line, it would have been one thing. But this was Jeord we were talking about... Jeord, who always had a smile on his face.

Jeord's blank expression, as well as the slowly expanding aura of pressure that he was exerting, soon caused the noisy noble ladies to clam up altogether. Up until a while ago, they were so eagerly chattering on. Now, however, they pursed their lips, looking on in apparent fear.

"In any case... it would be all but impossible for my simple-minded and pure Big Sister to carry out such specific and detailed acts of bullying. If I may say so... I usually spend my time by my Big Sister's side. However, I do not recall seeing this witness of yours... not once. Did you genuinely witness my Big Sister, Katarina Claes, carry out these specific acts...?" Keith said, looking up from the paper of detailed accusations.

On his face was a cold smile — one that I had never seen before. A single glance from Keith was enough to cause the so-called witness

to retreat, with her giving an involuntary squeak as she took a few steps backwards.



"Honestly! Lady Katarina would never do such a thing! It is as Master Keith says — Lady Katarina is indeed simple and pure! She is all but incapable of such intricate and complicated plans!" Mary declared, a tense expression splashed across her features.

Immediately after, Alan spoke up too, in his usual brusque manner. "It's as she says! There's no damn way this idiot could plan something difficult like that! She's stupid, see?! All she can do is face you in a sincere one-to-one!"

Sophia chimed in next. "Exactly so...! Lady Katarina would never do anything like this... planning behind someone's back?! She's not that capable! Lady Katarina simply does not have the capacity to act in such a way!!"

"Well said," added Nicol.

Although everyone seemed to be protecting me from these outlandish accusations... for some reason, I couldn't help but feel like they were severely underestimating my capabilities...

And then, as soon as my friends delivered their statements, the familiar voices of a few classmates started ringing out through the cafeteria.

"Yes! Lady Katarina would never do anything of the sort!"

"Lady Katarina bullying another student? Unthinkable!"

The voices rose up, one after the next. Soon they grew louder, flooding in from all corners of the room. And then...

"It is as everyone says. Lady Katarina is not the kind of person to bully or hurt another! While the accusations and details written on this paper — about me being bullied, are true... Lady Katarina was in no way the perpetrator! In fact, Lady Katarina herself protected me from these bullies, time and time again! Also... I clearly remember

the faces of those who really did bully me, and attempted to cause me harm. If there is really a need, perhaps I should name them, one by one, here and now..."

It was as if she were someone else. The usually gentle, calm, and soothing Maria... was now courageously deflecting the accusations directed at me, swatting them away one by one. From the corner of my eye, I could see a few people seated in the cafeteria slowly turning pale.

Upon closer inspection, some of the noble ladies who were accusing me reacted in a similar way, lowering their heads. The girls were now obviously at a disadvantage. No longer able to continue their accusations, their voices slowly grew softer and softer, a sharp contrast from their initial tone. Soon, they trailed out of the cafeteria.

Immediately, Maria came to my side to reassure me, as I had been silent for the entire ordeal. "Lady Katarina, are you all right?" she asked, looking straight into my eyes with an expression of pronounced worry.

I nodded deeply. "Yes... quite. Um... Thank you, everyone." I said to my friends, as well as my other classmates who had spoken up for me.

"No... In fact, I apologize, Katarina. For not being at your side when this began," Jeord said, placing a hand on my shoulder.

"Sorry we were late, Big Sister," Keith added, doing the same.

Before I knew it, the tension in my shoulders faded slowly but surely. And with that came a deep, familiar rumbling. It would seem that my stomach, still not having any lunch, was at its limit.

"I never thought those girls would dare to do something like this to Katarina."

"I agree, Prince Jeord. While it is indeed true that they view Big Sister as an enemy of sorts... I did not think that they would go this far."

"Yeah. Even if she were the way they claimed... she's still the eldest daughter of a duke. To insult her would be... endangering themselves. More than just their standing, I mean. They didn't seem like the type to go this far."

"Also, there is the matter of this evidence... no matter how one would spin it, I hardly believe that their little group is capable of such. Especially this... the level of fabrication is all but too high."

"It is as Lady Mary says... I do not think that those students are... capable of creating such well-crafted pieces of fake evidence..."

"...It is also odd that we were all summoned at the same time to perform various tasks."

While I was finally able to tuck into my much-deserved lunch, my friends all seemed to be engaging in some difficult topic of conversation. I, however, was simply happy that I had survived the Public Prosecution of Katarina Claes, and in turn, avoided a Catastrophic Bad End.

Given that the scenario of *Fortune Lover* officially ends during the graduation ceremony next spring, I still couldn't let down my guard... But even so, I had gotten out of that terrible situation thanks to everyone's help. That was truly a good thing.

I was caught up in my own thoughts, and didn't notice that Maria alone was silent, as if thinking about one thing or another. With lunch break finally over, everyone was just about to return to afternoon classes... when Maria suddenly spoke up.

"There is someplace... I would like to go. Please go on ahead, everyone."

"Should I go with you, Maria?" Although it seemed like the bullies would no longer trouble Maria, I still asked after her, worried for her well-being.

"No... it is nothing important. I will be fine on my own. Please, do go on ahead," Maria said, staunchly refusing my offer.

*Perhaps her stomach hurts? Does she need to use the washroom? Maybe she shouldn't have eaten so much over lunch break...*

"Hmm. All right then. We don't have long before afternoon lessons begin though, so make sure to come back quickly."

"Of course, Lady Katarina," Maria replied with her usual smile, before heading off in the opposite direction of the classrooms.

After this, I would deeply regret not having gone with Maria.

Although I had asked her to return quickly, she was nowhere to be found in the classroom. Assuming that she was unwell, I thought to check the infirmary, but there was no sign of her there either.

After this, we all searched for Maria... but no matter how hard we tried, we couldn't find her anywhere. It was as if Maria Campbell had vanished into thin air after we had parted ways at the end of the lunch break.

It was now the second day since Maria's sudden disappearance. Although my friends and I desperately searched the academy for her, we could find no trace of Maria's whereabouts at all — not even a single clue.

All I could do was panic, my mind a hysterical mess. *Why didn't I just go with her...?* I would come to regret my decision even more in the coming days.

"Here. Drink this and warm up. You look terrible, Lady Katarina," said the student council president as he handed me a cup of freshly-brewed tea.

"...Thank you very much." I said, graciously accepting the cup. It had the same gentle taste, and soon, its warmth spread through my body.

I was in the council chambers, as I always was. I stared at the chair that Maria used to sit in. Normally the president would offer me tea, and Maria would offer me a homemade snack, all smiles. However... that smile was now conspicuously absent.

"Miss Campbell has a good head on her shoulders, and wields strong Light Magic. I am sure she will be all right," the president said, attempting to soothe me as my gaze remained fixated on the empty chair — Maria's chair.

The president had assisted us in searching for her, and even attempted to cheer me up in his ever-so-gentle voice. Even now, he was showing me so much consideration.

I hardly thought that I was the only one suffering... I could see that my friends felt the same way. After all, the president was close with Maria, too. There was no way he wouldn't be hurt by this development.

Even so, he had taken care to cheer me up, to be considerate.  
*Wallowing in regrets and being depressed will do nothing for me. I should put those feelings aside and do what I can.*

*I'll definitely find you. Please... be all right. Wait for me... Maria.*

It was the night of the third day that Maria had gone missing. After finishing my evening meal at the dormitory, I was heading back to my room to prepare for tomorrow. It was then that Jeord invited me to his quarters with a grave expression on his face.

It was hardly a time for social calls — but more than that, Jeord's severe expression instilled a sense of dread in me.

"What is it, at this hour...? Don't tell me... Has there been news of Maria...?" I asked, my voice quivering as I did so.

Jeord simply shook his head. "Not quite. We still have not located Maria. However... we have discovered something that might be related to her disappearance. I thought to inform you posthaste."

"Something... related? To her disappearance?"

"First... look at this." Jeord presented to me a sheaf of papers — documents, perhaps. They were the very same papers that had listed all my supposed sins and wrongdoings, the ones that were shoved in my face the previous day.

"This is... from yesterday..."

"Indeed, the documents those nobles confronted you with the other day. Something about these papers caught my attention, and I've been investigating them alongside the affair of Maria's disappearance..."

Jeord had long been aware of those noble ladies that had attempted to frame me at the Public Persecution of Katarina Claes — specifically how they harbored an intense dislike towards me. However, those nobles had neither the social standing nor power to cause me harm in any tangible way. As such, Jeord had mainly opted to leave them be.

In spite of Jeord's earlier assessment, what happened yesterday had indeed hurt me. There was one problem, however — according to Jeord, those noble ladies shouldn't have had the resources or capability to create the accusatory documents they'd used against me.

Jeord, unwilling to overlook this glaring contradiction, had apparently been looking into the matter, as well as searching for Maria. And then...

"Most peculiar, is it not? The conclusion is obvious — those nobles were not the ones who created these documents."

"...What does that mean, then?"

"Another party, Katarina. Somebody other than these nobles was responsible for these documents. But the plot thickens; when questioned, the nobles claim to have no memory of how they came across these papers in the first place."

"But how could they not remember? That makes no sense..."

"Of course, it was most unbelievable. Even I thought that they were lying at first, and did an appropriate amount of investigation... but it would seem that they were all telling the truth."

"..."

*Those nobles did not know where the so-called evidence came from? They received it from another party? Impossible. After all, they presented the papers with such confidence!*

*To begin with, presenting accusations like that as evidence is absurd... Did the nobles all collectively lose their memories of the incident...?*

Still wearing that same severe expression, Jeord continued on, in spite of my stunned silence. "Alas, Katarina, it goes even deeper... For some reason, all of those involved seem to have absolutely no memory of the events that transpired... for that entire day."

"...Eh?!"

"It is beyond a doubt that those girls harbor ill will towards you... that much is plain fact. However, it is unthinkable that they would be so bold as to publicly level accusations against you."

Jeord had a point — those noble ladies did dislike me. In fact, they would often curse me under their breaths if I walked past them while unaccompanied. Even so, they hardly seemed to have the sheer guts, or perhaps courage to actually attempt to harm me in any way.

After all, I, Katarina Claes, was the eldest daughter of a duke, and the fiancée of the third crown prince of the kingdom. I had quite a bit of political power and influence, so half-hearted attempts at causing me harm would merely backfire... with notable consequences.

While the noble ladies involved were of considerably high social standing when compared to the average noble, I could hardly see any of them having the gall to pick a fight with Katarina Claes herself, much less in public.

Even so... yesterday's events did indeed happen. For some reason, those noble ladies were all overtaken by an irresistible urge to conduct a "great counterattack against the terrible oppressor, Katarina Claes"... and those sentiments coursed through not one, but all of them at the same time.

However, once they retreated from the cafeteria, those emotions apparently quickly faded, and all the noble ladies in question were left clutching their heads, wondering why they had done such a thing in the first place. When Jeord had started looking into the matter, the nobles involved were all visibly apologetic for their actions.

"But... if what you say is true, Prince Jeord, then that's really suspicious. In fact... it almost seems like those nobles were being controlled by someone else... against their will."

Jeord's expression immediately darkened at my words. "If I had to say, Katarina... it would not be an assumption, but a definite reality. The nobles were being controlled by someone, of course."

"Eh...?!"

"The overall demeanor of those girls was indeed strange at the time..."

"B-But... controlled? By someone else? Is that..."

*Controlling something like an earthen golem is one thing, but actual, living humans...?*

*Anyway, I've never heard of anything that resembles hypnotism in this world. Is it even possible to control the minds of that many people at once...? I was truly confused.*

Jeord continued his explanation once more, looking more and more severe with each passing moment. "To control the mind of another, yes... it is indeed possible — with the power of Dark Magic, that is."

"...What? Dark... Dark Magic? Is there even such a thing?"

From what I understood, the magical elements in this world were Water, Fire, Earth, Wind, and Light. Those born with magical capability would have their powers manifest at a certain age. This was what I had been taught by the academy, and even the tutors who educated me in my childhood. It was a reality that everyone understood.

There were only five kinds of magic — Water, Fire, Earth, Wind, Light. We were not informed of the existence of any other kinds of magic, not even after enrolling into this prestigious academy.

"Yes, Katarina. The sixth magic... Dark Magic. A 'Wielder of Darkness,' so to speak. Those who wield magic woven from such magical energies, the Dark Arts, are capable of controlling the hearts of others."

"...But I haven't... Darkness magic? Dark arts? I've never heard of anything like that..."

“Of course. Dark Magic is a very dangerous thing. It is forbidden, and often hidden away. Only certain individuals in this kingdom know of its concept and existence.”

“Dangerous...?”

“The capability to control and dominate the hearts of others. Those who fall prey to this domination have absolutely no memory of it. A most fearsome magic, is it not?”

To have your very own mind controlled without warning... and have no memory of what you could have done during that time. It was as Jeord said — a most terrifying prospect indeed.

“As such, it is fair to conclude that the noble ladies involved in this particular incident were being controlled by someone who wields Dark Magic. In other words, Katarina... this incident may very well be the result of you being targeted by a Wielder of Darkness.”

“...Me? Targeted? By a Wielder of... Darkness? ...Why?”

While most of the noble ladies simply disliked me because of the fact that I was Jeord’s fiancée... was there something else I had done to earn their ire?

“I know not of the reasons, Katarina. We do not even have any suspects lined up. However... it would do you well to be cautious. Take care to avoid solitary movements from now on, if you would...”

“...I understand...”

*I thought that the incident of the noble ladies harassing me had already been solved by everyone’s collaborative efforts. To think that there was such an ominous backdrop to all of this... But... wait...*

*Why is a Wielder of Darkness targeting me in the first place? If their target was indeed me, then why...*

"Why did Maria disappear, then...?" If the Wielder of Darkness did indeed mean to target me, Maria should have been left out of this entire affair.

"Ah, well... Assuming that this mystery individual's target was you, Katarina, Maria should have been left alone. However... Maria Campbell is a Wielder of Light."

"Yes, there is that... but what does that have to do with anything?"

"It is said that those born with Light Magic are able to... sense Dark Magic when it is used. They are opposites, you see. It is even said that only those with Light Magic are capable of perceiving and identifying the Dark Arts when they are used."

"What?! Then, Maria was..."

"She most likely picked up on something during the incident... and made contact with this Wielder of Darkness. It is my assumption at this point that she has been kidnapped by this individual."

Darkness Magic... the Dark Arts. Magic that was capable of dominating the mind of another. Did Maria notice that? More importantly, where had she been taken to? I felt my head spinning at all the information I had been presented with. I couldn't make sense of any of it.

The very existence of Dark Magic was unknown to me before now. A forbidden magic that was often hidden away... *Eh? But then... what would happen to individuals born with Dark Magic in their veins?*

"...But... Prince Jeord, if Dark Magic is indeed dangerous and often hidden away... what happens to people who are born with it? Do they hide their powers as they manifest? And anyway... if Dark Magic is so secret, wouldn't it be difficult to keep tabs on these so-called Wielders of Darkness, if their powers awaken?" I said, immediately questioning Jeord further.

"You see, unlike other kinds of magic, Dark Magic is not something that one simply has at birth. Dark Magic, and by extension, the Dark Arts, are a... new type of magical power, obtained sometime later in a magically capable individual's life."

"Obtained later in life...? A new type of magical power...?"

*Isn't magical capability and aptitude something that's determined at birth? A power that can be obtained later on in life... what does that mean?*

As if sensing my growing sense of confusion, Jeord continued his explanation — lowering his voice as he did so. "To obtain Dark Magic, a certain ritual is required."

"A... ritual?"

"Yes... a ritual. It is said that...if a certain something is offered up as an offering in that ritual, the one performing it would become a Wielder of Darkness."

"An offering?"

Jeord nodded deeply at my question, before pursing his lips, and then finally inhaling deeply. "You see... according to what we know about Dark Magic and its rituals, we can say that one becomes a Wielder of Darkness... when a human life is offered up as a sacrifice. As such... anyone who wields Dark Magic would have obtained it through an exchange. Magic... for the life of another."

It was a world of darkness. Pitch black. I stood in a world where I could not tell up from down.

At my feet were the fallen bodies of all of my dear friends. Jeord, Keith, Mary, Alan, Sophia, Nicol, and Maria. There was no hint of life in their faces.

“Everyone... wake up! Please wake up!” I shouted, as if my life depended on it. I shook each and every one of them desperately. Not a single one of my friends moved.

“...Why...? How... did this happen?” I knelt down amongst the unmoving bodies of my friends. I could feel my body shivering, the tears welling up in my eyes.

*How did it come to this...? How could I lose everyone I cared for in such a way...? If this was the end that would embrace us... I alone should have headed towards catastrophe. Towards the end.*

“Why...? Why...?”

My tears only continued to flow, silently, in this pitch-black world.

What greeted me as I opened my eyes was the familiar ceiling I was used to. To be precise, it was the ceiling of my dormitory room — the one I had been living in for these past six months.

The room was dark. I couldn’t see any hint of light outside my window. It was fair to assume that the sun hadn’t risen yet.

“A... dream? All of that?” My voice was quivering, faint. I could still feel myself shaking.

I was covered in cold sweat. I placed a few fingers on my cheek, and found that my fingers were wet. Apparently I was crying as I lay in bed, dreaming.

*What a terrible dream that was... I held myself as tightly as I could with both arms.*

One had to exchange another's life in order to gain Dark Magic — to become a Wielder of Darkness. Magic paid for with the life of another. Perhaps it was because I had come to know of something so terrifying that I had such a horrible dream.

However... such a future was impossible. There was no way it could come to pass. In the original setting of *Fortune Lover*, the only person at risk of losing their life was the antagonistic rival villainess character, Katarina Claes. And that was only true in Alan's, Keith's, and Jeord's routes.

To be fair, I had yet to clear Nicol's route... but then again, the rival character in that scenario was Sophia. Nicol, being fond of his little sister as he was, could not possibly do anything bad to her. So... there was no way anything like that could happen.

The only one in danger in this game world was none other than me — Katarina Claes. Only me. For these past seven years, I had made various preparations, all for the sake of adequately overcoming these dangers and trials.

"It'll be alright," I said to myself. But in spite of all my efforts... that dream, and the visions I had seen... hardly faded.

In the end, I never fell back asleep.

The next day, I started feeling unwell before noon. Perhaps it was because I hardly got any sleep last night, after witnessing such a gruesome sight in my dreams. Keith and Jeord accompanied me to the infirmary, where I could hopefully get some rest.

Maybe it was because I hadn't slept enough, or because I was reassured at seeing their faces, but I fell asleep almost immediately after I was tucked into the warm bed.

When I woke up, quite some time had passed. It was now almost lunch break, and Jeord and Keith had long since returned to their

classes. My head was now clear, thanks to the short nap I had. After thanking the nurse, I made to return to the classroom.

Although Jeord had cautioned me against going anywhere alone just the day before, it was only a short distance from the infirmary to the classroom, so I figured it would be all right.

Crossing through the courtyard from the infirmary would take me back to the classroom quickly, and that was the route I took. Warm sunlight shone down on me as I stepped into the open courtyard. It didn't take long for my eyes to settle on a small bench — the very same one that Maria had intended to eat her lunch on, not too long ago.

*Maybe a little while longer would be fine. What harm could it do?* I approached the bench, before sitting down slowly on it. Before I had gotten to know Maria, she would always eat her lunches here, alone.

*Maria is cute and gentle... I thought that I could be with her forever as good friends. I wonder where she is now...?*

If what Jeord said yesterday was indeed true, then Maria was in a lot of danger indeed... After all, it was possible that she had been taken away by a Wielder of Darkness — someone who sacrificed the life of another to gain Dark Magic.

“Lady Katarina? Whatever are you doing here?”

I turned around at the sudden voice that called my name. Standing there was none other than the president — with his usual, lovable smile.

“Ah... I was feeling a little ill, and so I took a short rest at the infirmary. I was thinking of returning to the classroom immediately after, but...”

“Is that right? However, we still have not found Miss Maria. It is dangerous to sit in such a place by yourself. Perhaps I could walk you back to the classroom?”

“Th-Thank you very much...”

With that, the president held out his hand. But it was then that a thought flitted into my mind. *What is he even doing here?* Lessons were currently being held at the academy, and I was the only student who was at the infirmary.

*So yeah... what is the president doing here? I should ask him.* The question floated up to the surface of my mind. I craned my neck, looking up at the president. His head full of red hair, now illuminated by the sun’s rays, almost seemed to be sparkling.

That was it. It was this very sight. Suddenly... a memory resurfaced from the depths of my mind.

“The hidden character route was really something, you know...? Unexpectedly difficult!” Acchan said, once again with that self-satisfied smile of hers. She continued on, despite knowing that I hated spoilers for the game’s scenarios.

“He’s quite a dangerous person, you know? With Dark Magic! If you succeed in the route, he spends happy days with the protagonist... but if you fail... the protagonist, her friends, and everyone in the student council... die. Everyone will be killed by this hidden character! A terrible Bad End, isn’t it? Ah, also, he has a head full of red hair and grey eyes—”

Yes... it was exactly like I had heard from Acchan. The existence of a hidden character, and the endings that awaited... In other words, the dream yesterday was not impossible at all. A horrible ending in which

the protagonist and everyone in the student council lost their lives... it did indeed exist.

I felt beads of cold sweat trickling down my back. *How could I have forgotten something so important...? I really, really am a fool...*

Red hair and grey eyes — just like the person standing in front of me smiling gently. Student Council President, Sirius Dieke. As expected, he was yet another person with impossibly high specifications. He was popular too, of course.

This man before me was none other than the hidden character of *Fortune Lover*, and the one who wielded Dark Magic.

I couldn't believe that my gentle, dependable senior would do such horrible things... that he would end the life of Maria, the Student Council, and everyone I cared about...

However, if Jeord's words were to be believed, there was a high chance that these recent incidents were caused by one with Dark Magic. And if my memories from my past life were indeed accurate... then the president, Sirius Dieke, was most likely the same Wielder of Darkness who was behind all this. Magic paid for with the life of another. The Dark Arts.

"Lady Katarina... is something wrong?" Sirius asked, perhaps noticing that I remained frozen and seated, despite him now holding my outstretched hand. He had his usual, gentle expression on his face. Could it really be him?

"I... President, are you really a... Wielder of Darkness? Also... what have you done with Maria...?"

"...What is this all about...? Wielding Darkness?"

I had uttered the words before I knew it. Sirius, however, only looked slightly worried. He had an expression that suggested he knew nothing. Nothing whatsoever.

That's right... the very existence of Dark Magic was unknown by the masses. Even I didn't know anything about it — not until I had that conversation with Jeord. Even if he did have Dark Magic in the original setting of Fortune Lover, the current reality may be somewhat different.

After all, even my close friends had remarkably different personalities than they used to in the game, so even the President himself could be different. The Wielder of Darkness could have just been someone else.

"Oh, of course... you wouldn't know, president. How could our gentle student council president have Dark Magic, or do anything terrible to Maria...?" Again, the words left my lips before I knew it. There was no way such a gentle person could sacrifice the life of another to gain Dark Magic. It was impossible.

With those thoughts in mind, I turned my eyes to Sirius once more. Sirius' gaze, however... was different. He regarded me with a coldness in his eyes — one that I had never seen.

"President...?"

"Gentle, huh... You always say that about me, don't you...?"

"...Of course... It's because you are a gentle person, President..."

I found my voice quivering under his cold gaze. Upon hearing my answer, however... the president's expression... twisted.

"That's just an act. It's easier to get by if I pretend to be gentle and calm, you see? You all, being the fools you are, were completely taken in by this little charade."

"?!"

The corner of Sirius' lips curled up at my expression of bafflement and surprise. Soon, a smile surfaced, twisted and mocking. This was far from the usual charming smile he had on his face.

"On another note... just so you know. The one who took Maria Campbell was me. All because she realized something she was better off not knowing. And also, Katarina Claes... I hate you. You are a hypocrite! A false altruist seeking to save the lonely and ostracized! The more I look at you, the more irritated I get!"

In an instant, his tone became cold and hurtful. The words that left his lips dripped with hostility. Sirius tightened his grip on my hand, still held in his. It was starting to hurt.

"You know what...? You should just fucking disappear!"

*The lonely and ostracized...? Saving them? A hypocrite...?* I didn't understand what he was talking about. However, from the blatant hostility in his tone, I could tell that Sirius was not fond of me in the slightest.

But... as I thought. Sirius was the one who had done something to Maria. Then... would Sirius claim the lives of Maria, of everyone in the student council, of all those I cared for... just like how it was in the game?

I gazed into Sirius' grey irises. He no longer had his usual, calm expression. His eyes were cold, chilling me to the bone. He himself admitted that he had kidnapped Maria... and that his gentle disposition was nothing more than a façade. His words dripped with hostility and hate. Even so... why?

"...Are you... okay?" I asked, raising my other, free hand, slowly to his face.

With his cold eyes, and hateful words, Sirius stood before me. In contrast to his words, however... I could see only pain in his face. Even now, it looked like he could start crying any second. His face was pale — as if he would collapse at any moment. My fingers brushed against his cheek — his skin was ice-cold.



“...Y-You hypocrite! That’s enough! Don’t pity me, don’t get involved with me! Stay away! Don’t look at me with that smile of yours...! Just... Just get out of my sight!” Sirius shouted, roughly knocking away my raised hand.

As he did so I could feel a blanket of darkness slowly falling over me. Somehow, my consciousness seemed to fade...

“Sleep. Just like that. Until your life ends...” Sirius said contemptuously.

Through my fading sense of awareness, the last thing I saw was... Sirius’ face, and the tears that flowed freely from his eyes.

“The tea that you brew has such a gentle flavor to it,” my mother said, a calm smile on her face as she slowly patted me on the head.

Those were calm and happy days. However, that happiness was suddenly... all taken from me — and in such a hideous fashion.

That was when I swore. I swore that I would exact my revenge on those who had snatched my happiness away from me. That I would take everything they had — their social standing... their lives... everything.

I am the only son of Marquess Dieke — Sirius Dieke. That is the name I have now.

As I had magical aptitude, I enrolled into the Academy of Magic on my fifteenth birthday. My high magical and academic skills soon came to light, and I was chosen to be part of the prestigious student council. In doing so, I brought honor to the Dieke family.

I first heard the name of that individual upon crossing paths with my old childhood friend, Nicol Ascarr, at the Academy of Magic. The

last time I had met Nicol, he had barely turned ten. Now, five years later, I had run into him again.

However, Nicol had changed in those five years. Before, he was a youth with eyes that reflected a perpetual sense of loneliness. Now, however, there was a sparkle in his gaze — not a single bit of loneliness was reflected within those jet-black eyes.

It was a pity, honestly, given that I had felt a sense of camaraderie with this youth with the lonely eyes. It did not take long for me to discover the name of the individual who had caused Nicol to change in this particular way.

“Katarina Claes.” The eldest daughter of the Claes family, and fiancée to Prince Jeord, third crown prince of the kingdom. The once silent and stoic Nicol often spoke of this girl. The more he spoke of her, the more his usual, unchanging expression... wavered.

If I had to guess... the one who had taken away the loneliness in Nicol’s eyes... was none other than this girl.

In the spring of next year, I was elected as student council president... and that was when she appeared before me.

From all that I had heard about Nicol, I had assumed that she was some sort of impossibly beautiful saint. Upon actually meeting Katarina Claes, however, it dawned upon me that she was a normal girl, who hardly seemed special, and she did not leave much of an impression on me.

Although she did possess somewhat attractive features, another girl elected to the council this year, Maria Campbell, was much more attractive in that regard. In addition, she was not particularly smart, nor was she gifted with strong magical aptitude.

If I were to phrase it frankly, all Katarina Claes seemed to be was Prince Jeord's fiancée, and the eldest daughter of Duke Claes. It seemed like she had nothing beyond her station.

However, this relatively normal and unimpressive girl was respected and much-loved by her peers — said peers all being skilled and capable individuals, newly elected to the council.

That was also why they had leveled a threat against the lecturers and teachers: "If Katarina is not allowed free entry into the student council chambers, we will all rescind our nominations to the council," they said.

What exactly was so special, so desirable in this plain girl? Mysterious as it may have been, I didn't give her much of a second thought — none of this would matter as long as she never interfered with my revenge.

For the sake of executing my revenge, I had to maintain my act as the capable and calm student council president. I would, of course, have to get along with the new council members to some degree. To that end, I had to be kind and pleasant enough to this Katarina that they all loved so much — to a certain extent, anyway.

That was the thought I had in my mind as I brewed some tea for Katarina Claes that day — that it was nothing more than a hollow gesture.

"The tea that you brew has such a gentle flavor to it, President," Katarina Claes said with a peaceful smile as she raised the cup to her lips.

I felt a wave of unrest spread over my being at her words... and smile. So much so that the mask I had worn for years... almost seemed ready to shatter at that very moment.

Up until now, the other student council members only had the usual pleasantries to say about the tea I brewed. That it was

“delicious,” or something along those lines. However, there was only one person in my entire life... who said that the tea I brewed had a “gentle flavor.”

To make things worse, the way she smiled was much like how that person used to smile. I felt something deep in my chest stirring. With my previously unwavering resolve shaken, I found myself not knowing how to appropriately deal with Katarina.

Even so, the deception that I had steadily maintained across the years allowed me to interact with her somewhat normally. Ever since this incident, however, all of my interactions with Katarina Claes only served to spread even more shockwaves across my being, dampening my resolve.

On the day that everything was taken from me, I had sworn to have my revenge. I would put on this calm and gentle mask of mine, pursue academic achievements, and continue deceiving everyone else around me... all the while using the Dark Magic that I had obtained. I would weave plan after plan, preparing for the inevitable.

I gathered funds, fabricated crimes and evidence. The day would soon come when I could exact my revenge on those who had snatched away my happiness all those years ago. However... I found myself unable to continue on with my tasks. Not after I met this... Katarina Claes.

For the sake of my revenge, I was capable of doing anything, even if it meant dirtying my own hands. Up until now, I had not felt a single shred of regret or hesitation. Never once had my resolve been shaken. And yet... and yet.

When I looked into those azure eyes — Katarina’s eyes, and that smile on her face — I could feel my heart, my emotions... twisting and swirling like a maelstrom.

There was a girl by the name of Campbell in the student council. Maria Campbell. She was a commoner, and yet a Wielder of Light. A special girl.

Maria was capable in both academics and magic. She had a good head on her shoulders, and a most charming visage that easily captured the hearts of all those who gazed upon her. A truly blessed girl.

Even so, she often had a certain look of loneliness in her eyes. That look was exactly like the one Nicol used to have. I felt a sense of camaraderie towards this girl, too.

However, she changed. Somewhere along the line, the aura of loneliness around her being all but vanished — and soon I saw her with Katarina even outside the council chambers, as if they were the best of friends.

Ever since then, Maria's eyes seemed to chase after Katarina. Should their eyes ever meet, she would smile ever so faintly, as if overcome by joy.

Surrounded by the smiles and laughter of many... Katarina Claes. She was the one who brought this sparkle to Nicol and Maria's eyes. They were happy just being at her side. Looking at her then, I finally started to understand why Nicol seemed to view her as some sort of saint.

My heart, however, was filled with a vortex of emotions every time I cast my eyes upon her... so much so that the mask I had developed, this deception that I had maintained for all these years... sometimes seemed ready to crumble and fade.

*"Why are you bothering with someone like that? Continue the preparations for your revenge!"* another voice within me said, as I felt my very heart ravaged by the very sight of Katarina.

Now that it had come to this... it appeared that I could no longer disregard the existence of Katarina Claes.

It was pure coincidence that I witnessed the bullying of Maria Campbell. Although I knew that she was the target of petty bullying by students who were jealous of her, this was the first time I had seen it in person.

As the student council president, there was no way Sirius Dieke wouldn't intervene. And so I did what I had to do, giving a stern warning to the nobles bullying her.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Thank you very much. I am all right," Maria said, as if the experience had not bothered her in the slightest.

Even so, I couldn't help but feel baffled and exasperated at the sheer petty foolishness of these young lords and ladies. Maria Campbell was a commoner, and as such had a relatively low social standing in the academy. Even so, she was a Wielder of Light. If anything, she should be a valuable presence — one of the rare few blessed with Light Magic in this kingdom.

In fact, the Magical Ministry had long since had its eye on Maria, ever since she enrolled into the academy. Blessed with Light Magic and high magical capabilities, Maria Campbell was sure to obtain a high position in the ministry upon graduation.

To bully and harass someone like Maria, who would be accepted into an association that held the reins of power to the kingdom only second to the king himself... it was plain to see that they would pay for their crimes one day. And yet, they did not realize this... what fools they were.

It was then that the idea struck my mind. Why not frame Katarina Claes? Frame her for all the bullying and harassment that Maria Campbell had experienced.

If I succeeded in this endeavor... even Katarina Claes, the eldest daughter of Duke Claes, wouldn't be able to get away with it unscathed. If everything went according to plan, Katarina might even disappear from the academy... and disappear from my sight.

If I could do that... my heart would no longer waver. My resolve would never again be shaken. With that in mind, the rest of the plan was simple. All I had to do was investigate what kind of bullying Maria was subject to, and then have Katarina do the exact same things.

To that end, I had to control Katarina with my Dark Magic, and then have her bully Maria in those specific ways. My plan, however, did not come to fruition.

Dark Magic was said to be able to dominate the hearts and minds of others. However, the means by which one would attain such powers, as well as the dangerous nature of Dark Magic itself, meant that its very existence was hidden from the public at large.

In spite of all this, Dark Magic was not omnipotent — far from it. One could not exactly control the hearts of others however they pleased. Erasing certain memories, or snatching away one's consciousness for a set period of time... that much was possible. Dark Magic, however, was not capable of creating something that was not already there.

For instance, Dark Magic could not make someone hate what they loved... nor could it make them suddenly adore what they detested. What it could do was cause the seeds of jealousy, envy, or even hatred, to slowly grow — and this would eventually incite the individual to act. However, if the person in question did not have any

jealousy, envy, or hatred in their heart in the first place, nothing could be done.

And of course... Katarina did not have the slightest feelings of envy towards Maria. I had assumed that amplifying her envy was enough. Sooner or later, she would move on to bullying Maria. However... I could not amplify something that wasn't there. In the end, I was unable to incite Katarina into bullying Maria.

As a result, I had to change my plans... In the end, all I could do was amplify the envy and hatred of those noble girls who bore ill will towards Katarina, provide them with fabricated circumstantial evidence, and then have them publicly blame Katarina for all the bullying — and even that took quite some effort to pull off.

Efforts were made to lure away Katarina's friends, her dependable knights, on the day of the incident. While she did seem cornered initially, her knights came to her rescue earlier than I had anticipated, and my plan ended in failure. The false evidence that I had crafted was immediately dismissed by the knights who loved her so. Even Maria Campbell, who had indeed been bullied and harassed, stood up for her, claiming that "Lady Katarina would never do such a thing."

Honestly speaking, my inability to dominate Katarina's mind meant that this plan had a low chance of success to begin with... but for it to fail to this extent...

I did, however, erase the memories of those girls, and modified the memories of all those involved in preoccupying members of the student council that lunch break. As a result, there was no way anyone could trace this incident to me.

I hadn't suffered any backlash for this failure. The plan had a low rate of success — I suppose nothing could be done about it. That was when the other voice in me spoke out.

*"There was no way that you, wise as you are, would not have anticipated this. You knew from the start that this plan would not work. Were you really serious about getting rid of that annoying woman?"*

*Was I really serious? Was I? Of course... I had to erase her — remove her from my sight.*

Yes, that was exactly it. That woman caused my resolve to waver. I had to erase her... and that was why I had thought up this plan in the first place.

However, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of... contradiction. Even though my plan had failed, I somehow felt... relieved?

I gazed at Katarina from a distance. There she was, surrounded by her friends, smiling happily. With a complex mixture of disappointment and relief in my heart, I plodded back to the council chambers.

With this, the curtains should have been drawn on this event. Upon returning to the council chambers, I set about arranging some documents... and it was then that she appeared.

Maria Campbell. The one who had so magnificently shielded Katarina moments ago — the very same one who had foiled my plans... and the only Wielder of Light in the Academy of Magic.

Lunch break was already over. Why would she be here at this time...? My question, however, was soon answered. Her face pale, Maria began to speak.

"I noticed some time ago, President... that you were occasionally glaring at Lady Katarina. I assumed that I was just imagining things... but then I was thinking about what just happened. I... did not want to think that you were involved in this incident, President. And so I

thought I could come to check on you... Well then... what exactly were those things?"

"Whatever are you talking about, Miss Campbell...? What do you mean by 'incident'...? Did something happen to Lady Katarina?" I responded, a fake expression of worry on my face.

To think that I had let my mask slip and openly glared at Katarina a few times... what a colossal mistake. Even so, Maria didn't have any evidence to back up her words. All I had to do was erase that memory.

"You don't know...? But... that is impossible. You must be connected in some way... after all, it's the same. That black aura around you... looks exactly like that black presence that was drifting over the noble ladies harassing Lady Katarina!"

"?!" My eyes opened wide, in spite of myself. A black presence, an aura... was she referring to the presence of Dark Magic?

Up until now, no one had pointed this out, although I had been using my magic all this time. I took it for granted that no one around me was capable of perceiving Dark Magic in the first place. Could it be...

*Ah. Because she is a Wielder of Light.* It was a reasonable assumption. I hadn't encountered a single Wielder of Light, not since first obtaining my Dark Magic powers.

Dark and Light were pure opposites. Maria Campbell and her Light Magic... was it because of this that she was able to perceive it? The formless Dark Arts?

Maria, with her stern expression, appeared to have seen right through me. Now that it had come to this... continuing the charade would be difficult. In that case...

"Ha. Haha. As expected of a Wielder of Light. That's right. I was the mastermind behind this entire incident. All so that I could erase that irritating woman..."

"?!" Maria, frozen to the spot with her eyes wide, could hardly react as I walked to her, ever so slowly. After all, Dark Magic could not activate without contact. I placed a single hand on Maria's shoulder.

"...But you see... this is not something you need to know." I would simply erase this, and several other memories from Maria's mind. In a few seconds, Maria would forget about this conversation... or so I thought.

"Well then, Miss Maria. If you don't return to the classrooms soon, lessons will start without you."

"...What are you talking about, President...? We're not done here." Maria said, suspicion and surprise written all over her features.

*...Could it be?!* I let my Dark Magic slither across Maria once more. However...

"What have you been trying to do... since just now?" Maria said, with that same expression. It would appear that she was unaffected by the Dark Arts.

*Wielders of Light must be immune to the Dark Arts... I won't be able to erase her memories...! In that case... I cannot simply allow her to leave.*

"President... why would you... Lady Katarina..."

If magic didn't work, a physical tactic would. Soon, Maria was unconscious. She had discovered something that she was better off not knowing. With me unable to erase her memories, I could not simply allow her to return to Katarina and the rest.

And so... I carried the still unconscious Maria to a hidden chamber in the academy grounds. I had planned and schemed so well... up until now. This was my biggest failure.

All this... all this. Was because I got involved with Katarina Claes.

*"That woman is a hindrance. Erase her. Now. Quickly!"* the voice within me demanded.

Maria's disappearance was soon known to Katarina and her friends. Before long, they started searching for her in earnest.

The existence of a hidden chamber in the academy was only known to a few in the Dieke family. Surely, they would not easily discover where Maria was hidden. Even so, I couldn't exactly lock Maria up forever.

Since then, I had tried many times to alter or erase Maria's memories with the Dark Arts. Maria, however, showed no sign of succumbing. I was now at a loss.

It was then that the voice within me spoke once more. *"Well then... you might as well just kill her. What better way to silence her once and for all?"*

I took some time during a self-study period to check on how Maria was doing on the fourth day of her confinement. Assuming that the Dark Arts could still work on her should her spirits be dampened, I continued observing her — and yet... despite being cooped up in a dark room for an extended period of time, Maria still seemed stubbornly steadfast.

Irritated at the unimproving situation, I made my way back to the classrooms... and that was when I saw a figure. A familiar figure, seated on a bench in the open courtyard. It was none other than the

culprit herself, the one responsible for putting me into this mess... Katarina Claes.

“Lady Katarina? Whatever are you doing here?”

Katarina turned around, surprised by a sudden voice calling out to her from behind. “Ah... I was feeling a little ill, and so I took a short rest at the infirmary. I was thinking of returning to the classroom immediately after, but...” Indeed, she did look rather pale.

“Is that right? However, we still have not found Miss Maria. It is dangerous to sit in such a place by yourself. Perhaps I could walk you back to the classroom?”

As Sirius Dieke, the student council president, I had no choice but to say those words to her. I extended my hand to the seated Katarina.

“Th-Thank you very much...”

As Katarina placed her hand into mine with a smile, I could feel my heart wavering, now stronger than ever before. I couldn't help but feel uncomfortable in this open, warm courtyard, so lovingly caressed by the sun's rays. I wanted to quickly return to the classrooms. For some reason, however... Katarina was now frozen and unmoving, her hand still in mine.

“Lady Katarina... is something wrong?”

Her azure eyes stared into mine. And then...

“I... President, are you really a... Wielder of Darkness? Also... what have you done with Maria...?”

Although it was a huge shock to hear those words all of a sudden, I was able to quickly recover, in no small part due to the continuous deception I had maintained across the years.

“...What is this all about...? Wielding Darkness?” I pretended to know nothing of Dark Magic, assuming an expression of confusion and feigned worry.

Katarina lowered her head slightly, as if lost in thought. *Why would she say something like this, all of a sudden...? Has she known of the existence of Dark Magic from the very beginning, or has one of her capable knights sniffed me out? Still, I can't be sure that's the case...*

Much like Maria, Katarina seemed somewhat unsure of herself. All I had to do was bluff my way out of this with the adequate smoke and mirrors... or at least, that was what I intended to do.

"Oh, of course... you wouldn't know, President. How could our gentle student council president have Dark Magic, or do anything terrible to Maria...?" Katarina mumbled, more to herself than anyone else.

Upon hearing those words, I could feel it: a cracking sensation... deep inside of me. Before I even realized it, the calm, composed mask of Sirius Dieke, painstakingly maintained across all these years, had been ruthlessly torn off my face.

"President...?" Katarina said, looking at me, shaken.

"Gentle, huh... You always say that about me, don't you...?"

"...Of course... It's because you are a gentle person, President..."

*Still the same words even after my mask has been torn off, Katarina... What a foolish woman you are.*

"That's just an act. It's easier to get by if I pretend to be gentle and calm, you see? You all, being the fools you are, were completely taken in by this little charade."

"?!"

I allowed my lip to curl upwards, as if to ridicule the wide-eyed Katarina with a well-placed, menacing smile. "On another note... just so you know. The one who took Maria Campbell was me. All because she realized something she was better off not knowing. And also, Katarina Claes... I hate you. You are a hypocrite! A false altruist

seeking to save the lonely and ostracized! The more I look at you, the more irritated I get!"

It was as if a dam had burst within me. The words continued pouring out, each faster than the last. "You know what...? You should just fucking disappear!" I hurled my hostile, hateful words at the girl before me.

With this, even Katarina should be sufficiently terrified... perhaps she would even throw some hurtful insults my way, or maybe even regard me with hateful eyes. That was what I... expected.

"...Are you... okay?" Katarina's response was a question. In her eyes was... worry. I didn't know why, but she seemed worried for me.

*Why...? Why is she looking at me with those eyes, again...? Did she not hear what I just said? I clearly recall claiming that I was the one who had kidnapped Maria.*

And then Katarina slowly raised her free hand, reaching out to my face, gently brushing my cheek. Like she was... empathizing with me.

*Why, why, why...?! Why do you not fear me, why do you not hate me...? Don't look at me with those eyes!*

I immediately knocked aside her warm hand. "...Y-You hypocrite! That's enough! Don't pity me, don't get involved with me! Stay away! Don't look to me with that smile of yours...! Just... Just get out of my sight!"

If I stared into those azure eyes any longer... If she approached me again... If she smiled at me just one more time... I felt like I could no longer continue being who I had been all this time.

*"For the sake of my revenge, I would do anything,"* I once swore. Now, more than ever, I could feel my resolve dangerously shaking.

*"Erase this woman..."* the voice within me said. Obeying, I allowed Dark Magic to flow into Katarina's outstretched hand.

"Sleep. Just like that. Until your life ends..."

Katarina fell slowly, before my eyes, collapsing onto the ground. Having been spirited away into the land of dreams, she no longer had any free will. She would most likely sleep, and continue sleeping... until her life itself ended.

Now, finally... that annoying eyesore of a woman was gone. I would now be able to continue living my life for the sake of revenge... just as I had done before. My resolve would no longer waver.

Or so I thought... *Then why? Why has this vortex of emotion in my heart not calmed down in the slightest?* In fact, the very sight of Katarina sleeping... only served to intensify this feeling.

A strange, water-like fluid began falling from my eyes. *What, exactly... is this?*

I was seated in a dark, dim room, on a chair next to a bed. Filled with unease, I stood up once more, reaching out towards the bed's pillow. How many times had I done this?

I could only sigh with some degree of relief as I affirmed her temperature and steady breathing. A girl was peacefully sleeping in a bed, in a certain room of the student dormitories.

To me, Anne Shelley, the girl in the bed was the most important person to me. Yes... she was none other than Lady Katarina Claes.

Although she still drew breath, her body would not move an inch. The young miss merely continued her deep sleep. What if the warmth started to fade from her body...? Such thoughts would cross my mind every ten minutes or so, filling me with a deep unease. Once again, I would get up, ascertaining her temperature and breathing.

It had been two days since Lady Katarina had fallen into such a state. I had been by her bedside all this time. I found myself unable to sleep... nor did I have much of an appetite for anything.

Although my colleagues had offered to take my place so that I may rest, time and time again... I just could not allow them to. It did not feel like something I could do. Should anything ever happen to Lady Katarina in my absence... no. I could not possibly leave her side.

I held Lady Katarina's hand in mine, looking at her serene face. The boisterous, rowdy young miss, who would often kick off her blankets and pillows in her sleep... was now sleeping motionlessly. I simply could not shake the feeling that this was disturbingly abnormal.

*How... how did it come to this...?*

It was two days ago that Lady Katarina was found collapsed near the courtyard near the school buildings, when the sun was almost ready to set. She was then carried back to her room in the dormitory.

According to Prince Jeord, the young miss was unwell that morning, and had been escorted to the infirmary to rest. Later, he would visit the locale again, only to be told that Lady Katarina had already returned to the classrooms.

Thinking that he had missed her, Prince Jeord returned to the classrooms, but the young miss was nowhere to be seen. In a panic, he searched for her everywhere, before finally locating her, collapsed in a corner of the courtyard.

No matter how many times he called her name, Lady Katarina never responded. Prince Jeord immediately brought her to the infirmary, and promptly summoned some doctors to tend to her. "She is merely asleep," the prince was told.

Afterwards, the prince continued to call her name, but Lady Katarina merely continued to slumber — and so she was brought to

her personal quarters. Again, a doctor was summoned, only for the prince to be told that she was “merely sleeping.”

Unable to bear with Lady Katarina’s unnatural state of stupor any longer, Prince Jeord exercised his royal rights as the third crown prince to call one of the most acclaimed doctors in the kingdom. Armed with a magnificent moustache, the visibly senior doctor was responsible for the health and well-being of the royal family itself — he was one of the very best in the kingdom, if not all the lands. I had hoped that this doctor would be able to do something. I sincerely hoped that this would be so, and yet...

“It is most unfathomable, honestly. She does not seem physically unwell — this much I know, from all the examinations I have done. Perhaps she may awaken immediately... perhaps she may never open her eyes again.”

“What, then... would happen to Katarina if she continued sleeping like this...?” Prince Jeord inquired with a grave expression. The doctor, however, could only give an apologetic answer.

“...If the young lady continues to sleep, Prince... she will be unable to have any water or any food. If this circumstance is prolonged... I fear she will lose her life.”

“WHAT?! Impossible! How could something like that...?!”

Even the usually calm and collected Master Keith momentarily lost his cool, relentlessly demanding answers from the aged doctor.

*WHAM!* My eyes instinctively followed the sound of the impact. Prince Jeord, who only ever had a smile on his face... Prince Jeord, who never once raised his voice... had his fist up against the wall.

Lady Mary, too, had become completely pale — I could almost hear her rattling as she shivered. She seemed ready to faint at any moment.

Prince Alan's expression was one that was foreign to me. His features were incredibly stiff, as if his entire being was dedicated to maintaining a stoic expression.

Lady Sophia was simply standing where she was, as tear after tear dropped down from her eyes, opened wide in shock. Not a single wail escaped her lips.

And Master Nicol... his fists were clenched so tight, it almost seemed like his skin would start changing colors the very next minute.

From where I was seated, I could only watch over all of the young miss' friends in her room... I, too, would immediately collapse should my determination waver. Lady Katarina may very well lose her life. I could feel myself impaled by the notion, sinking slowly into despair at the thought of such a possibility.

After this, many other doctors were summoned to her bedside. None of the doctors, however, understood the reason for the Young Miss' slumber. None of the doctors could wake Lady Katarina. Occasionally, one of the Wielders of Light would show up — one of few individuals blessed with Light Magic in the Kingdom. Even so... the outcome remained unchanged.

A day, and then another... and yet, there was no sign that Lady Katarina was any closer to waking. She was the one who had given me purpose... the one who allowed a tool such as myself, to once again become human. The most important person to me in the world.

*I've already decided that I would live my life by your side... so please. Lady Katarina... I beg of you. Please... please do not leave us. I thought, as I strongly held the young miss' hand in my own.*

*"No, not at all. Please don't worry about this, Your Highness. It is a small wound, one that can be easily hidden with my bangs! There is no problem at all."*

Much time had passed since that day. Seven years since the girl before me had smiled and said those words. My dearest fiancée... Katarina Claes.

My existence was all but forgotten at the castle, and all I had were days of boredom. Yes... Katarina Claes. The mysterious girl who had suddenly appeared before me. With her strange words and amusing actions, I found myself slowly drawn in. The more time I spent with Katarina, the more I realized that the world before me — that once grey, drab world, was now filled with vibrant color.

All I had known was boredom. Tedium. I knew nothing of happiness... or the very notion of fun. Of enjoyment. I knew nothing of such things, and yet Katarina taught me all of it. Even jealousy, sadness... emotions that I surely would not have felt, had I not met her.

Seven years had passed since our fateful meeting. I could no longer bear the thought of returning to that grey, drab world... a world without Katarina.

In the beginning, it was nothing more than a calculated arrangement, a political engagement. However... before I knew it, I had come to love Katarina Claes more than anyone else in the world.

Alas, she was naturally born a charmer, and many would flock to her... but I had long since made up my mind. Now that she was in my hands, I would never let go.

And yet... and yet. How could this be...? I knew nothing... nothing, of Katarina being exposed to danger. I was unable to protect her. All I could feel were strong pangs of regret and guilt. I blamed myself for my failings.

Perhaps the Dark Arts were responsible for Katarina's catatonic state. Such was my assumption, and I had even summoned a Wielder of Light... to no avail. We knew nothing.

*"Perhaps one with an even stronger magical aptitude, one also blessed with Light Magic... they may have some answers,"* or so I was told. But of course, the only individual with such qualifications was Maria Campbell. Maria herself was still missing... The situation was most dire.

I could only curse my own helplessness as I slammed my fist straight into the wall.

*"Keith, we are brother and sister, you know. You should call me Big Sister!"*

That was what she said to me, with that smile on her face. I couldn't believe it had already been seven years.

Even so, I remember all of it as if it were yesterday. Of how I was verbally abused, said to be a monster... of how I would hug my knees to my chest in a dark room, living my lonely life. And yet she turned to me with a smile, soothing me with a warm hand on my back.

*"I'll stay with you forever!"* she said. The ray of light into my world of darkness... my adoptive sister, Katarina Claes. Her warmth, her gentle smile... as if the love she had for me was more than what an older sister would have for her brother. The most precious, most important person to me in the world.

I had always been with her... always. And we were supposed to be together — from here on out, as well. I had no intentions of handing her over... not even to her fiancé, Prince Jeord.

I had sworn to protect her... with these very hands. To that end, I had put my entire being into mastering the sword, honing my magic,

and even the appropriate etiquette one would display as a noble. All for the sake of protecting Katarina with my own hands.

*How could this have happened? Why was I not with her then...? Even though I'd sworn to protect her...? I could hardly hold back the regret in my heart.*

After I became the adopted son of the Claes family at the age of eight, whenever things were hard, Katarina was always there, with that gentle smile of hers...

All I wished now was to see that smile again. I did not... I *could* not lose Katarina...

I raised a hand to my shoulder, trying to quell the tremors that assaulted my body.

*"You have quite the green thumb, Mary! Maybe even green hands too, ha! Yes! Green thumb, hand, you know! You're a special and wonderful person!"*

Even now, I remember clearly... the day she held my hands, so tightly in hers. I was a coward, I was weak. Always with my eyes downcast, always running. I hated myself.

But then, Katarina Claes said, to me... that I was a special, most wonderful existence. I was very, very happy.

My older sisters claimed that I was "filthy." They hated my eyes and hair — both the color of burnt sienna. Katarina, however, said she liked them. She said that they were pretty.

I put my all into becoming the ideal noble lady — one who could proudly stand by Katarina's side. Honestly... there were so many times when things had gone wrong, when obstructions to my goal had arisen... But because Katarina was with me, because she was

fond of me, because she said that I was important to her... I was able to overcome all these challenges.

*The only reason why I am the Mary Hunt I am now... is all because I've been allowed to be by Katarina's side. Even now, and into the future, I longed to stand by her forever. Katarina was important to me. So important that it made me want to just snatch her away from her fiancé.*

And yet... when I gazed upon her as she was now, it was like all life had left her. The sight of Katarina, sleeping so peacefully, flooded my mind. I could feel my vision going dark... but I held on. I held on like my life depended on it.

*There was no way I will just lose consciousness like this... No! I will not stand for it! For I am Katarina Claes' dearest friend, Mary Hunt! I am NOTHING like those weak-willed noble ladies one would so casually find in this kingdom!*

*I have to do everything I can for Katarina...!*

I righted my posture, raising my head.

*"The same goes for you, Prince Alan — I do believe that you have skills you can be proud of, too. It is just a matter of... individual strengths and weaknesses."*

I had always been compared to my twin brother. I'd all but given up, and then she says that to me. With those azure eyes of hers, she turned to me and looked right at me... and never once let up in those matches we had. Katarina Claes, the girl who climbed up trees in that silly manner... like some sort of monkey.

I had lost myself to the voices around me, and was trapped in my own delusions. She was the one who snapped me back to reality. It was only after meeting Katarina that I could finally let all that pointless tension in my shoulders go.

Always looking straight ahead, never a lie in her words. I felt comfortable and peaceful next to Katarina. So... I just thought I'd continue standing by her side like I always did.

But then... this happens. The thought of losing Katarina made me feel a kind of fear I didn't know I was capable of feeling. And that was when I noticed just how important Katarina was to me. And I realized that I wanted to be with her forever.

But I was stupid. I was dense. I only realized my own feelings when we were on the verge of losing Katarina altogether. She was my brother's fiancée... there was no way my wish would come true. But... I still wanted to be by her side, as much as I was permitted to be. There was no way I could bear losing her right now.

Something... anything. I had to help Katarina.

*"You really are blessed, Master Nicol, to have such amazing parents, and a cute younger sister."*

The day she said those words to me. Those words, that smile. I could never forget them.

Everyone had simply decided that I was unfortunate, and that I was to be pitied... because of my important family. "But I am fortunate." No matter how many times I repeated this, no one would understand. And I felt that this was how it would always be, and that I should simply give up.

Katarina Claes, however... understood. My heart, which was once blanketed by frustration, was now instead cradled with warmth. From that day onwards, Katarina was a most special individual to me.

I was never very good at interacting with others. Often, I would turn my gaze away from theirs. But Katarina always looked at me

with her blue eyes. She always faced me with a smile that was as bright as the sun. It was most calming to be with her.

Katarina Claes, fiancée of my childhood friend Jeord, third crown prince of the kingdom. I did not have to think much about it to know that we could not always be together. I understood that much. However... I wished to spend as much time as possible with her, at least within permissible limits.

"You are most capable! Surely you will become a most favoured candidate for succeeding the position of Chancellor." That was what everyone around me said. However... what could I do in this situation? I hated myself for being helpless. I could not even protect one person — the most important person to me.

*So much for the lauded Chancellor candidate...* I tightened my balled fists once more. I could feel my nails digging in, and the sensation of blood slowly dripping from my palm.

"I think that your silky white hair is beautiful. That your ruby-red, sparkling eyes are beautiful. That... you... are beautiful."

I was different. I... looked different. People would gossip... say that I was cursed, or that I was disgusting.

But then... this girl said that I was "beautiful." She then held out her hand and asked... "Would you like to be my friend?"

At first, I thought she was just playing along... showing me a dream that was convenient at the time. But... that was no dream... For the first time in my life I made a friend. She turned to me, smiling gently...

From the moment I met the girl known as Katarina Claes, my world changed completely. I felt like I was propelled out of the dark room that I had confined myself into... and that I was now under the warm

rays of the sun. Finally, I had obtained the happiness I had only dreamed of before — in my fantasies and thoughts, walled up in that dark room. I had wanted these days to go on forever.

That was my sincere wish... then why, why did this happen...? For those two days, tears would start flowing from my eyes the very moment I lost my focus. I cried and cried... until I felt like I had used up all the water I could possibly contain in my body. Even so... the tears simply kept flowing.

It had been two days since Katarina suddenly collapsed. Countless times I visited her chambers. So many times I called out to her... but I could not see even the slightest hint of a reaction. My heart ached at the sight of Katarina continuing to sleep soundlessly.

I really just... wanted to stay by Katarina's bedside. However... my brother disagreed, dragging me back to my room. "That would simply not do, Sophia," he said.

Now that we were physically apart... even now, I could feel it... a deep sense of unease... the thought of losing Katarina. For the past two days, she had been visited by a variety of doctors... but none of them could wake Katarina from her slumber, despite their many methods and attempts.

If she kept sleeping like this, Katarina could very well lose her life... When I heard those words, they just... did not seem real. The words were sudden, pierced into my reality.

No matter the kind of doctor that visited, not a single one of them had a concrete answer. Now, two days had passed... and those words slowly started feeling more and more real.

If this went on, I would really lose Katarina... I would never be able to see her smile ever again! *No... I cannot accept that! I don't want to lose her!* The thought surged strongly into my mind. It was then that I heard it.

*“That’s right! I cannot accept it! I don’t want to lose her, not again!”*  
A voice, unseen... suddenly called out. It was a voice that I had no recollection of — and yet... it felt so, so nostalgic.

Surprised, I turned, looking this way and that around me. I had asked the servants to stand down, so there was no one but me, alone in my dormitory room.

*“After all this time, we’ve met again... I don’t want to lose her! This time, for sure, I have to help her! So... don’t just sit and cry in a place like this! Bring me to her side! Quickly!”* It was almost like the strange voice came from deep within myself...

Guided by the mysterious voice, I stood up and slowly walked in the direction of Katarina’s quarters.

“Lady Sophia?! Whatever are you doing here at this hour?”  
Katarina’s personal maid asked, involuntarily raising her voice at the sight of me.

But of course... she would say that. It was already this deep into the night, and I had visited Katarina’s chambers without even asking for permission. Under normal circumstances, this was something that would never, ever be done... it was an action that went against the grains of societal common sense.

Even so... for some reason, I felt like I simply had to do it... Like the mysterious voice within me instructed me to.

“...Lady Katarina...” I approached the bed, clasping her hands in both of mine. As I did so, I saw my brother approach from the corner of my eye. I suppose word of my social faux pas had already reached him...

“Sophia... calm yourself.” He placed his hands on my shoulders, trying to guide me back to my room... However, I refused.

Perhaps word of my stubbornness spread quickly... but before I knew it, Prince Jeord, Prince Alan, Master Keith, and Mary were all present. Regardless, I continued holding onto Katarina's hand. I refused to let go. I was not going to move from this place.

I held her hand against my forehead, closed my eyes... and wished. Prayed — with all of my heart. "Please... I beg of you. Please help Lady Katarina".

As I did so, I felt like I could see the face of a young girl in the darkness... She had black hair and dark eyes. There was no way I could have known her. And yet... something about her was so, so nostalgic.

*"Okay, leave it to me! I'll definitely bring her back! All you have to do is continue calling out to her from where you are!"* the girl said, her gaze filled with resolute strength. And then, as suddenly as she appeared... she was gone.

It had been two days since I put Katarina Claes to sleep with the Dark Arts. Try as her knights might with all their methods to wake her... their wishes did not come true.

After all, Dark Magic could only be dispelled by the one who was responsible for casting it in the first place. If Katarina continued to slumber as she did... she would surely die.

That, precisely, was what I had wished for all along. Then... why? For some reason, my heart refused to calm itself. When I thought about how Katarina would be gone, just like that, I felt my chest tightening. It was hard to breathe.

*...No. I don't want to lose her... I have to dispel the Dark Arts I used on her.*

*"What foolishness you speak of!"* the voice within me said, rage evident in its voice. *"That woman is nothing more than a hindrance"*

*to your revenge! Those who dare get in the way of your revenge have to be erased... there is no other way!"*

The more I hesitated, the more upset the voice within me grew.

*"You've LIVED your very life for revenge! To utterly destroy those who took your mother's life, the ones who used you as a tool! Were you not going to send them to the depths of hell? Was that not your reason for living? Have you forgotten your mother's last words?!"*

Yes... the last words of the mother I loved so much. The very last thing that left her lips. That was my reason for living. "...Please, avenge me..."

I had no other reason to live. All I needed was my revenge.

"How long are you going to sleep, you fool daughter?!"

Just as that thunderous voice shook me from my sleep, I felt my blanket being pulled away, too.

"...E-Eh? What?" I squinted my eyes, not used to the light and shocked by this sudden development.

The person who had pulled my blanket away was now glaring at me. "Don't you 'what' me! How many times have I called for you and tried to wake you? You're going to be late for school again!"

"...Eh...? M-Mother...?"

"Mother'? ...What's gotten into you? Are you unwell? Did you oversleep and lose your mind?"

"...Eh? What? Ah... G-Good morning, Mom." I stared up at my mom, who was now standing over me with a most intimidating pose. With her downward-slanting and somewhat beady eyes, she kind of reminded me of a fox one would find in the fields.

"Aren't you already a high schooler? Can't you make your own hair and tidy your own uniform?" she said, making me sit up. I caught sight of myself in the mirror. My face was much like my mother's — fox-like, but somewhat normal-looking.

*Why do I feel... like something's off? Is this really my face? Hmm... perhaps, at one point, but my face now is more...*

"What are you doing, still lazing around?! You're really going to be late if you don't hurry it up!" Mom's screeching voice prompted me to look up at the clock. It was as she said — time was almost up.

I quickly jumped up from my bed and went through the motions to prepare myself for school. I took off my pajamas, jumped into my school uniform, doused my face with water, and then my preparations were complete.

"At the very least, do something about that hair of yours," Mom said. But then again, my hair was stubborn, and no matter how I tidied it, there was a cowlick that simply wouldn't go away. I decided to leave it.

However, my hair now was different... it was long and flowing. Every morning, Anne would help me prepare for the day, tidying and brushing my... *Eh? My hair now? What does that even mean? What did Anne do...? Who was this Anne again?*

*Hmm... again, the feeling that something is very off. How strange. Something seems... wrong. Am I forgetting something very important?*

*Ah! It's this time already? It'll really be bad if I don't hurry!* The minute hand of the clock seemed to move unnaturally fast the moment I took my eyes off it.

I didn't have any time to sit around and leisurely think about things! I rushed to the living room as fast as I could — and there, my older

brother, who was currently enrolled in university, was elegantly eating his breakfast.

My other older brother, who was a salaryman, had already set off for work, just like my father. “Oh, good morning. When will you finally be able to wake up without having your blanket pulled off your sleepy self?”

My mother was standing next to my brother, who seemed somewhat amused by all this. She quickly thrust out a lunch box in my general direction.

“Thanks!” A low rumbling from my stomach could be heard the very moment I took the lunchbox into my hands. Although my sense of hunger was further amplified at the sight of the delicious meal laid out on the table before me, I hardly had the time to sit down and eat.

I scanned the dining table for something I could munch on while travelling... only to come up empty. Left without much of a choice, I rummaged through the fridge, looking for something that would fit comfortably in my mouth while cycling. There was indeed something — and so I quickly stuffed it into my mouth.

“Amf goin naw! Baai!” With a cheerful goodbye, I turned to the entryway of my home, turning back to look at my mother one more time before I left. For some reason, my brother was laughing uncontrollably behind her.

“Wait... what is that in your...” I guess Mom was saying something, but now was not the time for that. Paying her words no heed, I rushed out of the house, jumping onto my well-loved bicycle in one swift motion.

As my cycling speed increased, I could hear my mother’s voice calling out from behind me. “AT THE VERY LEAST! Make it bread!

BREAD! Why is there a cucumber in your mouth?!"

As I started pedalling, I chewed down on the cucumber, which was apparently this morning's replacement item for breakfast. If I had to guess, this was a cucumber from Grandma's farm. While it was fresh and did have a distinctive taste of its own, it was rather dull without any seasoning. I regretted not putting some miso paste on it cucumber in my hurry to get to school.

With chunks of cucumber in my cheek, I weathered the terrible howls and barks of the dog that lived near my house and somehow managed to pedal all the way to school, just as the bells for the first lesson rang out.

Quickly, I headed to the classroom, and upon approaching could make out a bit of a ruckus. It would seem that our homeroom teacher had yet to arrive.

"I made it! A great save!" I muttered, entering the classroom quietly through the back door.

"Unfortunately... you did not quite make it," my homeroom teacher said, glaring at me from his spot on the podium.

And so, for the terrible crime of being late for a few minutes, I was summoned and summarily lectured by my homeroom teacher during lunch break.

My lecture finally ended halfway through lunch break. Deflated, I made my way to Acchan's classroom. She had been a great friend to me every since middle school — a great otaku friend, that is. Now that we were in our second year of high school, we had been assigned to different classes, but I made sure to visit her classroom every lunch break. It was then that we would have our otaku talk over lunch. This was part of my daily life.

Acchan, who already knew at that point that I was late, immediately said... “Let me guess. You were late, caught, and lectured again. When will you ever properly reach school on time?”

Apparently Acchan already knew of my unfortunate circumstances. Nonetheless, she delivered her assessment with an exasperated expression.

“I just stayed up a liiiiittle bit last night... and then couldn’t get up this morning...”

Her exasperation seemed to intensify as she heard those words. “Playing games deep into the night again? You really should be more aware of the time...”

“...Ugh... I just kinda got annoyed and kept going I guess...”

Upon becoming a high schooler, I was introduced to otome games, and quickly got hooked with my very first one. I was always like this upon receiving a new game, and it was all too easy for me to forget the time as I got engrossed in the gameplay.

“Really... burning the midnight oil just for games! Did you at least make any progress on *Fortune Lover*? ”

*Fortune Lover* was an otome game that I had purchased recently, and the very same game that kept me up that night.

“Yeah... I was thinking I should try out the path of the arrogant prince. Alan’s route!”

Alan was a potential love interest in the setting of *Fortune Lover*. He was indeed an arrogant prince.

*Hmm... he’s a little arrogant at times, I guess. But isn’t Alan more gentle and nice most of the time...? In fact, it doesn’t feel like he’s as arrogant as the game made him out to be.*

*Huh...? Game made him out... to be? What am I even thinking about?* It was almost like I'd met him in real life, as opposed to him just... being a character in a game...

"What's wrong?" Acchan asked, regarding me with worry plain in her face.

"Ah... it's nothing! Nothing at all. Oh, right! I have to quickly eat my lunch!" Thanks to my form teacher's terrible lecture, I had lost half the time that I usually had for my lunch. I had to finish my meal quickly... after all, my stomach was mostly empty; I only had an unseasoned cucumber for breakfast.

My lunch was homemade by Mom herself. After we finished our lunches, Acchan and I enthusiastically spoke about our otaku hobbies and games. We had a lot of fun.

I woke up every morning, took Mom's homemade lunch to school, and happily spoke to my friends. Such was my everyday life. It was an unchanging, normal life... but for some reason, it also felt somewhat nostalgic... like a most cherished memory.

*Wouldn't it be great if I could continue living these carefree days?* For some reason, this thought floated into my mind.

A few days after that, I had made good progress on *Fortune Lover*. In fact, I was now in the middle of a certain sadistic, terrible prince's route.

However... what was this feeling? Something about all this was... wrong. This feeling seemed to intensify the more I played *Fortune Lover*.

It was a most mysterious feeling... as if I had forgotten something that was very, very important to me. However... no matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't quite figure out what exactly I was

missing.

Those carefree days continued... until a certain lunch break. I was having my lunch with Acchan, as always.

"How's your playthrough of *Fortune Lover* going?"

"Still on the route of that terrible, sadistic prince..."

For some reason, Acchan seemed a little worried upon hearing my response. For some reason, it felt like... she was different today. At least, when compared to most other days. While I couldn't tell exactly what had changed... she seemed a little more... adult. Grown-up, perhaps?

"How has school been? Fun?"

"...Eh? Hmm... yeah, I guess."

Yet another mysterious question from Acchan's lips. The more I responded, the more I felt like something about her was different. It was something about her face. A face that I had known since middle school, someone who had been with me ever since then... or so I thought...

"Eh?!" I cried out in spite of myself. For a split second, Acchan looked different — I saw her as a beautiful young girl, with stark-white hair and ruby-red eyes.

*What am I even thinking? There's no way that could be what Acchan looks like.* I rubbed my eyes, before gazing upon my close friend once more. There it was — Acchan was how she always looked. *What did I just see, then? Was I just imagining things?*

A wide smile came across Acchan's face as I continued staring at her, mouth agape and slightly frozen in place. "I'm having a lot of

fun. After all, I got to meet you, and live through these days again. But... this isn't really your world anymore, is it?"

"?" *This is no longer my world? What's she going on about?*

"You belong to another world now, don't you? Another world... Many people are waiting for you there."

"...Acchan? What... What do you mean?"

Acchan's answer to my confusion was a quiet, gentle smile. "Listen. Can you hear them? Calling out to you."

"Eh...?"

As if on cue, I found that I could suddenly hear a series of voices.

"Katarina... wake up! I cannot imagine a life without you."

"Wake up, please... Big Sister! Did you not promise that we would be together forever?"

"Lady Katarina! Wake up, please wake up! If you aren't here... how could I continue working hard, as I have until now?"

"Wake up! How long are you going to keep sleeping, you idiot?!"

"Katarina... open your eyes. Please."

"I beg of you, Lady Katarina... please. Please open your eyes...!"

Those voices... what nostalgic voices. Voices that I've heard before. It was as if a veil of mist had fallen over my mind. I couldn't remember, but it felt... wrong. And now, finally... that mist was lifting.

Nostalgic voices... My adopted brother and friends. All people who were important to me... How could I forget about something like that?

With that, the mist in my mind completely cleared. Fresh, vivid memories flooded back into my mind. Before I knew it... I had remembered everything.

It was exactly like Acchan said. My noisy and naggy, yet gentle family. My close friend and fellow otaku. The otome games I loved... True. This was really a calming, peaceful world. And yet... this was no longer a world I belonged in.

After all, I had long since stepped into a new world... another world. My new family, my dear friends. I had formed bonds with many important people in that world, too. And now... those important people — everyone was waiting for me.

*I have to return to the world I belong to. The world where my important friends and family... are all waiting for me.* The thought resounded strongly through my mind.

With that, a sudden, mysterious sound rang through the air — it was the sound of something breaking, cracking.

Surprised, I turned, surveying my surroundings. It would seem that my classmates had all vanished without me noticing, leaving me with an empty classroom. The only ones who remained were Acchan and me.

The floor began to crumble before my very eyes. We would soon be falling straight into what seemed to be a bright pool of light.

*Ah... this is the place. Should I continue falling... I'll definitely be able to return to the world I now rightfully belong to.*

“Ah! Wait! There’s one thing! Acchan! I have to save Maria upon returning to my world! Surely you know where she is being held, Acchan! Please tell me!” Acchan, after all, had cleared the game long before I did. She of all people would know.

"Alright. Maria is still within the campus... in a hidden room on the grounds. The exact location is..." With that, Acchan concisely informed me on Maria's whereabouts.

The floor continued to crumble, the pieces falling into the light. There was no time. I should have figured it all out faster. Remembered quicker. I had so many questions to ask.

"Ah... one more thing. Why is the President..."

*Why was there so much pain in his expression? Why was he crying?*  
However...

Finally, my foothold crumbled, and I began to be absorbed by the light. Acchan looked at me with her gentle eyes — a most serene expression.

"I'm sure you'll figure it out. Save the President... just as you have saved us. His real name is..."

"Eh?! Save? What do you mean? What real name?"

Unable to understand Acchan's words, I asked question after question. All the while, I could feel my body half-submerged, steadily sinking into the light.

I could no longer see Acchans face. Somehow, I knew... that this would be goodbye. My close friend, who had always been with me since middle school. It was all thanks to her that I even managed to become a high schooler in the first place. Acchan was always looking out for me, always helped me.

But then... in that sudden accident, I was gone. I could not even say goodbye. This was my final chance.

"A... Acchan! It's been a long time... but I'm glad I met you again!  
Goodbye, Acchan! Thank you for everything up until now!!"

Turning to Acchan, whom I could no longer see, I shouted at the top of my lungs. Did my voice ever reach her...?

"I'm glad too, to have met you again. This time... I will stay by your side, as Sophia. Goodbye and thank you, my dear, dear friend..."

Acchan's last words, however, did not reach my ears.

The first thing that I saw upon opening my eyes was Sophia's face, with large droplets of tears falling from her eyes. Behind her were Jeord, Keith, Mary, Alan, and Nicol. The people who were dear to me.

*Ah... I have finally returned to my own world.*

Sophia hugged me tight as I slowly awakened, before starting to sob loudly. Even Mary, who was usually so calm and collected, was hugging me too, tears flowing down her face.

Everyone else was looking at me with relief. I understood very well just how worried everyone was. My world was right here — where all those who were important to me lived. This was why I had to protect it... this world, and everyone whom I cared about.

*A terrible Bad End like that... I refuse to let that happen!*

The first thing I did upon waking was to stretch myself — slowly, steadily. I had, after all, been fast asleep for the last two days. My body felt dull and heavy.

Although I immediately set about looking for Sirius Dieke, the student council president, he was nowhere to be found. Perhaps he had heard of my awakening, and had escaped someplace... at least, that was what everyone else said. I, however, did not think this to be true.

If anything, he should still be in the academy grounds. Specifically, the place where Maria was currently being held captive. When asked why I thought this to be the case, I found myself unable to answer. Even so, I believed in it — the fact that Sirius was currently with Maria, and that Maria was safe. This was why I headed to that hidden chamber... I had to save Maria.

"He is a criminal who made an attempt on your life, Katarina. He is a most dangerous individual. You should leave this to us and the authorities, and rest in your room."

So I was told. However... I wanted to save Maria with my own two hands. After all, I was the reason she had been captured in the first place. And also... I wanted to speak with Sirius one more time.

Sirius' expression from right before I passed out — that scene was etched firmly into my mind. An expression of pain, of suffering. He had been crying without a sound. Although he had shown me such hostility... that expression was almost one of worry, and perhaps sadness.

And then there was that last thing Acchan said... the matter of his true name. Sirius Dieke. Surely he had some pressing circumstances of his own. To understand that, I had to meet with him once more myself. I had to make that journey.

Although they were initially unwilling to let me expose myself to any more danger, everyone eventually agreed — under the condition that I would be accompanied.

And so I, my adopted brother, and my friends set off together. Our destination was where Maria was being held... and where Sirius was.

We found ourselves in a somewhat dark forest, some distance away from the academy's main buildings. Our target was a storage facility

of sorts — it was closer to the Magical Ministry's laboratories than the student dormitories, and as such didn't usually see much traffic.

After pushing open the strangely heavy door, we cautiously entered. It was a space almost as big as the Claes manor's guest parlor. Various bits and pieces, their purpose unknown, were scattered all over the room. Avoiding the small piles of junk and clutter, I went deeper and deeper into the room's recesses.

I finally stopped, standing in front of a large shelf. We were now at the farthest point from the building's entrance. It was a heavy and imposing shelf — not one that a single person could casually move. However, I quickly located a raised surface, much like a button, subtly positioned on its side. It was just as Acchan had described.

Without any hesitation, I gave the button a solid push. Almost immediately, the shelf slid over to one side, its movements hardly producing any sound. With the shelf now out of the way, we came face to face with what appeared to be a solid, black door.

"There really was such a thing!" Everyone else who was with me exclaimed in surprise.

I had told them earlier that this whole hidden chamber affair was a premonition I had seen in a dream. While my friends all looked at me with a certain degree of doubt at first, they eventually believed me and had followed me to this building. It would seem like they still had their reservations, however.

I reached out, placing a hand on the doorknob. I'd assumed that it wouldn't simply open, but I was luckily mistaken. With a simple turn, the door swung open, revealing a small room about the size of my accommodations back at the student dormitories.

Without any hesitation, I stepped into the room. The room was lit only by a single, tiny window in the ceiling — it was a dark, dank space. After allowing my eyes to adjust, I looked around. It didn't

take me long to discover the silhouette of a girl, sitting alone in a corner.

I immediately made my approach. “Maria!!”

“...Lady Katarina...?”

It was a painful sight. Maria had a shackle around one foot, connected to the wall by a thin chain. Thankfully, she didn’t appear to be hurt. While she didn’t exactly look like she was in the best of health, her eyes looked straight into mine, and her voice was steady.

“...Maria. I’m sorry I’m late...” I held her tight. I did, after all, take quite a while to come to Maria’s aid.

“...I should be the one to apologize... I have greatly inconvenienced everyone...”

Perhaps it was because she was relieved, or maybe because she was just putting on a brave face. I felt the strength and tension fade from Maria’s body.

“No. Didn’t you do what you did for my sake?”

Maria nodded, albeit with a slightly troubled expression. It was as I suspected; she had already noticed something on the day of the accident, and had tried to help me by exposing the truth.

“Thank you, Maria.”

A slight shade of crimson crept into Maria’s cheeks as she smiled faintly in response. I heaved a sigh of relief. While it was truly a blessing that Maria had been discovered unharmed... I still had one more goal left to fulfill.

“Say... Maria. He... Sirius Dieke is still here, isn’t he?”

“...Yes, Lady Katarina. He is... just beyond that black door,” Maria said, her expression darkening slightly as she pointed out the door in

question. It was well hidden, to say the least. At a glance, it was no different than a simple wall.

“...Do you already know what the president had done to you, Lady Katarina?”

“Hmm... I suppose I could say that I do. But in reality... there are still many things I do not know.”

While I had discovered this hidden chamber thanks to Acchan’s advice, there were still many unanswered questions. Why would the president do this? How did he even receive his Dark Magic powers to begin with? Was he really capable of causing such a tragic and terrible Bad End, like he did in the game? So many questions... so little answers. Even so...

“...I still can’t think of him as a bad person, you see. This is why... I feel like I should at least speak with him, just one more time.”

“Have you no sense of danger? Aren’t you being too kind?” My friends around me protested, but even so... those were my honest feelings at that moment.

“Is that so... I suppose he hasn’t done anything bad to me, other than placing this shackle around my leg... He brought me my meals, too. Perhaps... maybe. Maybe he is not a bad person... But he does possess some mysterious powers, Lady Katarina...”

It was just as Jeord had said. Maria, who naturally wielded Light Magic, was able to detect the presence and use of the Dark Arts.

“...I suppose you know about his powers, Maria?”

“Can you sense it too, Lady Katarina?”

“I have... heard of it, yes. But unlike you, I cannot sense it. After all, only those who wielded Light Magic were capable of such a thing. Isn’t that right, Maria?”

Maria nodded in response. “Yes... During the incident at the cafeteria, there was some sort of black mist or presence surrounding those girls, and the president too. In fact... the black aura around the president has only grown bigger and stronger in recent days...”

*Eh?! Why? Did he use his Dark Magic on some unwitting victim again? When? What for?*

Maria patiently continued her explanation despite my confusion. “But... that mist is different from what I saw before, Lady Katarina.”

“...Different?”

“Yes... The mist I saw before was external. It almost... clung to him, like a film over his being. The mist now, however, seems to be coming out from within the president himself. If I had to describe it... it would almost seem like the mist is controlling the president himself.”

*What does that mean? Did he lose control of his Dark Magic somehow, causing it to go berserk?* I tilted my head this way and that, unable to understand the circumstances. Maria herself seemed equally at a loss, appearing more worried by the second.

However... we had come this far. I wasn’t simply going to give up and run away, claiming that it was “too dangerous” or anything along those lines. My friends and adopted brother seemed to have similar sentiments, although they were obviously unwilling to let me go. Even so, not a single one of them raised an objection. While they did have their misgivings, they probably already knew that I was dead set on doing what I came to do, and wouldn’t simply give up even if told them to do so.

“...I’ll come with you, Lady Katarina.” Maria said, looking straight at me.

“But... you’ve been locked up in this place for all this time, Maria... you really should rest.” Even if Maria hadn’t been hurt, she was

locked up in this small, dingy room for an extended period of time. If anything, I wanted to have Maria examined by a doctor, and have her leave this room as quickly as possible.

“No... I’m coming too! Am I not the only one who can perceive the president’s mysterious powers, Lady Katarina?! Then it should be clear that I should come along too!” Maria did have a point. Amongst us, only she was able to perceive Dark Magic.

“Even if you say I can’t... I’ll still come along! Somehow!” Maria said, her courage reflected in her eyes. I could tell that she had already made up her mind. We freed her, and soon enough, we found ourselves all standing in front of the door, ready to enter.

This door, much like the previous one, opened without much difficulty. We were greeted by a staircase instead of a room, however, extending deep underground. It was a narrow, unlit passageway. Only one person could fit through at a time. We all made our descent, with Jeord providing some lighting via his fire magic.

Before long, we discovered yet another door. Jeord, who was leading the group, placed his hand on the dark, heavy door, and pushed. The door opened, once again, with hardly a sound.

For some reason, this room made me feel... sick. Although it was almost the same size as the chamber that Maria had been locked up in, there wasn’t a single window — no sunlight could enter. By what little illumination the room had, we could make out some dark, sinister letters, lining the walls in a seemingly endless scrawl.

It almost seemed like the air in this room had crystallized, stood still... and in the middle of it all was none other than Sirius. Looking at his face, illuminated faintly by the lamp he held, I could tell that he was far worse for wear, more so than the last time I had seen him.

Turning to us, Sirius' expression was one of exhaustion. He had the look of someone who had given up... that is, until he turned his gaze onto me.

"...Why are you here?" His expression immediately changed to one of shock.

*Eh? I thought he already knew that I had woken up, and so hid himself down here... did he not know, perhaps?*

"...Because the sleeping spell you had cast upon me was dispelled." Since Sirius didn't seem to know, I thought it was best that I informed him.

"That isn't it! I KNOW that it was dispelled! How... Why are you here? After what I did to you? Why would you appear before me!" Sirius exclaimed, his expression darkening.

"Ah, that. Right." My friends did say the same thing, after all — all of them, actually, upon hearing that I wanted to go to where Sirius was. Now I was hearing it from the person himself.

*I suppose he does have a point. Sirius did say quite some mean things to me, and also used his Dark Magic to put me to sleep.*

If I had continued to sleep, unable to wake, I would have surely died... or at least, that was what everyone told me. In any case, I did manage to wake up, so the only real damage done here was my bones feeling a little stiff after having slept for two days straight. If anything, I probably needed that sleep — I felt a lot better after sleeping. And so I decided to answer Sirius truthfully.

"Well... I don't really think that you've done anything particularly terrible to me..."

"...You. Do you even... do you even know what was done to you?!"

*Ah, that look. Sirius thinks I am a fool, no doubt. How unfortunate.*

"No, I do know. You used your Dark Magic to cast a sleeping spell on me, right?"

"Exactly! And with that sleeping spell I would extinguish your life!"

"Hmm... That is a lie, isn't it?"

"A... lie...?" Sirius' expression seemed to darken further. But I paid it no heed, continuing with my little speech.

"After all... if you really did want to kill me, you would have done it there and then, not simply put me to sleep. Isn't it faster that way?"

There were no other people present in the garden. As far as I knew, we were the only ones there. It would have been extremely easy for Sirius to kill me if he had really wanted to — there was no point in going through the trouble of putting me to sleep.

While I was not exactly very smart or quick on the uptake, even I could understand this. Similarly, Sirius was a capable, skilled individual. I couldn't believe that he didn't notice this himself. This was how I came to the conclusion that the person standing in front of me had never really intended to kill me in the first place.

"..." Sirius simply stared at me blankly, as if his words had been snatched away.

"I wanted to meet with you one more time, President. So we could have a talk."

"...Talk?"

"Yes. Because... you looked like you were in pain back then. Because you were... crying."

Honestly speaking, though, I couldn't quite remember what I had said back then. To be fair, I was put into a magically-induced sleep for two days, so I could hardly be blamed for this lapse of memory. I remembered one thing, however — Sirius' face, tear-streaked, as I fell from the bench I was sitting on.

*Why? Why did he have such a pained expression...?* It was something that I couldn't stop wondering about.

"So... I wanted to see you one more time, to see if we could have a proper conversation..."

Sirius' face twisted in response. "...You hypocrite... And? Then what? Are you going to save me like you saved these other fools? Saint Katarina Claes?" His lips were twisted in distaste, much like the rest of his face, as he spat out his words.

*Hypocrite? Save? Saint? I don't know what he's talking about.*

*Hmm... come to think of it, Acchan did say something about saving, didn't she? That I should "save the president"...*

However...

"That's impossible!" I declared resolutely, keeping my gaze trained on Sirius. "I am not the protagonist, after all! I am nothing more than a rival character, a villainess of a noble! There is no way I am capable of saving anyone!"

Maybe he couldn't possibly have predicted such a response. Sirius' jaw hung limply from the rest of his face, and for a while, he was frozen in that expression. I could hear some whispers amongst my friends. "Rival character? Villainess noble?" They seemed confused too.

Before I could stop myself, I had already blurted out those words — although it seemed like no one really understood what I had to say. Perhaps they are currently all thinking about how strange I am. "*Ah, what peculiar things that girl says...*"

Even so, those words were the truth, and nothing but the truth. In the otome game world of *Fortune Lover*, I was not the protagonist, but the antagonist villainess rival character. That was my role. I could hardly measure up to the other rivals either. I couldn't hold a candle

to Mary or Sophia, with their beauty, high magical capability, and smarts.

I wasn't all that beautiful, my magic was half-baked at best, and I wasn't smart at all. *Yes, I am a most disappointing rival character. I am Katarina Claes. How could someone like me be expected to heal the trauma and pain of others, like the protagonist? To heal and soothe someone's broken heart? There was no way I could do that!*

Even so, there was the one thing, no, the only thing I could do —

"I cannot save you from your pain... or make it go away. But... I can stay by your side."

I was, after all, nothing more than a villainess. I didn't have it in me the abilities to miraculously save other people. Even so... I could be there for them.

"I could stay with you. When you're sad, when things are hard... I can listen. I can stay until you're happy again, or maybe just okay again."

Suddenly recalling all the memories of my past life... realizing that I was a villainess... working so hard every day to achieve my goals. There were trying times and there were happy times. And then there was everyone else... my friends. My dear friends who stayed by my side all this time. My friends, who listened to me, who accompanied me until I could cheer up again. That was how I managed to come this far.

I was not alone. Standing beside me were my trusted, important friends and comrades. Even if I alone couldn't hope to save Sirius from his suffering, or even alleviate it... my friends would surely be able to offer him their help.

I slowly made my approach, taking a step towards Sirius. "So... you don't have to cry alone."

It was almost like a dam had broken inside Sirius. His pained expression, his crying face. What exactly was it that hurt him so? Why was he suffering so much? I understood nothing. Right now, I knew nothing. However... he had been crying. Quietly, as quietly as he could, alone, in this dark room all by himself. He was only adding on to his pain.

And then... when he reached his limit, perhaps we would all end up like that nightmare I had. That terrible, hideous Bad End. To avoid that... to prevent such a tragedy from coming to pass...!

"Come. Come with me... Raphael." I raised a hand, reaching out to the crying Sirius slowly. I called him by his name — his real name, just like Acchan had told me.

Upon hearing those words, Sirius'... no. Raphael's eyes opened wide. He stared straight at me. Honestly, I didn't understand what this entire real name affair meant. Even so... somehow, I just felt like that was the more fitting name for him.

Raphael slowly raised his hand. Trembling, he slowly reached out... His skin was ice-cold. I raised another hand, clasping it over his. "It'll be okay." I tried my best to smile, so that I could cheer him up ever so slightly. I focused, trying my utmost best to not look like a smiling, mean-spirited villainess who had something up her sleeve.

"...The black mist... it's fading..." Maria, who was standing some distance behind me, muttered. I didn't really know what she meant. However... I noticed something as I gazed into Raphael's eyes — they were now a familiar, gentle color.

"What are you doing in a place like this?" A gentle voice, from above my head.

I had been bullied by the other children who lived nearby, and had hidden in a corner of my home. Looking upwards at the direction of the voice, I saw my mother, whom I loved very much, looking down at me with a worried face.

"...It's nothing. I'm okay." I didn't want to worry my mother. I blurted my words as I rubbed away my tears in a hurry.

"If you cry in a place like this, all alone, those painful feelings won't go away. When it hurts, Mom will be by your side. I'll sit by you and listen to you, so don't cry alone," my mother said, holding me tight as she did so.

By the time I had become aware of myself, I was already living with my mother. We were otherwise alone. My mother continued to work as she raised me. Although it was hard on her, the smile never once faded from her face.

We did not live comfortably, nor were we of any means, but my mother always said the same thing: "I am truly blessed to have a wonderful son like you!" she would say, while hugging me tight. My mother loved me very much.

Those were peaceful, blissful days. I didn't know anything about my father. Not his name, not if he was dead or alive. Because of this, I was often picked on and bullied by the other children who lived nearby. It would be a lie if I said I didn't once wonder, or care. But even as a child, I noticed that my mother never spoke of my father. After all, children hardly gave these matters much thought.

However... I would eventually come to regret this. If I had at least known something about who my father was... then perhaps I would have been able to change what happened.

Eventually... the peaceful life I shared with my mother abruptly ended. It happened in the spring of my ninth birthday, in the evening, as my mother and I were walking home together.

Without warning, a few burly men I had never seen before ambushed us — before pressing a cloth to my face. The cloth had a sweet smell about it... and that was the last thing I remembered.

I found myself in a dark room as I regained consciousness.

The room didn't seem to have access to natural light, and was lit by a lamp. By the light of that lamp, I could see sinister letters written all across its walls. It was so unsettling.

There were about ten people there. I was lying down on my back in the middle of the room, and those people stood, surrounding me.

The burly man who had restrained me before I passed out was also present. If I had to guess, these were the people who had brought us here.

My limbs were tied down. I tried to move, to no avail. There was also a cloth gag in my mouth — I found myself unable to speak, or make much of a sound.

Before me was a man dressed completely in black, and... a woman. The woman wore a vibrant, red dress, and around her neck were several large jewels. A woman in red... she didn't seem to match her surroundings very well.

"The child is awake. Quickly, now. Bring him here," the woman in red said, and one of the burley men stepped up. In his arms was what appeared to be a boy of my age. The boy was placed next to me, on top of a beautiful piece of fabric. It seemed like he was sleeping peacefully.

Upon closer inspection, the boy was thin... very thin. He was also somewhat pale, and seemed to have trouble breathing. He seemed very ill indeed. However... looking past his afflictions, I noticed that he looked very similar to me. Red eyes, grey hair... even his face. Who was this child...?

As I continued to inspect this boy, the woman in red started to speak. "With this, the preparations are complete. Well then. Let us begin. Present the sacrifice."

*Preparations? What do they mean? Is something going to happen in this dark room? What was this "sacrifice"? I felt like I had heard the word before, in a book my mother once read to me... What was it, again?*

Still confused about the situation, I kept pondering upon the meaning of the word. Another man stepped forward — this one opposite the burly man who had placed the boy on the cloth. This man, too, seemed to be bringing someone along.

That person was... none other than my beloved mother. He was dragging her into the room. Her beautiful face was bruised and battered. She was roughly pulled and made to walk, as if she had suffered injuries to her legs.

"Mother!!" I yelled, desperately struggling against my cloth gag. In reality, only a slight, muffled sound escaped. I tried to get up, tried to approach my mother. However, one of the men standing near me pushed me down roughly, pinning me down onto the cold, hard floor.

"Stop it!!" my mother shouted, trying to walk towards me. She, too, was subdued by one of the men.

Regarding us with a chilling stare, the red woman spoke once more. "Please. Do not be so rough with that child's body. After all, his body belongs to my precious Sirius."

*That child? Does she mean me? What does she mean by my body belonging to this... Sirius? Who is Sirius?* I couldn't understand what was going on at all.

"Madam Marchioness, please... if you hate me, do with me as you please... but please, please spare the child..." my injured mother pleaded with the red woman desperately. My mother referred to this red woman as "Madam Marchioness."

*Does she know this woman? Why would this woman hate my mother?* My mother was very kind to me. She was also very nice to everyone who lived around us. Everyone loved my gentle and kind mother. I couldn't think of any reason why someone would hate her.

However, the red woman stared at my mother coldly. "What an impudent woman you are. First, you take my husband from me, and then was gifted with a child... and yet you ask for more?"

"...I am nothing more than a passing fancy of the marquess, and was only with him for a short time. As I said before... I have no intentions of approaching the marquess ever again. All I want to do is live quietly with my child..."

A dry smack echoed across the dark room. My mother, who was pleading with the red woman, had been slapped across the face.

"MOTHER!!" I tried to scream, but I was still gagged, unable to speak.

"...Both fathered by Marquess Dieke. Both children take after him... and yet. Why are we so different? Beauty... health. A healthy child... Why are you so blessed? And yet I have nothing. I am not beautiful. I am sickly. I am unloved by my husband. When I finally bore my child, he was sickly, and was born with an incurable disease. He has not long to live..." the red woman said, roughly grabbing my mother.

"...To think... That you two, mother and son, could live happily forever... I will not allow it! I will NEVER allow it! Begin...!"

At her words, one of the men in black approached my mother, standing before her. In an almost emotionless voice, he started to speak. They were the most mysterious words I had ever heard; they were foreign, much like the language of a faraway land. However, they were also strangely... nostalgic.

I could feel a wave of goosebumps rising over my skin as the man continued to speak. I felt sick. It was like the air itself stagnated and became still.

And then... the man's words stopped. At that, the entire room was enveloped by a thick blanket of darkness. In the pitch-black dark, I couldn't see. All I heard was my mother's screams.

As soon as light began to enter my vision, I started searching for my mother. It didn't take long for me to find her. About two, perhaps three steps away, was my mother, sprawled out on the floor, dazed. I desperately tried to approach her, struggling against my bindings.

Upon finally managing to get close to her, I noticed that my mother's face was pale. She was no longer breathing. Although she was injured before, she was not dazed in such a fashion. *Why? What happened?*

"Mother! Mother!" I yelled pointlessly into my gag. I saw myself, reflected in my mother's eyes. She stared straight at me.

"—please..."

In a voice too faint to be heard, in a voice that sounded like it would fade away any moment... my mother took her last breath. And then all was silent.

"Well? Was it a success?"

"Yes. As stated in the texts... it would seem that the adequate powers had been attained," the man in black responded.

"Is that so? Then do it, quickly. Use that power to transfer Sirius' consciousness into that child's body."

Although I could hear their conversation, nothing entered my mind. I couldn't accept what had happened here. Just moments ago, I was talking with my mother about what to have for dinner, and we were walking home together. Before I knew it, I had been taken to this dark place... and here, my beloved mother... stopped breathing.

"Yes. Then, we shall begin." The man in black placed a hand on the body of the boy sleeping next to me, and then another on my head. In that moment, a rapid series of images filled my mind. They were strange images, too, complete with sound. Unknown places, unknown people... it felt like someone else's life.

As the images continued to flood my mind, I was assaulted by a searing headache. And then... as the images finally slowed down and stabilized, I found that I suddenly knew everything. Why I had been brought here... and why my mother had stopped breathing in this dark room. The images that entered my mind told me everything I needed to know. The plans of that woman in red...

The woman in red was the wife of Marquess Dieke, a noble. She was the mother of the boy lying down next to me. Sirius was his name. However, the Marquess did not love his wife. He was a womanizer, and continued sleeping around with other women even after he got married. After they got married, the Marquess did the bare minimum. After ensuring that his heir Sirius was born, he quickly left, seeing no need to stay by his wife's side.

Perhaps that was the reason why the madam became intensely dependent on her only son, Sirius. She would speak of her

misfortunes to this young child every day. She became emotionally dependent on him.

However... the child, the one and only place where she could rest her heart... was soon afflicted by an incurable disease. She used all her money, all her power, and hired many doctors. Failing that, she even ventured into the occult. But no matter what she did, her son's health did not improve, and he got sicker with each passing day.

The woman could not accept that she might lose her only child. One day, she became aware of a certain kind of magic — Dark Magic. Magic that was able to dominate the hearts and minds of others. Magic that could replace the memories of others. Upon hearing of that... an idea came into the woman's mind.

If she had transplanted her son's memories into a healthy body, he would surely be saved. It was a nonsensical plan. Realistically, such a reckless plan would have no hopes of success.

However... there were no other ways to save her child. The woman, unable to bear the thought of losing her son, decided to chance it on this reckless plan. And so, the woman started to search for a way to obtain Dark Magic, and a suitable vessel for her son's memories.

The vessel... the new body for her son, had to be healthy. It also had to be of a similar age and appearance as her son. After all, a body that looked completely different could not claim to be the heir of the Dieke family. It was then that the woman found what she was searching for. A child about the same age as her son, with a similar appearance. It was almost like the boy had been born to serve as a vessel for Sirius...

That boy was none other than the illegitimate love-child of Marquess Dieke and one of the maids in his service that he had laid his hands on. The maid worked at the Marquess' abode, and was well-loved by her employer. Soon after, a child was born to the maid,

and it was around that time that she vanished from the household. The maid, upon leaving the Marquess' service, bore a healthy and happy child, a child that looked very much like the Marquess. It would seem like she lived happily with her child.

And so it was decided that this child would serve as Sirius' vessel. The woman successfully discovered a means to obtain Dark Magic... said means being that of sacrifice — exchanging a life for the Dark Arts. In other words... a living person had to be sacrificed to become a Wielder of Darkness. The woman made up her mind. She would sacrifice the ex-maid, who was so happily living with her child.

Finally, the woman carried out her plan. She captured the vessel-child and his mother, who was to be the sacrifice. She instructed one of her underlings with magical aptitude to sacrifice the child's mother. Upon him gaining Dark Magic, he would then use his powers to transfer Sirius' consciousness into that of the child.

As per the woman's plan, Sirius' memories would be transplanted into the vessel, said vessel being me. Upon this happening, I would cease to be, and instead be reborn as Sirius Dieke...

However, even with all of Sirius' memories, all he had seen and heard, suddenly crammed into my head... I was still me. It was without a doubt that Sirius' memories were fresh in my mind, but that was all there was to it. There were only memories in my mind — the youth known as Sirius was nowhere to be seen. All I felt was a sad, sad wave of emotion.

*"I am tired. Please let me rest,"* it seemed to say.

Before Sirius had even become aware of himself, all he had to listen to were his mother's complaints and grudges. This carried on even as he fell into the clutches of an incurable illness. The youth had no choice but to listen, and now he only wished to be set free. Despite

his age, the youth was already tired of living. What flowed into me were only memories — Sirius' will was nowhere to be found.

As such, I never became Sirius, only gaining knowledge of his memories, void of all emotion. The woman's plan had failed. However, if she figured this out, she would have me killed on the spot. I made a mental declaration to Sirius' memories.

*I cannot die here. I cannot not die here... It was a strong feeling, stronger than anything I had felt up until now. I cannot die. Not yet... not before fulfilling my mother's last wish...*

Before I knew it, the gag had been removed from my mouth. I suppressed my emotions as much as I could, and then turned to the woman I hated most in the world.

"...Mother dearest," I said, just like how Sirius Dieke had referred to her.

Upon hearing those words, a wide smile came across the woman's face. "Ahh, Sirius! It is you! The Dark Magic succeeded!" she said, holding me tight.

I could feel myself shivering from an extreme feeling of disgust and hatred. And yet I endured. I couldn't die here, not yet. I had to live... and fulfill my mother's last wish.

"...Well then, madam. My work here is done. Could I please return with my family to our homeland, now...?" the man in black asked, somewhat fearfully.

"Yes... you have done well. Thanks to you, my Sirius has finally obtained a healthy body."

"...Well then, can I please return to my family?"

"Oh, of course. I'll let you see them now. Men." The woman gestured to the men who had restrained me earlier, who had been standing in the corner of the room this entire time.

The man in black seemed to have a look of peace about him. The burley men approached him, and... pierced the man in black with their swords.

"...Why...?" he asked, blood flowing freely from his body as he reached out with his hand questioningly.

"You said you wanted to return to where your family was, right? Well, your family is already in the afterworld... waiting for you." The woman smiled elegantly.

"...I only worked for you... because you promised me that you would... let me return to my family. After we had... done all this... You... You lied to me...!"

"Did I really have a choice? After all... it is a power considered taboo. Few, if any, have obtained such powers before. But now that everything has come to an end... wouldn't it be most dangerous to simply let you live, now that you are a Wielder of Darkness...?" The woman smiled, as if she were extolling a truth of the world.

The man in black, his face scrunched up in pain and fury, stared right at the woman. "...Curse you, curse you... I will never forgive you...! I will take away all of your... power, your social standing... no matter what... I will see that you fall into hell..." The man's outstretched hand brushed against one of my toes.

"What are you going on about? You are a dead man writhing. Men, finish him." At her command, the men thrust their swords deep into their victim... and soon he stopped breathing.

At the same time, Sirius Dieke, the boy who had been lying on the cold floor next to me, breathed his last breath.

I lived my life as Sirius Dieke from then on. I swore to take revenge against the Dieke family — the people who took my mother's life, and who turned me into a tool.

It was soon after I had started living my life as Sirius Dieke that I noticed that I had strange, mysterious powers. I found that I was able to read the hearts of others, and to control their actions. This was Dark Magic. Honestly speaking, I didn't know why this power manifested in me in the first place. Even so, it was something I could use, and I welcomed its presence.

Since then, I had lived only for the sake of revenge. Time passed by... and then I met her. The girl who said the same things as my beloved mother did. The girl with the same gentle smile on her face, just like Mother's — Katarina Claes. Ever since I crossed paths with her, all I could feel was a tumultuous vortex of emotions in my heart. My resolve to live for revenge... started to falter.

This was why I had to get rid of Katarina once and for all. I lulled her into a deep sleep with the Dark Arts. She would sleep forever, and eventually die.

However, my unbreakable spell was overcome. I understood this to be the case when I went to check up on Maria in her little hidden room, and saw that my Dark Magic had been undone. I should have been panicking over the situation, but instead, I felt a deep sense of peace.

The spell I had cast on Katarina was broken. With this, she would be saved. *Perhaps that is for the best*, I thought. With Katarina's awakening, my deeds would be brought to light. Surely I would be arrested and dealt with.

*"You can't let yourself get caught here! You have to escape, so you may continue planning for your revenge!"* the voice within me said, somewhat forcefully. However... if I were caught here, then everything would end. Perhaps that was a good thing.

*"Have you forgotten your mother's last words?"* the voice said once more. I felt my heart stir. *"Please avenge me..."* — my mother's last

words. I had lived all this time in hopes of fulfilling that dream. But I was... tired, you see. I no longer wanted to hurt anyone.

Once the authorities got wind of this, surely this place, hidden chambers known only to the Dieke family, would be discovered too. The chambers were originally constructed so that Madam Dieke could carry out occultic research in hopes of saving her son. Soon after, research in the chambers shifted to the Dark Arts. It was for these purposes that this place was built — hidden away in the forests, and yet still on the grounds of the Academy of Magic.

The place where my mother's life had been taken away. Where my life, my future, had been snatched from me. For it to all end here... perhaps this, too, was fate. That was why I kept waiting in this hidden chamber. Waiting on my own destruction.

I did not have long to wait. Soon, I sensed several presences in the room I had locked Maria in. The room I was in was set deeper into the ground. With the descending stairway and a thick door between me and them, I could not exactly observe the situation in the other room.

However, the very fact that I sensed a presence in that room was enough for me to understand. At last, Maria would be saved, and I would be arrested and detained.

*"You can still escape! Quickly, use the Dark Arts on them! All of them!"* the voice within me cried. The voice would not stop. And yet, I found myself quietly waiting for the end.

And so... after the sound of approaching footsteps down the stairwell, the door to my room opened. I had expected the authorities, perhaps armed with a variety of weapons. Instead, I froze upon recognizing a certain individual in the group that entered the chamber.

Jeord Stuart and Keith Claes. Student council members... I expected this. The prince, who had long since lost his heart to Katarina, surely desired to arrest me, one who had made an attempt on her life, with his own hands. Naturally. I had assumed as much.

But... no. I remained rooted in place, staring at the person before me. *Why is this person here?* I could not understand. I had said such hateful words, even made an attempt on her life. Then why... why would she appear before me now?

"...Why are you here?" I asked, only for her to answer, almost absent-mindedly.

"...Because the sleeping spell you had cast upon me was dispelled." Katarina Claes stood before me, with that same attitude of hers. It was almost like she'd forgotten what had happened in the courtyard. What I had done to her.

"That isn't it! I KNOW that it was dispelled! How... Why are you here? After what I did to you? Why would you appear before me!"

"Ah, that. Right. Well... I don't really think that you've done anything particularly terrible to me..." Katarina said, as she always did. As if nothing of note had happened at all.

I had set out to kill her. What was she thinking? Was she really that much of a fool...? Or did she really possess the forgiving, accepting heart of a Saint? Or, perhaps... there was an even simpler explanation.

"...You. Do you even... do you even know what was done to you?!" I asked.

"No, I do know. You used your Dark Magic to cast a sleeping spell on me, right?" Katarina replied, as if it were the simplest, most obvious thing in the world to say.

"Exactly! And with that sleeping spell I would extinguish your life!" I had no choice but to lay it out clearly, as Katarina seemed to have trouble understanding the scope of the situation.

"Hmm... That is a lie, isn't it?"

"A... lie...?"

"After all... if you really did want to kill me, you would have done it there and then, not simply put me to sleep. Isn't it faster that way?"

"..." There it was again. That blatant, straightforward way she answered my questions. I found myself speechless.

It was exactly as Katarina said. It would have been much simpler for me to kill her, as opposed to going through the trouble of putting her to sleep. Then... why did I not just do that? No... I couldn't. I could not do it. In truth, I—

"I wanted to meet with you one more time, President. So we could have a talk."

"...Talk?" *What is this?*

"Yes. Because... you looked like you were in pain back then. Because you were... crying. So... I wanted to see you one more time, to see if we could have a proper conversation..."

Her aqua-blue eyes looked right into mine. I felt my chest tighten up. I could hardly breathe. The maelstrom of emotions ravaged my heart.

"...You hypocrite... And? Then what? Are you going to save me like you saved these other fools? Saint Katarina Claes?" Before I knew it, the words had left my mouth. She hardly knew anything about me. Nothing. What would the daughter of a duke, raised happily and lovingly, ever know?

Even if Katarina Claes had said something along the lines of how she would "save me," I would surely brush it off. No... I would

despise her for being full of herself — just the folly of some lovingly-raised noble lady of a powerful family.

Unexpectedly, however... Katarina said the exact opposite.

“That’s impossible!” she declared, staring straight at me. “I am not the protagonist, after all! I am nothing more than a rival character, a villainess of a noble! There is no way I am capable of saving anyone!”

*Protagonist? Rival...?* I couldn’t comprehend these words, uttered with such force. She declared that salvation was “impossible”... I could not possibly hope to understand the thought processes of Katarina Claes. All I could do was stand, looking back at her with a blank expression. And then —

“I cannot save you from your pain... or make it go away. But... I can stay by your side,” Katarina said, smiling gently as she did so. “I could stay with you. When you’re sad, when things are hard... I can listen. I can stay until you’re happy again, or maybe just okay again.”

Words... much like what my mother had said to me, such a long time ago. I had hidden in a corner and cried alone, not wanting to worry my mother. When she found me however, she held me tight, saying similar things to me. When I finally remembered that memory — I felt something break deep within me. It was almost like the fog in my mind had cleared.

In truth, I had always, always suspected, in a corner of my mind. “*Please avenge me*” — supposedly my mother’s last words. But could my gentle, loving mother, who always worried more about me than herself... ever leave me with such words?

And now I remembered. I finally remembered that my mother had hardly left such hateful words. Why? How could I misremember in such a fashion?

My mother’s actual last words — “...*Please... live. Live on... be happy. I love you...*”

Yes. My mother had never sought revenge. Until the very end, up until her last breath... she had wished for my happiness. That was why I thought I should live on... that I had to continue living on.

Before I knew it, Katarina had moved quite close to me. "So... you don't have to cry alone." With a gentle smile, she reached out with her hand.

Why did my vision distort in such a way? My cheeks were wet.

"Come. Come with me... Raphael."

Raphael. My real name. The name that my mother had given me. A truly important name. Slowly, I reached out with my hand towards Katarina's. But then...

*"Hey. What do you think you're doing? Don't listen to the words of someone like that! In fact... they're careless, and have approached you. Take her hostage and escape! You can still escape!"* the voice in my screamed, agitated.

I, however, turned to the voice — and responded. "*I don't want to do anything like that. I've already had enough of revenge!*"

"...Wh-What?" The voice in me seemed afraid.

I asked it a question. "*Also... who are you?*"

I had lived my life according to what this voice that preached endlessly on about revenge said. It was this very voice that had brought up the memory of my mother's last words. However... those last words were false. My mother never said such a thing.

It was this voice that had enticed me into doing all this. This "other me" who shouted about revenge, and who twisted my beloved mother's last words. I finally realized it. This thing was not me.

My belief that this voice was me had clouded its true form. I could not see it for what it was. For so long, I thought that this voice was

another side of me. In truth, he was the man in black. The very same man in black who had taken away my mother's life.

*"So... you notice at last."* The man in black smiled, bitterly, in defeat.

*"...All this time. You've been controlling me... pretending to be me."* I remembered. How his fingers had brushed against me right before his death. I suppose it was right then that the Dark Arts had seeped into me and controlled my will. And that was how it twisted my mother's last words.

*"All I was doing was granting your wish. I was just helping you,"* the man in black said hatefully.

*"...Yes. I hated them... hated them all. ... But, I did not live on for the sake of revenge! I lived on so that I could one day be happy!"*

That was my mother's last wish — that I would live on, and find happiness. So... this man in black had to be erased. The supposed fact that the Dark Arts could only be dispelled by the individual who cast the spell... this girl before me was proof that it could be overcome.

"It'll be okay." Katarina's warm hands gently held mine.

I started at the man in black, focusing on a singular thought in my mind. *"...This is the end. There will be no more revenge. Your existence is no longer needed."*

*"Damn it all... who do you think was the one who had led you all this way? You are weak... you traitor..."*

With those last words, the man in black vanished.

Looking up, I saw Katarina's gentle smile, and felt her warm gaze.>

Sirius Dieke — real name Raphael Wolt.

He told us everything; about how he had been born to Marquess Dieke and a maid in his service, about how he was raised, and how he had been living as Sirius Dieke... and also about how he had obtained Dark Magic. Finally, he also told us about how he had been controlled for the past seven years by that very same Dark Magic.

Although everyone was intent on presenting him to the authorities and pinning him as a criminal behind this entire incident, their opinions changed upon hearing Raphael's story. I had never thought to persecute Raphael for what he did. Maria, too, decided to forgive him for having confined her to that chamber for several days.

It would seem that Maria had been looking at Raphael's eyes at the moment when the Dark Magic cast upon him was dispelled, and in doing so became more convinced of the truth to his words.

However, Raphael decided that he should turn himself in to the authorities. "I want to tell them about all this myself. About my mother and I... and the man in black, and the real Sirius. Although I was being controlled, I still have a duty to speak of the things I had done..." Raphael said, deciding to inform the authorities about all that had transpired.

The sins of Madam Dieke, her men, and Raphael's own sins were hence laid bare. A while after Raphael had turned himself in, news of Madam Dieke and her men being arrested spread across the circles of noble society. We never heard about what became of Raphael for his involvement in forbidden magics, nor was the incident ever made public. It was probably safe to assume that he was now atoning for his sins in some manner.

There were no details in the rumors of Raphael and his fate after he turned himself in. I could only continue to worry, not knowing what had become of him.

Several months passed. We were now about a month away from the graduation ceremony. With the graduation ceremony occurring soon, the members of the student council were all accordingly busy. So I decided to focus on my agricultural work, not wanting to get in the way of their duties. I set off for my dormitory room, intent on retrieving my farming implements.

“Lady Katarina Claes.”

A familiar voice. I turned around. Standing there was a somewhat unremarkable, brown-haired youth, wearing attire reminiscent of officials from the Magical Ministry. He had a normal, almost boring aura about him — if he had not called out to me, I would probably have walked past him without ever noticing that he was there. He didn’t stand out in the least.

*Hmm? Who’s this?* The fact that he called out to me and knew my name meant that I had known him in some capacity before... and yet, I could not remember.

As those thoughts crossed my mind... I looked into the youth’s eyes. It was then that I remembered — those were the gentle, grey eyes I knew so well.

“...Wait... could it be? Raphael?” I blurted out.

As I did so Raphael’s eyes opened wide. “I am surprised you could tell. Especially since my appearance has changed so much.”

*Ah, it is Raphael after all...* I hadn’t seen him for a few months, and he did look entirely different — but those gentle, grey eyes remained as they always had. He smiled, as if embarrassed, upon hearing my explanation. It was a smile I had not seen in quite a long time.

“You’ve come back?” The fact that Raphael was standing here meant that he was able to return to the academy... or so I assumed.

"Yes. Thanks to the various testimonies that everyone provided, I was able to return to this place once more."

We all did what we could to help Raphael's case. We told the authorities what we knew of Raphael's story, Maria's eyewitness testimony, and how he had been gentle and kind to us up until then. In addition, we also utilized some social connections, directly launching a petition to the higher levels of authority in the land. If what we did would help Raphael, even in the slightest way... then that was a good thing.

I couldn't help but be surprised at his current appearance — so different than how he was before. Why was it necessary to change how he looked to this extent? "Could it be that... you were thinking of enrolling in the academy again, as a new student...?" I asked.

After the incident, Raphael left the Academy. On the surface, he had left "to recuperate" because of "health issues." However, rumors of Madam Dieke's arrest had already spread through the intermingled layers of noble society, and many assumed that her son, Sirius, was somehow involved in the incident as well — at least, that was the image I had gotten.

It would be difficult for Raphael to enroll as Sirius Dieke once more, especially not with that face, which was widely-known to the student body. However... now that he had altered his appearance so much, it was perhaps possible to enroll in the academy again as someone else. Those were the thoughts that flitted through my mind as I inspected Raphael's new appearance.

"No. I will no longer return to the academy... It is a little unfortunate that I could not graduate. However, I have actually obtained a position at the Magical Ministry, and will be working there from here on out. As Raphael Wolt, of course."

As the Dark Magic cast on Raphael dissipated, gone, too, was the source of his power — Raphael could no longer utilize the Dark Arts. Even so, he had high magical aptitude. It would seem that he was valued for his skills, and eventually offered a position within the Bureau.

However, there was another angle to this, perhaps. Considering that Raphael had been acting under the mental influence of forbidden magic for a time, it made sense that the Bureau would want to monitor him. In other words, he was now under the Bureau's supervision and care.

Due to these circumstances, Raphael was assigned to work at the research facility on the academy's grounds. This was why he had to change how he looked — so that he would not be recognized by the student body, hence avoiding a commotion. As for why he looked like someone else altogether... he apparently had the assistance of a professional disguise and make-up artist.

*A professional... disguise artist? What sort of profession is that? They even changed his facial shape... a well-done disguise indeed. Yes, as expected of a professional.* Apparently, until noble society at large had calmed down, Raphael was to stay in this disguise.

“Then, I suppose we will meet like this again sometime?”

“Yes. I would think so... we are on academy grounds, after all.”

“Ha. Then... should we have a chance, would you put on a pot of tea again, in that delicious way that you do?”

“Of course. Gladly.” Smiling, Raphael suddenly knelt before me, reaching out with his hand. It was a reminiscent of what Jeord had done when he had asked for my hand in marriage.

*Eh? What? What's this all about? What should I do?*

“Lady Katarina Claes... allow me to introduce myself once more. I, Raphael Wolt, would like to live by your side. Would you permit me the honor of doing so...?”

*Hmm... what stiff, formal words. I suppose Raphael means that... he wants to be friends and get along from now on? Well then.*

“Of course. I hope we get along well from now on, too,” I said, holding his outstretched hand in mine.

“Ah... but. Well... perhaps you really should not be calling me by my full name. It is a little unnerving. Just address me like you always have, yes?” Raphael smiled, as if at a bit of a loss, upon hearing my words.

## **Chapter 5: The Final Event is Here!**

Finally... at last. The time had come. It was now the night before our second-year seniors graduated — the night before the graduation ceremony. Alone in my dormitory chambers, I balled my fingers into a fist.

I had finally, finally... reached this point. The end of *Fortune Lover*, the last event... the graduation ceremony at the Academy of Magic.

A year would have passed since the commoner protagonist, intermingling with her noble peers, enrolled and studied in the Academy of Magic. She would have furthered her studies, fallen in love with someone her age or a senior in the Student Council, and with the graduation of her second-year seniors, the game would end.

At the graduation ceremony, the protagonist and love interest character would finally gain a meaningful connection. There was, of course, the reverse harem route... in which she ends up with all the romanceable options.

Though I had safely overcome the Public Prosecution of Katarina Claes, I still had to be wary, not letting my guard down until the game ended. Honestly, though... I could hardly see myself being chased out or cut down by any of these people. After all, they were now my important, close friends. But even so. I had to keep my guard up right until the end.

I was armed with our greatest work — the toy snake that Grandpa Tom and I had designed and perfected, in my pocket. And if I were ever exiled from the kingdom, I would be ready. I had already prepared my farming overalls, my favorite hoe, books on agriculture, and various other tools. The intensity of my swordplay had been a topic of conversation as of late, too.

I had the perfected, ultimate projectile snake... and the technique to quickly launch it. With the guidance of Mary and her green thumb, the crops I grew no longer wilted, and instead thrived. And day after day, without fail, I toiled away at the fields, honing my skill with the hoe.

*Since my memories of my previous life came back to me on that fateful day, eight years ago, I have worked hard. Now, it was finally time to put my skills to the test.*

*If you're coming for me... then show me what you've got, Catastrophic Bad Ends! I, Katarina Claes, with her eight years of hard work, will be your opponent!* I raised my balled fist to the air.

And so... I let my fighting spirit burn wild — only to be interrupted by a knock at the door. Anne soon entered the room.

“Young miss. I do recall you saying that you had wished to personally prepare the flower bouquet for Master Nicol... It is to be handed to him tomorrow, congratulating him on his graduation. Have you made the necessary preparations?” Anne said, eyeing me suspiciously as she did so. I, for my part, still had my fist raised in the air.

In this particular academy, there was a custom of giving a congratulatory gift to a graduating senior, usually one that has been helpful and offered guidance. Not too different from a custom in the school I attended in my previous life. I intended to personally hand Nicol his gift. After all, he had been very helpful, in more ways than one.

Traditionally, these celebratory gifts were often flower bouquets. There were occasionally gifts of bouquets with particularly valuable accessories in them, or in some cases items with actual money, but such gifts were usually only given if they shared a particularly special bond.

I'd thought to myself that all I'd have to do is arrange a simple bouquet of flowers. But then I'd realized: Nicol, the Alluring Count, was quite the popular individual. In fact, one of his fanclubs was probably the largest in the academy. He would probably receive countless bouquets.

In which case... he probably didn't need any more. And anyway, receiving a flower bouquet like that meant that extra effort had to be taken to preserve the flowers... and bouquets didn't serve much of a purpose other than being a decorative item. And so, I had prepared something... special.

With that in mind, I proudly showed Ann what I had prepared. At a first glance, the item in question appeared to be a beautifully-wrapped bouquet. But upon closer inspection, it was definitely different.

"Well? Ingenious, right?"

"..."

*Ah, such a great idea! I really am quite the genius!*

*With this, the preparations for Nicol's congratulatory gift are complete! The Catastrophic Bad End countermeasures are in place!*

"...Um. Young miss... what exactly is..."

*Tomorrow was the day! The final battle!*

"...Excuse me... young miss? Are you listening?"

Once again, I rose my fist high, raising it triumphantly to the ceiling.

And so, I ended up staying up very late on the night before the final battle.

The graduation ceremony was much like the intake ceremony I experienced earlier in the year. The representative of the graduating

students was Nicol himself. Originally, that role belonged to Sirius Dieke, but not much could be done about it now that he was no longer a student at the academy.

Regardless of gender, I found that many people in the crowd had turned red and were sighing in a bittersweet fashion at Nicol's graduation address. They had all been thoroughly charmed by the Alluring Count. What truly terrifying charm indeed.

Jeord, meanwhile, was the representative for students yet to graduate from the academy. It would seem that he would become student council president next year. I observed a similar reaction amongst many of the female students as the prince gave his address. Their faces were red, and a cacophony of sighs could be heard. As expected of the handsome fairy-tale-esque prince.

With that, the student addresses peacefully concluded amongst the sighs of the crowd.

It was finally time. To me, this was it — the final frontier. The Ending Event of *Fortune Lover* was finally under way.

It was time for the graduation party. With the ceremony over, many students attended a standing buffet party in the academy's courtyard. In this graduation party, the protagonist and her love interest would sneak out of the venue quietly... and finally make clear their impassioned thoughts for each other, forming an everlasting connection.

I decided to closely observe Maria's movements so that I could discern who she would sneak out of the venue with. With that goal in mind, I stuck even closer to her, closer than I normally would.

However, I couldn't simply stay close to Maria and do nothing else — after all, this was a graduation party. I had to say a few congratulatory words to my seniors, at the very least. Of course, the

senior I wanted to congratulate the most was Nicol, and I had to hand him his congratulatory bouquet.

Maria and I made our way over to where he stood. By the time we got there, Nicol was already holding quite a sizable number of bouquets. In fact, there was also a small stand set up next to him where many other bouquets now lay.

There were... a lot more than I expected. The sheer number of them was stunning. Many congratulations were apparently in order.

Maria was first to hand over her flowers. Although the bouquet that she had prepared was by no means expensive, it was charming and lovable — a fantastic bouquet very much reminiscent of Maria's tastes.

Next, I stepped up, handing Nicol the special bouquet I had prepared. Taking a glance at what appeared to be flowers, Nicol smiled — that rare, wonderful smile of his. Upon taking a closer look at the bouquet, however, he suddenly froze mid-motion.

Noticing Nicol's strange behavior, Alan, who had been standing next to him all this time, leaned over for a closer look. "Oi, what's wrong... pfft! What!? WHAT IS THIS? GRASS!?" Alan exclaimed, and soon his loud voice drew the attention of Jeord and Keith.

I, however, responded to Alan tersely. "How rude! Grass? How could that be? They are vegetables, vegetables!"

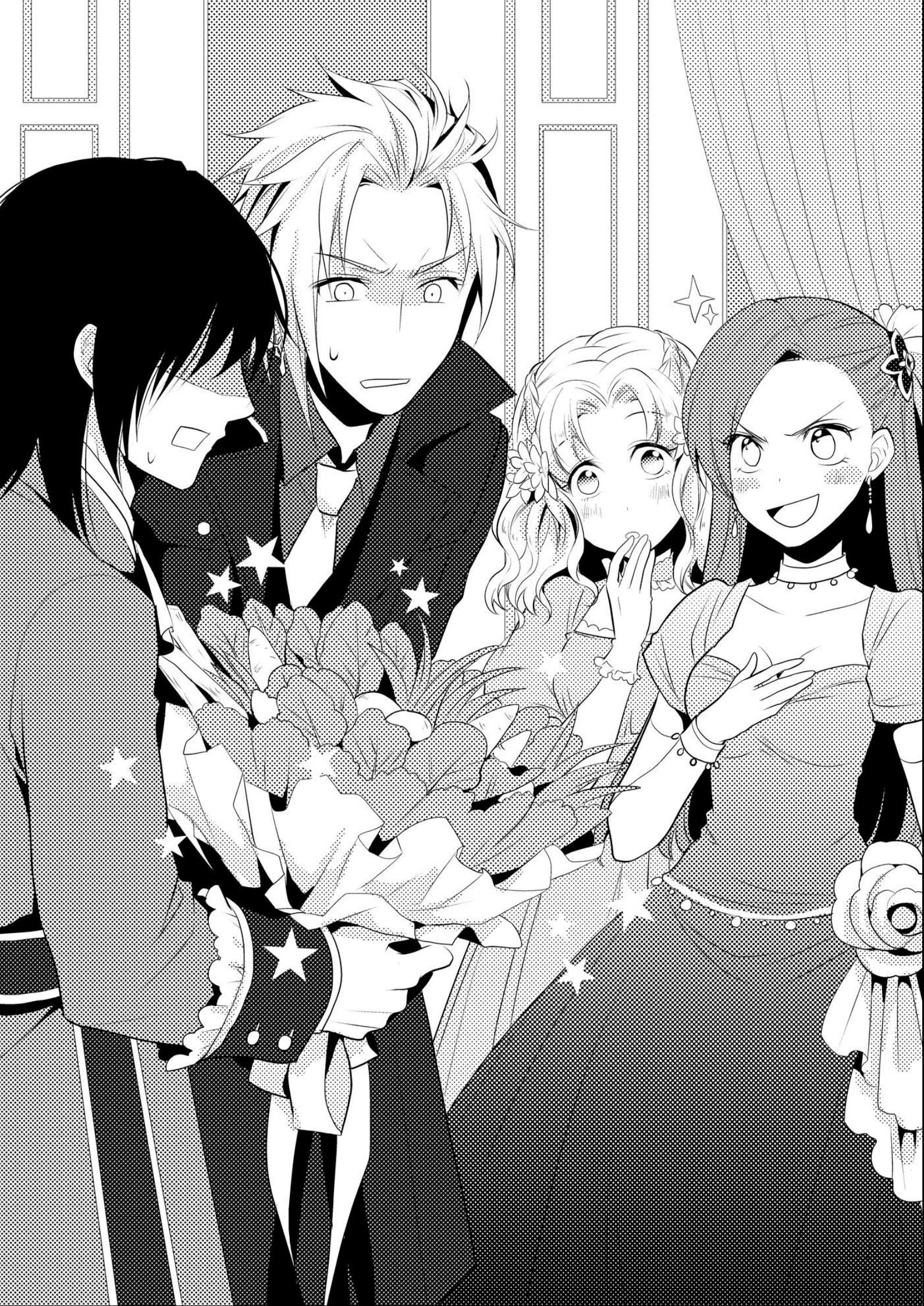
"...Vegetables?" Alan repeated, seemingly shocked. He leaned over once more, presumably to give the bouquet a closer look.

Nicol, too, started inspecting the bouquet he held in his hands. Jeord and Keith remained standing some distance away, as if to observe the flow of events.

"I thought you might be troubled by all the bouquets you would get, so I wrapped up some vegetables from my field instead. With

this, it won't be just some decoration you throw away! You can eat them, too, and they'll fill your stomach!"

*Not a flower bouquet, no! I name this invention the veggie bouquet!*  
At this time of the year my fields didn't exactly have many leafy greens, so the center of the bouquet was mainly comprised of onions, chives, garlic and the like. Perhaps it was a little grass-like, but unlike grass, these crops could be eaten and indeed would fill one's stomach! Truly good produce.



*Oh, what a superb idea!* At the very least, I felt that it was a great idea, and was full of praise for myself. However...

“...No matter how I look at it... it’s grass, isn’t it...? Veggies? Really...? Pu...” For some reason, Alan had lost it, and was currently laughing his head off.

*What, exactly, is so funny? How rude of you, Alan.*

Nicol, finally having snapped out of his frozen trance, managed to respond at last. “Thank you. I shall... treasure. This meal.”

Maria seemed to have high praise for the bouquet too. “It does look very delicious.”

Meanwhile, Jeord was once again staring at the ground, his shoulders shaking. Keith, on the other hand, gave me his usual, exasperated stare.

With this, the party had moved on to its final phases before I had even noticed it. Honestly, I was somewhat panicked and nervous at this point, because Maria had displayed no attempts to leave the venue whatsoever.

Even stranger was how there was now a performance going on — some sort of surprise event to commemorate the graduation of our seniors, I was told. *But... a violin duet between Jeord and Alan? Eh? Do you two even care about sneaking out with Maria at all? What is this sudden merry performance all about?*

However, it was amazing that the day would come where those two would perform happily together, and that they would get along.  
*Hmm. Was there even a scene like that in the game?*

Even more confusing was how the two of them had asked me prior to the ceremony what songs I liked to listen to. *I didn’t understand what they were going on about, but... isn’t this the song that I just*

*haphazardly selected? Why would I, of all people, who has nothing to do with the graduation ceremony at all, be asked to select the songs being played...?*

*Hmm... The more I thought about it, the more confused I got. There were too many differences with the original scenario of Fortune Lover. Maria was no exception, even saying "To be able to spend all of today by Lady Katarina's side... I truly am happy."*

*Well... I suppose it's good that Maria is pleased. But... Maria! Don't you have a romantic interest in mind?*

*Ho! Or perhaps... she's gone for the reverse harem route, and has already formed connections with everyone else here!*

*I never personally cleared the reverse harem route, and so I don't know anything about that particular ending. But if what Acchan said is true, I think Katarina does meet a Catastrophic Bad End in this one too...*

*Ugh, what is it going to be!? Is it really a reverse harem, Maria? Or are you going to choose someone from now!?*

Panic, panic, panic... I couldn't restrain myself. I couldn't wait any longer.

"Hey... Maria. Do you have anyone you like?" A straightforward question here was the way to go.

At my sudden question, Maria seemed extremely surprised, her face soon turning bright red. "I... really admire you, Lady Katarina..." Maria said, in the most innocent fashion possible.

"...Um, Maria. While I am very glad that you think so highly of me... I don't mean that. I am referring to... you know. Someone who has caught your fancy, a man who you want to date, right? That's what I meant." I made sure to be painstakingly clear with my question this time.

"...Caught my fancy... a man... who I would like to date..." Maria mumbled the words under her breath, as if giving them deep thought. I stood by her faithfully, holding my breath as I watched over her.

*Quickly, now! Tell me, Maria! Which of these potential love interests is it?*

"...I don't think there is anyone like that, Lady Katarina."

"...Ha...?" Maria's answer caught me off-guard, and a somewhat pathetic sound arose from the depths of my throat. *Eh? What? Did she just say that... there isn't anyone like that?*

Maria, however, continued concisely and confidently in spite of my confusion. "There are no men who have... caught my fancy, Lady Katarina. But... someone did. She is someone I deeply admire. Someone whom I would like to be with forever — you, Lady Katarina." With that, Maria grasped both my hands in hers. "So... please, Lady Katarina. Let me continue being with you... from here on out."

*Those are words that I've heard somewhere before... hmm. Ah, right. Those are the protagonist's final words to the successfully romanced love interest character. "Let me continue being with you... from here on out."*

*But then... why me? I don't get it. I don't understand. Panic!*

Suddenly, another hand approached ours. "Lady Maria... it simply won't do, leaving us out like that. I, too, would like to remain with Lady Katarina forever."

Saying so, I found my hands taken into Mary's and away from Maria's. Mary was smiling elegantly.

"M-Me too! Me too, Lady Katarina! I want to be with you... forever!" Sophia said, visibly excited, as she stood next to Mary.

"Well... then. I, as well. As much as I would be permitted to." Nicol chimed in too, with his usually stoic expression.

Before I knew it, Alan, who had apparently finished his duet at some point, showed up as well. "Th-Then! Me too, yeah?"

"Ah, everyone. What are you saying? Katarina is my fiancée, after all." Saying so, Jeord snatched my hands out of Mary's... only for them to be intercepted by yet another pair of mysterious hands in the process.

"Prince Jeord. I believe we have discussed this countless times prior, but my adoptive sister is hardly cut out for the role of Queen. Please, do cancel the engagement. I will take all responsibility for the needs and wants of my adoptive sister," Keith said, now holding my hands in his.

With that, my surroundings were suddenly enveloped in a cacophony of voices.

"Ah, Keith. How many times have I said it, hmm? I have no intentions of cancelling the engagement. Katarina will become my queen."

"But I must protest, Prince Jeord. It is unthinkable that you would have my important adoptive sister all to yourself. I will see to it that the engagement is cancelled."

"It is as he says, Prince Jeord. Having Lady Katarina all to yourself? Unthinkable! We will ensure that the engagement is called off. To that end, I, Mary Hunt, shall lend you my strength, Master Keith."

"Yes... that's right," Sophia piped up. "I wouldn't want Prince Jeord... to have Lady Katarina all to himself. Please let me help too, Lady Mary... Oh, you should help too, Big Brother."

"If that is what you desire."

"Eh? Then I'll help too!" Alan jumped in.

"I will be of assistance as well! Please, do allow me to assist!" Maria spoke up passionately as well.

"Ah... how terrible, to gang up on me like that. You lot... I will never hand Katarina over."

Before I knew it, my hands, which had been in Keith's grasp moments ago, were free. But then... here it was again. This feeling of being excluded from the conversation. I no longer understood what everyone was talking about. It was a little lonely, yes, but their discussion was lively, and everyone looked like they were having fun.

It seemed like everyone was getting along... but this was not love. If it were indeed a reverse harem, things would feel a little different. Come to think of it, the atmosphere changed somewhat the moment Mary and Sophia joined us. While it did feel like I was being slightly excluded from the festivities... it didn't seem like I was anywhere near a Catastrophic Bad End.

Still confused by recent events, I racked my brain, thinking as hard as I could. *Hmm... This... This situation. If I had to put it into words... an ending where everyone became friends? The "Friends Ending"?*

The "Friends Ending"... commonly known as the normal end. The protagonist does not end up forming a lasting romantic connection with a potential love interest, and the game ends with everyone simply being good friends. For a game about romance, to get an ending in which the protagonist falls in love with no one was a Bad Ending in some ways.

I didn't know why Maria said those specific words usually reserved for a love interest... and there were many differences with the friendship ending that I had seen in my previous life. Even so... the happy look on all their faces — it did seem like the "Friends Ending" that I experienced before.

Personally speaking... I'd thought that all the potential love interests would be smitten with Maria. After all, Maria was gentle and lovable. Even the heart of a rival character such as myself would involuntarily skip a beat upon seeing that face of hers — her embarrassed, shy look, with her crimson-tinted cheeks.

And then there was Keith and Jeord, who would often pull me away from Maria whenever we had gotten too close. I had assumed that they were already charmed by her, and were simply jealous of the time we spent together...

This was why I thought that Maria had already formed a connection with someone — if not everyone. And yet... here we are, at the "Friends Ending" instead.

Rival characters didn't have any ill fates befall them upon the resolution of this particular ending. After all, the game concluded with everyone as friends — nothing more. In other words... I, Katarina Claes, would not have to face a Catastrophic Bad End. I could feel the tension fade from my shoulders — it was as if all the strength in my body had evaporated.

Now fully relaxed, I looked at my friends, who were still merrily having their lively conversation. Before long, we were told that the party had officially ended — and that was that.

And so it came to be that the graduation party, as well as the events of *Fortune Lover*, came to an uneventful end.

It was an unexpected ending — one that I had not imagined at all. To me, however... it was the best ending I could ask for.

With the graduation party finally over, we made our way to the Student Council Chambers to hold a farewell party for Nicol. While it seemed excessive to have one party after the next, this little

gathering was nothing more than partaking in tea and snacks casually while having some light conversation.

We also invited the previous student council president, Raphael, to the farewell party — albeit stealthily, so that the students on campus would not find out. While Raphael was somewhat withdrawn and reserved at first, everyone welcomed him warmly. Being his juniors, we all readied a flower bouquet for him too, which he graciously accepted. He did, however, freeze up a little upon receiving my specially-crafted veggies bouquet, much like Nicol did. Stunned by the sight of my wonderful invention, no doubt.

The student council was together for the first time in what seemed like a long time. I had a lot of fun spending time with everyone.

“Please, Lady Katarina,” Raphael said with a smile as he offered me a cup of tea.

“Thank you very much.” After gratefully accepting the cup, I eagerly raised it to my lips. While it has been quite a while since I’d had the chance to enjoy one of Raphael’s brews, its taste remained unchanged — gentle as ever.

From what I was told, Raphael had been practicing tea-brewing for a long time, apparently always preparing a cup for his tired mother when she returned home from work. He had a calm and peaceful expression on his face as he recounted this to me.

“Lady Katarina... please do try some, if you would like...” Maria said, offering me some snacks.

“Wow! Today’s snacks are exceptionally delicious! I’ve never seen snacks quite like these before, Maria. Are these homemade too?”

It was much like a soft, fluffy sponge cake drizzled with a generous helping of syrup. Just looking at it was enough to make me start drooling. I had never seen a snack like this before amongst Maria’s creations.

"Yes. A new concept, Lady Katarina. Mother and I thought of it together."

"Oh! With your mother, you say?"

"Yes. I was happily telling her about how you enjoyed my snacks, Lady Katarina, when she asked if you would be bored by having the same kind over and over again... so we thought of a new recipe together."

"Really? Ah, but I'll never tire of your homemade snacks, Maria! Never! But yes, I am very happy indeed! Thank you very much for thinking of me. Do pass my thanks along to your mother for me."

"Yes. I will make sure to do so," Maria replied, smiling happily.

Having tried one, I quickly came to the conclusion that Maria's new snack was even more delicious than it looked. I could hardly stop my hands from moving.

"Katarina... if you eat so much all of a sudden, won't you have yet another stomachache?"

"Exactly, Big Sister. You also had quite a lot to eat... more than most others, I would say, at the graduation party. Do limit yourself..."

So came the swift warnings from Jeord and Keith, as I continued stuffing my face full of snacks. *Ugh... they're both staring straight at me... Just like how Mother does... I suppose they would be similarly annoyed if I got a stomachache from overeating...*

Jeord's deliberate warnings were delivered with a smiling face, while Keith simply looked... worried, continuously reminding me to eat less. *I suppose I have no choice. I'll save some for later.* I slowed my snacking speed down — just by a tiny bit.

"Lady Katarina... I purchased a new series of novels recently. It turned out to be a most enjoyable story... if you would like, we could read it together next time," Sophia said.

She described the new romance novel she had read. It was a story very much relevant to my tastes, and I decided to borrow it from Sophia right away. *Yes... yes. I'll be looking forward to reading this, oh I will.* With that, the conversation shifted to that of novels and the like.

"Katarina. I fear I shall not see you for quite some time. I leave my sister in your care," Nicol said with his usual stoic expression.

"Ah, no, think nothing of it. I'm sure we'll all continue to get along," I replied with my best smile... and there it was! Nicol's alluring smile momentarily flitted across his features once more.

*...Yes. Nicol's alluring charm is fearsome indeed... even for someone like me, who's known him across the years and built up some resistance to it.* My cheeks were already red in spite of myself.

I wouldn't be able to see Nicol often after he left — at least, not for the next year. It would be a little lonely for me, but I suspected it would be much worse for Sophia, who loved her brother very much.

"Big Brother, do visit often! We have to ensure that you do not fall behind, given that you will be left out of the competition for a year!" Sophia pleaded, apparently hoping that Nicol would visit the academy when able. I didn't quite understand what the second half of her statement meant, however. In any case, Sophia really did love her older brother.

"Ah, Lady Katarina. Have you already decided what crops to plant next year?"

I was still staring at Sophia, her face full of love and smiles for her dear older brother, when Mary made that inquiry. *Hmm... Mary does have a point. It'll soon be spring. What should I plant this year, indeed... new vegetables of some sort, perhaps? Hmm.* It was worth looking forward to.

"I would be glad to assist you this year too, Lady Katarina," Mary said. With the assistance of Mary and her green thumb, I felt like I had the farming capabilities of a thousand men.

"...Fields, huh... that's good and all, but. That thing you put on when you do fieldwork... can't you do something about it? No matter how I look at it, it just makes you look like an old commoner woman," Alan said.

I had answered this complaint of his many times before. Honestly, I really did like my overalls... they were easy to move in, and were perfectly suitable for agriculture. But when he phrased it like that! I supposed I should make some changes.

"...I understand. I shall make some... alterations." It was true — the overalls and headscarves that I had been wearing thus far were somewhat plain. And the colors were subdued and boring. Perhaps it was inevitable that wearing them caused me to look like an old woman. *Well then, I suppose I could at least include some patterned fabrics in my headscarves in the future!*

With my stomach now considerably full, I stepped away from the table, heading instead to a nearby windowsill. Perhaps standing would help with my digestion. Everyone was having fun talking about one thing or another, seemingly content. I couldn't help but think of the events of the past eight years upon witnessing this scene.

Eight years ago, on the day that I turned eight... the memories of my past life came flooding back to me. It was then that I knew that this was the world of *Fortune Lover*, and that I had somehow been reincarnated as a villainess rival character who had nothing but Bad Endings in her future. When I'd noticed all that... I thought to myself, *How unfortunate for you, Katarina Claes.*

However... upon actually living through the experience, I discovered that things were totally different from how they were in the game I

played. Jeord, who didn't care in the slightest about Katarina, was now so close to me. Keith, who originally spent most of his life avoiding his adoptive older sister, was now always with me, and always looking out for me. Even those who the original Katarina was never destined to meet — Mary, Alan, Sophia, Nicol, and Raphael... they were now all my important, dear friends.

In fact, even Maria, the protagonist of the game, who was supposedly Katarina's arch-rival and the one responsible for many of her Bad Ends... was now an important, close friend of mine.

"Lady Katarina, are you all right...?" Maria asked, seemingly worried at the sight of me absentmindedly rubbing my belly as I stood next to the window.

"I'm fine, Maria. Thanks for asking."

Back then, I often said to myself... *How awful! To be reincarnated as Katarina Claes, the villainess! I really have nothing going for me!* However, in the end, not a single one of those Catastrophic Bad Ends ever came to pass. Instead, I now found myself surrounded by many friends who cared for me, looked out for me, and at times offered me their assistance. I had truly made some wonderful friends.

While I didn't have much in the way of magical capabilities, nor was I good at my studies, my friends never once left my side. They were always there, offering me their support, even when it was painful or difficult.

Now, I felt like I could say it proudly, and as loudly as I could. To be able to cross paths with so many wonderful people... I, Katarina Claes, was truly blessed.

The sun's warm rays caressed my cheeks, shining through the window... as if heralding the imminent arrival of spring. With this, a new season would sweep across the lands — a new season... beyond

the plot and scenarios of *Fortune Lover*.

The End

## ***Side Story: She Who is Dearest to Me***

It has been a year since we enrolled into the Academy of Magic. We were now second-year students and I, Jeord Stuart, had been appointed student council president.

The academy's systems, much resembling a meritocracy, ensured that only the capable would serve in the council. The position of President, of course, was also determined by academic achievement. As such, it was perhaps natural that one such as myself would be chosen for the role — after all, the position of top student belonged to none other than me.

In the past, I would have simply seen all this as an inconvenience, and would not even have taken tests seriously. Now however... Well. An inconvenience still, yes, but a hoop I obediently jumped though. All for the position of student council president.

The purpose of this was simple — to make known far and wide the capability and skill of Jeord Stuart. With my social standing established, I would be able to assure with certainty that the one I desired shall fall into my hands. In the past, I saw the seat of King as a burden, and never once even dreamed of taking on such a troublesome role. Now, however... if it was required so that I would be able to take her hand, I would gladly obtain such a position.

There was one more point — in showing my capability, skill, social influence and position, I would be able to ensure that a certain individual remained protected. Being the natural charmer that she was, she had many allies. She was seemingly incapable of understanding the concept of danger. She was defenseless. One would question if she was truly the daughter of a noble —

exasperating. To make things worse... she never thought to suspect the motives of another.

The possibility of her being manipulated by some black-hearted noble, should I take my eyes off her, was far too high. As such, it was imperative that I solidified my social standing. My gaze from the sidelines would serve as a suitable warning to all those who would dare think of harming her.

With those reasons in mind, I would continue carrying out the troublesome role of student council president — all for the sake of solidifying my social standing.

After the lessons for today ended, I found myself in the Student Council Chambers, where I carried out my appropriate duties.

“My work for today is done. If you would excuse me,” I said, standing up from my seat.

If this had been a busy period, I would have been obligated to assist the others. There were no problems, however, given that we were not in a particularly busy season.

“You are already done, Prince Jeord...?” Maria Campbell asked, her voice full of surprise. She, too, had been appointed to a new position this year — that of vice-president.

“Yes. I will be returning to my quarters. Do excuse me.”

Although my workload as the president was significantly heavier than that of the other members, it was nothing to me should I put my mind to it. Under normal circumstances, I would finish my work at the same time as the other council members. Today, however, I finished early, having diligently finished my assigned tasks.

She was, after all, absent from the council chambers today. If she was not here, then there was only one place she could be, logically

speaking. With me finishing my work early and heading off to see her, I could have her all to myself — if only for a short while.

As if deducing my intent, Keith Claes, another member of the student council, shot me a most intense gaze. Mary Hunt, too, looked around this way and that stealthily, visibly quickening the movements of her pen.

Although the two would surely catch up eventually, it was plain to me that there was still some time. I headed out of the Student Council Chambers, quickening my pace so I could have as much time with her as possible.

Leaving the council chambers behind, I walked beyond the bounds of the campus' academic buildings, heading for a certain corner of the academy grounds. As I thought, that was where she was: Katarina Claes, dressed up as a commoner and happily working the fields. Katarina, my fiancée, had seen it fit to turn a small corner of the campus grounds into a crop plot.

The one person whom I desired to fall into these hands of mine.  
“Katarina.”

Katarina turned around, her voice filled with surprise. She had not noticed me, it seemed. “Ah, Prince Jeord... is your work at the council already done?”

“Yes. Are you planting seedlings today, Katarina?” I asked, upon noticing what appeared to be rows of vegetable seedlings lined up neatly in a corner of the field.

“Yes. They just arrived yesterday, you see, and so I thought I should plant them as soon as possible!” Katarina replied, a happy smile on her face.

This was how my fiancée was; she seemed to be happy anywhere she went, whatever it was that she did. There was not a single

moment of boredom in my time spent with Katarina. The days I spent with her were filled with radiance.

It made me wonder, however. *When was it that I first saw Katarina as a beautiful and radiant individual...?* Before I knew it, the young girl known as Katarina Claes... had become the most important thing in my life.

I approached Katarina, who was still joyfully explaining the intricacies of seedlings — and then, I placed a single hand upon her soft cheek.

“Hmm...? Prince Jeord?” she said, curiously, looking up at me with her azure eyes. To think that I could be this elated simply because I was the only thing reflected in her eyes...

“There was some dirt on your cheek, you see.”

“Ah, is that so? Thank you very much.” Katarina thanked me in her usual, straightforward way. How defenseless. It was as if suspicion itself remained an unknown concept in her mind.

Usually, someone would get in my way right around this point. Those interlopers, however, were busy with their work at the council today. They would not appear before us. In that case...

I moved my hand, slowly, my fingers tracing a path from her cheek to her soft lips. I leaned in, my fingers still moving slowly across Katarina’s lips. A normal noble lady would have her face flushed red at this point, should anyone do such a thing. Katarina, however, did not have such a reaction at all — as expected of her.

If I had to make an educated guess... she perhaps thought that I was “removing some dirt from around her lips.” Having known her for nine years, I had come to understand the gist of how she thought.

The sensation of her soft lips against my fingers... I wanted a deeper, more personal touch — those were the thoughts that welled up in my mind.

"Katarina, you have some dirt on your eyelid. Close your eyes — I shall remove it for you."

"Ah, right." Without suspecting my words in the slightest, Katarina closed her eyes where she stood. Slowly, I moved my face closer to hers.

"Big Sister! Watch out!" Just as those words were uttered, Katarina was snatched right out of my arms.

*Hmph. They always, always do this, interrupting me at such crucial moments...* I thought, staring at the culprit responsible for removing Katarina from my side.

As expected, standing before me was Keith, almost out of breath, staring at me with his usual graven expression. It would seem that he had finished his tasks at the council chambers. It would have been better if he had taken just a little longer, no...?

Steadying his breathing as he stood, still staring at me grimly, was Katarina's adoptive younger brother, Keith Claes. He, too, I had known for nine years. Keith had feelings for Katarina well beyond that of siblings, and he would always make it a point to get in my way. He also had a habit of plotting to cancel the engagement between Katarina and myself, one way or another.

"Ah. If it isn't Keith. Already done with your tasks at the council?" Hiding my irritation, I turned to Keith, smiling in a most friendly manner.

"But of course. I was given sufficient motivation to speed up my work thanks to you, Prince Jeord," Keith replied, his face hardening as he did so. And then— "Are you all right, Big Sister?" he asked, staring straight into Katarina's face.

"Hmm? All right? What do you mean?" Katarina said, still somewhat confused, apparently not understanding what had just happened.

*I see that Katarina's tendency to be immeasurably dense is present in full force today.* However, I was not entirely pleased with the distance between Katarina and Keith. They were too close — and with that thought in mind, I took her by the arm, pulling her away from him.

Although Keith did not seem to appreciate this development, he did not attempt to yank Katarina back into his arms. The reason for this was simple, really. Keith was simply somewhat of a late bloomer when it came to Katarina, or perhaps all women. He would never seek to take a relationship to the next level on his own accord.

Despite the fact that he was alluring to the opposite sex and often attracted the gazes of many women, the individual known as Keith Claes was simply not used to interacting with ladies. Yet even though he was not used to them, Keith still treated women in a most gentlemanly way — and that much was wonderful indeed.

Regardless, he was still an amateur when it came to relationships and love. Perhaps it was due to his own assumptions about how he simply had no luck when it came to love, or maybe it was because he had been raised together with the immensely dense Katarina.

Even so, the fact that he directed his affections towards Katarina was a most cruel fate. Katarina had, after all, been unwittingly fanning the flames herself without even knowing it. I had lost count of the times I had witnessed Keith's face turn some shade of red, before he quickly distanced himself from his adoptive sister in a panic.

There were times when Keith himself seemed to have noticed how futile that approach was, and also times where he seemed to

understand the necessity of moving things forward with his own hands... and yet there he was, hesitating, his resolve wavering, without me even lifting a finger or saying a single word.

Well, that strange awkwardness of his was something that I could be grateful for, no doubt. After all, Keith and Katarina lived together at the Claes Manor, and were essentially together for most of the day. Had Keith not been strangely awkward with romantic relationships in this particular way, it wouldn't have been strange if something did happen between them then.

Honestly, the distance between Katarina and I would have long since been closed, should I have been in Keith's position. As such, I supposed I had to thank Keith for his unique brand of awkwardness.

However, even if that were a good thing, it was most troubling for Keith to keep showing up, interrupting me at crucial moments. If only he had taken just a little longer to get here... Katarina's soft lips would have been mine.

As I stared at her lovely lips with those thoughts crossing my mind, Keith immediately placed himself between us, as if sensing something. He had an alarmed look about him. He was unfortunately very sensitive to such developments — ironic, considering his otherwise awkward nature. He would then stand guard near Katarina, on high alert, as if to prevent me from approaching. How vexing.

But then again, I had already stolen the caress of Katarina's lips once...

It had happened in the previous year, sometime near the onset of winter, when Katarina and the rest of the council found ourselves embroiled in a certain incident.

After Katarina had been confronted and falsely accused by some noble girls in the cafeteria, Maria Campbell had gone missing. All of us on the Student Council searched for her desperately. As the investigation progressed, I arrived at the conclusion that Dark Magic may have been behind this incident in some capacity.

Dark Magic, the Dark Arts. The ability to manipulate and dominate the hearts and thoughts of others — a terrifying, forbidden power. By my deductions, the target of these events was most likely Katarina. With this in mind, I promptly headed to her side, and soon had her inform me on recent events that had transpired.

Under normal circumstances, this information would only be made known to several high-ranking nobles. One did not simply decide to speak of Dark Magic to others. However, given the danger that Katarina was already in, I made the decision to speak my mind.

While Katarina was merely surprised at first, her face soon paled. She, too, realized the severity of the situation. When she heard that Dark Magic could only be attained by sacrificing the life of another... Katarina started shivering, ever so slightly.

It was too alien a world for the gentle and straightforward Katarina to comprehend — or even imagine. I held her tight as her shoulders continued to shake.

The very next morning, Katarina appeared before me, paler than she had been the previous night. I had assumed that she was frightened by what she had heard last night, and had lost sleep because of it. Katarina herself told me that she had witnessed a most terrifying dream.

For reasons unknown to me, she smiled in a most peaceful way upon seeing her other friends, and myself. We brought the pale

Katarina to the infirmary, in hopes of her getting some rest. There, she fell asleep, as if reassured.

Honestly, I had wanted to stay by her side for the entire time. However, I was told by the doctor on duty that she would have trouble falling asleep should I do so. I made my way back to the classrooms after requesting that the doctor inform me once Katarina awoke.

A few hours later, I would direly regret ever having left Katarina's bedside.

It felt as if the very blood in my body froze upon finding her, collapsed, in the academy's courtyard. I ran towards her, panicking. Then an incredible sense of relief washed over me when I realized that she still drew breath.

However, Katarina was now paler than ever. From what we could see, she was simply asleep. However, no matter how much I called out to her or stimulated her, she simply wouldn't open her eyes.

I exercised all my social influence and power to summon the most well-known doctor in the land, and had him examine Katarina thoroughly. The reason for her slumber, however, remained yet unknown. The situation did not improve.

The possibility of her being in this state because of Dark Magic was relatively high — and with that thought in mind, I had one of the few Wielders of Light in the kingdom brought to me, in hopes of them diagnosing the problem.

I knew that Katarina was in danger... and yet, I could hardly do anything to help her. I could not forgive my own weakness. How pathetic.

On the morning of the day after Katarina had fallen into a deep sleep, I paid a visit to her chambers. No response came, no matter how many times I knocked. Upon opening the door, I found that there was only Katarina, still asleep on her bed, and that personal maid of hers by her bedside.

Normally, someone or another would be in her room, but it would seem that no one else was present at the moment. It would appear that Katarina's personal maid did not notice my entrance — she was most surprised at the sight of me, dropping the cup that she had been holding straight onto the ground. With a resounding shatter, the cup splintered, now mere fragments of broken glass.

"M-My sincere apologies..." Saying so, Katarina's maid knelt down, visibly panicking and upset as she picked up the broken pieces of glass. Her face was white as a sheet; I wouldn't have been surprised if she collapsed at any moment.

This particular maid was usually most capable and skilled. She was an exemplar of a maid, and often made any guests who visited Katarina feel at home. She was not the kind of maid servant to break glassware or make mistakes such as this. This was exactly why her panicked expression was painful for me to look at. She, too, admired Katarina greatly — and Katarina, in turn, trusted her maid deeply.

"Have you been feeding her water?" Given that the maid had not even noticed presence, and the fact that she was holding the cup as I entered, most likely meant that this was the case.

"Yes... I thought that... if I give the Young Miss some water, there might be some changes to her condition... but I have been unable to have her drink very well, thus far..." the maid said, an almost paralyzing look of sadness in her eyes. She then quickly returned to her previous task of gathering up the broken fragments.

After a while, the maid completed her task. I offered to take care of Katarina as she disposed of the fragments. “Please do take care of those fragments. I shall watch over Katarina in your absence.”

Although the maid seemed hesitant at first, she eventually bowed her head, and with a murmur of “by your leave,” was soon out of the room. And so... Katarina and I were the only ones left in her quarters. Normally, I would have greatly desired such a situation. Now, however... no matter the number of sweet whispers, Katarina would not wake. She did not even react to my touch.

Even so, I approached her bedside, if only so that I could look upon her face.



It was like Katarina was lying perfectly still, not even drawing breath. This caused me great unease, and I quickly placed my hand onto her lips. Thankfully, she was breathing. I also noticed that her lips were slightly wet — probably due to the efforts of her maid and her feeding cup. There was another cup on the bedside table.

*“...If the young lady continues to sleep, Prince... she will be unable to have any water or any food. If this circumstance is prolonged... I fear she will lose her life.”* The doctor’s words resurfaced in my mind.

There was no way I could let that happen. I lifted the spare cup to my mouth, draining it of its contents. Then, leaning in, I placed my lips against Katarina’s, allowing the water to slowly flow into her throat.

To ensure that there would be no leakage of fluids, I sealed Katarina’s lips with my own. After a while, I noticed some faint movements in her throat — and then an audible gulp. *She... She drank it! What a relief...* After that, I repeated the exact same motions many times, ensuring that Katarina was well-hydrated.

In the evening of the second day of her slumber, Katarina opened her eyes, apparently having overcome the Dark Magic placed upon her by her own power.

I was desperate at the time — hoping that Katarina would live. While I did not remember the exact sensations I felt then... I could, at the very least, remember that her lips were remarkably soft. Now that I had felt the sensation once, I longed to caress it with my touch once more. However...

“Big Sister, how many times have I told you this? You are not to be alone with Prince Jeord!”

"But... Keith. It's already over! So it's totally fine if Prince Jeord decides to visit me."

"Eh...? What is over? Totally fine...? I'm afraid I do not understand, Big Sister..."

With this, it did not seem like another opportunity would reveal itself anytime soon. *If I had known this would happen, I would have been more... intense, in the previous occasion.* Those were the thoughts in my mind as I observed Katarina and Keith, neither one seemingly able to understand the other.

"Lady Katarina... are you safe?"

Yet another individual to stand in my way, I see. This one was out of breath as well.

"Oh! If it isn't Mary. Hmm... everyone seems somewhat early today. But... what do you mean by 'safe'...?"

"Ah, yes. You see, Lady Katarina... there were some... incidents today. I am glad that you are safe, however." Saying so, she turned to me, smiling ever so faintly. This woman was none other than Lady Mary Hunt — my brother's fiancée.

Theoretically, she was my twin brother Alan Stuart's fiancée. Mary herself, however, did not seem to view Alan that way. She only had eyes for Katarina, and seemed to always be chasing after her. Although she was quite a beautiful girl at a glance, her inner personality was something much akin to mine. How long has it been since I had noticed this...? Mary was even more troublesome than Keith, her methods intensifying by the day. She was a most fearsome enemy.

"H-Hey! Where are you running off to, Mary?" Standing behind Mary was none other than my brother, Alan. In truth, Alan, too, had been drawn towards Katarina. He'd had feelings for her for almost eight years now. However, thanks to his relatively thick mind,

tendency to be haughty, and the schemes of his fiancée, Mary Hunt, Alan had yet to notice these feelings himself. A truly pathetic man indeed.

However, even my dense brother seemed to have awakened to his own feelings following the Dark Magic incident. His attitude to Katarina had changed somewhat. Even so, I had let my guard down — Alan was not the kind to lay his hands on his brother's fiancée just because of how he felt.

However... Mary Hunt, his very own fiancée and strategist, had apparently utilized him in one of her plans. As we were brothers, Alan's quarters were adjacent to mine. Alan had apparently been instructed to report my movements to Mary... and so he had become an unexpectedly troublesome foe.

Alan aside, the fact that Mary's methods became more and more intense by the day was troubling indeed. In fact, I was now more aware of Alan becoming closer to Mary after becoming aware of his feelings. *Is this some sort of camaraderie? He has his own fiancée, does he not? I would greatly prefer that Alan and Miss Hunt get along well and keep to themselves. More importantly, they should stop interrupting the quality time I spend with Katarina.*

While this small field supposedly only belonged to Katarina and myself, before I knew it, the entire Student Council was here. Although I had put my mind to it and finished my work early, I supposed I could not discount their capabilities either.

In the end, Sophia Ascatt and Maria Campbell also arrived on the scene, and the small field soon became quite the hive of activity.

"Even so, Prince Jeord... the speed at which you work, and the fact that you can handle any kind of documentation, is most impressive."

"It is nothing special. Today was simply a fluke."

Maria, who had apparently been surprised at the speed of my work, offered me some compliments. I, however, responded in a relatively vague manner. Although the other members of the council had deduced the reason for me rushing through my work, and had ambivalent expressions about them as they did so, Maria hadn't seemed to notice this.

This young girl, Maria Campbell — a commoner and a Wielder of Light, had a good head on her shoulders. At the same time, however, she did slip up from time to time. As such, she sometimes did do very strange things indeed, although not to the extent that Katarina would.

In fact, if I had not met Katarina... given how I was, I would have found her most interesting. Even now, Maria continued to work hard, and gave her all in everything she did. *Yes... I think I would have been very fond of her indeed. However...*

"Ah, right. Lady Katarina... I had made some snacks for you today, too. Please do try some, if you would like." Saying so, Maria presented a box of snacks in Katarina's general direction. Almost immediately. Katarina happily bounded to her side.

"Thank you so much, Maria! Oh, I love you so!" Katarina's face was already full of unbridled adoration.

Yes... Maria Campbell. I did think of her as someone I could have become fond of... or so I thought... However, she was far too close to my fiancée. It would be quite a problem if Katarina grew overly fond of this girl. In fact, Katarina was already more or less thoroughly domesticated by Maria's snacks. It was clear that she liked this girl very much indeed.

To make things worse, Katarina, who was already enough of a natural charmer herself, had long since succeeded in making Maria

fall for her. Sometimes I would see the two of them together, almost looking like they were actual lovers. *Ah, what a terrifying sight.*

As such, the very existence of Maria herself meant that she was an enemy as well, hellbent on getting between Katarina and myself. If I had to say, Maria was different from the rest — she was a powerful foe, almost from another dimension.

As I looked upon Katarina, who was currently happily munching away on Maria's homemade snacks at a small table in the corner of the crop field, I felt a somewhat complicated mix of emotions rise up from within me. And then...

"Ah! Big Brother, this way, please!" Sophia Ascart's voice.

I followed the direction of her voice with my eyes. As expected, standing there was none other than Sophia's brother, Nicol Ascart, who had graduated from the academy in the previous year. Accompanying them was the individual who, up until the middle of last year, was the student council president — Raphael Wolt.

"Well met, Prince Jeord. It has been a while." The owner of that voice was none other than Nicol himself. Famous for his charms, it was said that his beauty captivated both man and woman alike. I returned his greeting, and inquired about his presence at the academy grounds.

"I have business with the Magical Ministry's research facility on the campus today," Nicol replied with his usual stoic, expressionless face.

Raphael, who was accompanying them, was also currently working at that particular research building. He had been working there today as well, when Nicol, who had been visiting, apparently called out to him. He was then invited along... which explains his presence.

"Ah! Master Nicol, Raphael! It's been a while, hasn't it?" Apparently Katarina, who had been stuffing her face with snacks all this while, finally noticed the presence of Nicol and Raphael.

"Katarina. I am glad you are well," Nicol said, his previously stoic expression melting away into an alluring smile.

*Ah, yes. Of course. This Nicol, too, has feelings for Katarina.* Even so, Nicol was quite the respectable man, and had a good amount of common sense about him. He would not think of lustng after someone else's fiancée. After all, he had been strangely blessed with a mysterious, yet troublesome charm, one that was powerful enough to captivate men and women alike.

If anything, it almost seemed like Nicol's charm only increased as the years went by. Even Katarina, whose tendency to be dense likely ranked somewhere near the top of this kingdom, had recently started to become attracted to his smile. Not exactly a development I could be relaxed about... And then.

"Big Brother, let us try some of Lady Maria's snacks, too! This way..." I had not even noticed her movements — but there she was. Sophia Ascrt, already seated next to Katarina, was calling out to Nicol.

Nicol's younger sister, Sophia, admired Katarina greatly as well. In fact, seeing her brother take Katarina's hand in marriage was apparently an ambition of hers — Sophia the matchmaker, so to speak. Although she was originally a quiet, withdrawn girl, the long years she had spent with Katarina and Mary were perhaps responsible for this transformation. She had become most... bold. She seemed completely different from the shirking young girl that I had met in my childhood.

In addition, Raphael, who had accompanied the two of them here, was also gazing at Katarina lovingly. Raphael's circumstances were somewhat complex to begin with — and although he did not initially show any sign of emotion for Katarina, that all changed after the incident. It did not take me long to find him staring at Katarina with passionate gazes after he had returned to the campus.

*Honestly... Katarina Claes. Just how many people do you intend to charm with your wiles...?* I inwardly sighed as I continued observing Katarina, who was currently still stuffing her face with snacks.

She was silly, naive, and dense... a noble lady that was most unlike her peers — that was Katarina. Even so, she would mysteriously draw other people to her. Those with loneliness or sadness in their hearts often found themselves drawn to her earnest personality.

To those who lived in the world of politics and conspiracy that were the noble circles of these lands... to those who desperately tried to read the intents and charades of others — Katarina's straightforward gaze must resemble the warm rays of the sun, warmly enveloping their hearts. This was why so many were drawn to the girl known as Katarina Claes, and found their lives changed because of their interactions with her.

With all that being said, Katarina was simply a little too much of a charmer. I had far too many enemies on the field. *However... I suppose this is all right.* The sight of her inflated cheeks as she enjoyed snacks with her friends was quite the hilarious sight. Perhaps it was fine for things to stay like this for a while — maybe even I had been significantly influenced by Katarina, to think of things in such a way.

I had been looking at Katarina all this time — and then... her aqua-blue eyes met mine.

"Would you like to try some too, Prince Jeord?" It would that Katarina had associated my gaze with a desire for the snacks she was currently having. She reached into the small basket of treats and took one, raising it up and offering it to me.

"Hmm. Very well then. I shall have one." I leaned in towards Katarina, closing my lips around the snack — and her finger. "Most

delicious,” I said with a slight smile. Almost immediately, I could feel a series of intense gazes dig into my being.

Katarina herself, however... did not seem to understand what just happened, as that absent-minded look was still on her face. “Ah... Prince Jeord. You didn’t finish it all! There’s still some here.”

Keith, however, soon leapt into action, his expression more grim than anything I had ever seen before. “Big Sister, quickly, your finger!” he exclaimed, grabbing Katarina’s arm, and then the finger that had met my lips just moments ago. He fervently cleaned it with a handkerchief.

“Eh! Wh-What is it, Keith? That hurts a little!” It would seem that Keith had rubbed her finger just a little too hard. Katarina’s voice soon rose in protest.

“Keith. Do be careful — you seem to be hurting Katarina.”

“B-But that’s because of you!!” Keith snapped back.

“Exactly! Prince Jeord, whatever were you thinking?” Sophia added.

“...Unbelievable. How dirty of you!” Mary exclaimed.

“Really, now! You... What have you done...” Alan grumbled.

With those exclamations, members of the previous and current Student Council soon placed themselves between Katarina and I, forcibly separating us.

*Ah, well. I suppose I do like Katarina’s smile, as she laughs and plays with her friends like this. Perhaps it would be alright for this situation to last just a little longer... However, I have absolutely no intentions of handing Katarina over to anyone.*

I flashed the still-stunned Katarina a brief smile. *Now, then... how should I go about obtaining some quality time for the two of us next...?*

## **Afterword**

Hello. It is Yamaguchi Satoru. Thank you very much for purchasing this book. It is because of the readers, and the support that I have received from everyone, that I was able to publish this book — two months after the first. Everyone, thank you very much for your support.

In this second book, Katarina entered the Academy of Magic — the stage on which the scenario of *Fortune Lover* plays out. The original protagonist of *Fortune Lover* finally makes her appearance too. I hope that you find her to your liking.

I would also like to thank Hidakanami-sama, who has provided the illustrations for this volume as well. The rival characters and love interests, who have now splendidly grown up, were portrayed magnificently. Specifically, Maria, who was the original protagonist of *Fortune Lover*, was drawn so lovably. I was impressed, and couldn't help but think, "Yes, she is just how the protagonist of an otome game would look!"

Lastly, I would like to thank the editor in charge, who has provided me with so much advice over these months. I would also like to thank all those who have assisted me in the publishing process. I am deeply grateful, from the bottom of my heart.

Everyone, thank you very much.



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