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

# ***Table of Contents***

Table of Contents.....	2
Chapter 1: Starting Work at the Magical Ministry.....	8
Chapter 2: Deep Inside the Castle.....	43
Chapter 3: I Found a Fantastic Field .....	63
Chapter 4: Lost Magic .....	112
Chapter 5: The Covenant .....	148
Chapter 6: A New Power.....	187
Afterword .....	212

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



A new chance for Katarina to come back as a villainess!

Continue playing as a villainess?  
→ No way!  
→ ...

## Katarina Claes

Class: Duke's Daughter, Magical Ministry Employee (Newcomer)

Personality: Spoiled brat (as a kid)

→ Wild problem child, pure-hearted but dense

Magic type: Earth

Skills: Tree-climbing, Dirt Bump (slightly powered up)

Special talent: Unknowingly making people fall in love with her

Items: Mysterious Magnifying Glass, Toy Snake, Beloved Hand-mirror, Dark Familiar (Pochi), C\*\*\*\*\* of D\*\*\*\*\*  
Notes: Remembers details of her past life

# 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.

## Larna Smith

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

## Sora

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

## Raphael Wolt

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

## Alexander

A magical tool created by Larna. Appears to be a bear-shaped plush toy.

## Pochi

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

## Cyrus Lanchester

A serious and strict Ministry employee.

## Katarina Claes

The only daughter of Duke Claes. Has particularly angled features — Katarina herself feels like it makes her look like 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.

## Dewey Percy

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

## Guy Handerson

A Ministry employee with macho looks and a maiden's heart. Goes by Laura.

# All Routes Lead to Doom!

## Character Introduction



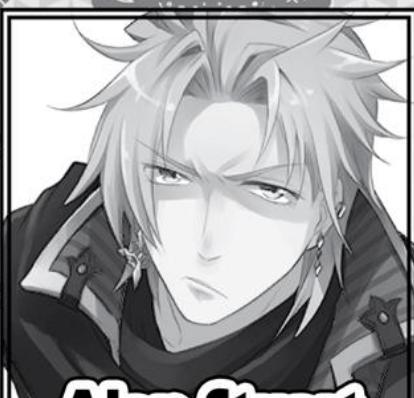
### Nicol Ascart

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. Very good with musical instruments. 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.



### 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.



### Mary Hunt

Fourth daughter of Marquis Hunt, and Alan's fiancée. A lovable and beautiful young girl, she is also known as the "noble lady amongst noble ladies" in high society.

### Nathan Hart

A Ministry employee who people hardly notice, and who also gets lost a lot.

### Anne Shelley

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

# ***Chapter 1: Starting Work at the Magical Ministry***

“Good morning, young miss. Please wake up... Oh, you were already awake?” said Anne, my maid, with a hint of surprise in her voice.

“Yes. Today is my first day of actual work at the Magical Tool Laboratory. I have to act like an adult,” I replied proudly.

I had entered the Magical Ministry in the spring, and then took the newcomer examination to find out which department I would be working in. I ended up at the Magical Tool Laboratory, where I would start working today. I was thrilled.

*I'm finally a working adult... I think I might get emotional.*

After all, my previous life had ended when I was still a student. I was raised in the country, the daughter of a simple office worker, and when I was in high school, I enjoyed little time as an otaku before my untimely death. I remembered all of this when, at the young age of eight, I fell down and hit my forehead in the castle garden. Thus started my new life as Katarina Claes, a duke's daughter.

My slanted blue eyes looked a bit menacing, but at least my silky brown hair and new face — slightly better-looking than the one in my previous life — weren't that bad. Or so I thought, until my sudden engagement to the prince made me realize that these features belonged to Katarina, the villainous antagonist of *Fortune Lover*, the otome game I had been playing shortly before dying.

Once I reached 15, I would have to enter the Academy of Magic, where, in the game, Katarina would bully the protagonist and be destined to either exile with a good end or execution with a bad end. Doom either way.

I spent the years before joining the academy coming up with countermeasures to these doomed endings. But after my

enrollment, I met with the protagonist, Maria, and became friends with her...

I had to overcome a few challenges, but the game peacefully came to its conclusion with the Friendship End. I could finally spend the rest of my days in peace and freedom!

After graduating from the academy, I got a job at the most important organization in the kingdom — the Magical Ministry. I thought that I wouldn't need to worry about the future anymore... but I then found out that the Magical Ministry was the setting for the sequel to *Fortune Lover*.

The love interests from the prequel would come back, along with some new faces, for the protagonist to romance... I had no problem with this — what I *did* have a problem with was that in *Fortune Lover II*, Katarina Claes, after being exiled, would come back just to be a villainess again. She was ready to make more mischief and risk more Bad Ends.

*Why would you do that?! Leave me alone! We already avoided doom once!*

And here I was once again, having to prevent a catastrophe, this time while working at the Ministry. And now I had even less information to work with.

*But I won't let all these years of efforts go to waste! I will attain my dream of a peaceful retirement!*

*I'll win over doom for the second time!* I swore to myself, clenching my fists with determination while sitting on my bed.

“Lady Katarina, you managed to wake up early today. Do not squander this rare opportunity. Stop wasting time, lest you be late,” said Anne, giving me a meaningful look.

*Oh snap.* I had been so busy reminiscing and swearing things to myself that I had forgotten about the time.

“I’m going to do my best! I won’t lose!” I said, jumping off of the bed.

“Yes, please do your best. You should start by changing clothes,” said Anne, helping me put on my work getup with her skillful hands. So began another morning like all the others.

★★★★★

“I’m counting on you to teach the newcomers,” my boss said.

I replied with a “Yes, ma’am,” but I actually had my share of doubts.

This year, two new employees were deployed to the Magical Tool Laboratory, the department where I, Guy Henderson (known as Laura) work. One of the two had already come in as an apprentice, but the other one was... a very problematic newcomer.

Duke’s daughter and fiancée of the third prince. Nobody with titles as important as those would normally work for the Ministry, which was why she had been the subject of many rumors before she’d even set foot here.

One of those rumors said that this allegedly spoiled noble girl had asked either her father or her fiancé to give her a job here to kill time until her marriage, and people now assumed this to be the truth.

It wasn’t, in fact. She was very different from who she was made out to be.

I had spent a few days with her to oversee the examination that would decide which department she would be assigned to, and I quickly realized that she was neither a spoiled noble girl nor just here to kill time. And I even came to know of the real reason why she was at the Ministry: hidden Dark Magic powers.

It didn’t surprise me that she was assigned to the Magical Tool Laboratory. She was a good girl at heart, but a difficult one for the Ministry to deal with for a variety of reasons. And all difficult-to-deal-with people ended up in our department.

What I wasn't expecting was that I would be appointed as her mentor together with another colleague.

"I will do my best!" she said with sparkling eyes as she bowed her head. She was a really good girl. Despite being a duke's daughter, she didn't look down on people and was always trying her best.

She was just too peculiar. Of course, I was peculiar myself... but during the examination, I found out that my peculiarity was relatively tame. I had nothing on someone who would try to fight a huge dragon with a stick.

Katarina Claes looked at me with anticipation about what we would be doing next, and I, deep inside my heart, sighed.

*How am I going to mentor this girl?*

★★★★★

Today was my first day working at the Magical Tool Laboratory.

"I will do my best!" I said, bowing to the two colleagues who would act as my mentors.

One of them had a huge, muscular body underneath cute, frilly clothes and heavy makeup, while the other had a pair of thick glasses behind his long bangs. The former, in particular, looked unique enough to surprise anyone at first sight. But after traveling together for a few days and becoming acquainted with her, I wasn't that shocked anymore.

They were Guy Henderson (who preferred to go by "Laura") and Nathan Hart, the two people who had overseen our examination.

To be honest, at first I was a bit anxious about this department that was full of oddballs, so I was relieved that my mentors would be the two I already knew — not that they weren't weird, but...

Of course one of them was a musclebound, blue-bearded macho who dressed, spoke, and acted like the cutest of girls, and the other was an easily forgotten, easily lost man who could never find his way back... But during the examination, I realized that they actually were very talented and caring colleagues, which is why I was relieved.

“Let’s all do our best.”

“We will teach you as well as we can.”

The two of them addressed me, and I once again briskly replied that I would do my best.

“First of all, let me briefly introduce the others in the department,” said Hart, pointing at the colleagues in the room.

There were the two who had guided us during our orientation: the woman who only speaks through her raccoon hand puppet and the narcissistic man with the sparkling uniform. Then there was another one wearing a white lab coat and clutching a smoking beaker, and one wearing a tanktop and holding a dumbbell. Almost no normal people. Almost none of them were even wearing the standard uniform. As expected of a department dealing with dangerous stuff, it was chock full of unique people.

After I was introduced to some of my new colleagues and showed the dangerous zones in the room, Laura walked into the mountain of papers in the center of the room and came back with someone, bringing him in front of me. I happened to know that someone very well.

“...Raphael,” I murmured.

“Welcome to the Magical Tool Laboratory. I’m Raphael Wolt, the vice-director,” he said with a smile.

“So you work here, Raph... Mister Raphael,” I said, realizing that I should speak respectfully to him now that he was my superior. My last-minute correction made him giggle.

“Yes, Lady Larna brought me here to work with her,” he explained.

Raphael, who was then using a fake name, had been the Student Council President at the academy. He was involved in an incident with Dark Magic and had to leave before graduation, quitting his fake name and starting work at the Ministry. Because of his complicated circumstances, he had to hide his identity. His red hair was still dyed brown, but his face was mostly back to his usual handsome one.

However...

“...You have some pretty dark circles under your eyes. Are you okay?” I asked, noticing the huge spots ruining his beautiful face.

“...Oh, lately I haven’t had much time to...” he started explaining with a tired expression, moments before being interrupted.

“Mister Raphael, new documents,” said an employee before dropping a new pile of papers on Raphael’s desk, making his expression get even worse.

“Understood. Lady Claes, see you around,” he said before disappearing inside his mountain of piled-up work.

Our brief meeting was enough for me to understand that Raphael was very, very busy with work.

I was then introduced to some more people, and ended up greeting most of my new colleagues in the department.

“That is it for people who are here right now. There are some colleagues who are out right now, but I will introduce you to them when they come back,” said Hart before sighing. “Well... it is about time I explained the outline of our work here,” he said, his face grave.

“Y-Yes. Please do.”

It was decided that I’d be hearing that explanation together with Sora, the boy who I had met during another incident at the academy. Originally an orphan from another country, he had hopped from job to job until reaching this kingdom, where he started work at the Ministry just before I did. He was one of the possible romantic interests for FL2, and, as such, was not only talented but also stunningly handsome, with his hair the same light-blue shade as his eyes.

“Why does Sora need this explanation after working here for months?” I asked. It turned out that right after he had moved into the department, between Larna being out on duty and all the other colleagues being terrifyingly busy, he was given the simplest of instructions, asked to only follow those, and then more or less left to his own devices.

*That’s... kind of sad.* However, that explained why he was standing there with me, listening to that briefing.

Hart’s description of our tasks was... surprising.

The department was called “Magical Tool Laboratory.” Before our examination, we were shown a warehouse full of ~~junk~~ magical tools developed there, making me guess that we’d be working with, well, magical tools.

...But Hart said that most of what we actually did was carrying out the menial tasks that other departments couldn’t be bothered with. Checking reports from local Ministry branches, filing documents, distributing supplies, and even maintaining and cleaning the building. Menial tasks, alright. We’d only be researching magical tools in the spare time between those duties.

Seeing my surprise, Hart elaborated on why things had turned out that way. Our department director Larna had displayed extreme

talent at a very young age, and achieved a considerable rank as a result. This, however, made a lot of people from other departments dislike her, which was why they forced all boring, trivial jobs onto her.

She was so talented that she would just come up with a magic tool to get the job done, and get more work thrown her way as a result. The Magical Tool Laboratory may have been full of weird people, but they were *brilliant* weird people.

Eventually people started asking her for assistance not to annoy her, but because they knew that she would be able to help. Now she couldn't really refuse helping anyone anymore. And since the department had gotten its new vice-director, Raphael, a few years ago, its efficiency had increased even further, resulting in even more people asking for assistance.

So on one hand, this department mainly had to deal with other people's menial tasks, but on the other, we were respected as people who could get things done.

"Other departments are more involved with research and experimentation, but magic tool research is a very young field, so..."

"Long story short, while you're still new and we can't trust you with important documents, you'll mostly have to deal with manual labor. Is that okay with you?" said Laura, picking up where Hart had stopped.

*Okay with me? If anything, not having to use my head would be...*

"Perfect! Leave the manual labor to me!" I replied energetically.

This may surprise you, but I wasn't actually all that smart... Back at the academy, I had the smartest students take turns tutoring me, and that was just enough to make my grades average. I was all too happy to do manual labor over research. I'd even been worried

about not getting enough exercise now that work would take time away from tending to the fields.

"...That's good to know," replied Laura, perplexed, while Sora's shoulders were shaking.

After the explanation was over, we went out of the department office to meet our colleagues and see what our work would actually involve.

Laura would be the one guiding us while Hart stayed with Raphael, helping him wade through all those papers. That was partly to help the busy vice-director, and partly to avoid him getting lost while outside. I was told that, in general, Hart rarely left the office for work.

"Okay, let's go!" said Laura enthusiastically, sounding like the host of a TV program I used to watch as a kid in my previous life.

Since our other colleagues were currently moving around the building and would be difficult to track down, Laura said that she could give us a tour and introduce us to any colleagues who we happened upon in the process — kind of like how we did things during orientation.

"Miss Katarina," said Laura, turning around before starting to walk, "I heard that during the orientation, you lost consciousness halfway through and weren't able to see the whole place. You definitely need to see where everything is, especially because our people often go to other departments for work."

She was referring to that very unfortunate accident on my first day.

"Thank you," I said with a smile, happy that she would do that for me. Laura was a really kind colleague. When she asked me what places I had already seen, I told her, "I've seen the library and the Biomagic Department."

“Oh, the Biomagic Department is impressive, isn’t it?” she said with a bitter smile. “Their department isn’t completely full of weirdos like ours is, but their director, Delius, is one of a kind. In particular, he tends to forget about everything else when he’s in front of rare creatures. You’d better be careful.”

She then explained that the Magical Tool Laboratory usually carried the feed to the creatures kept there, and that also, because our two departments were close together, we were on generally friendly terms.

“This is around the usual feeding time for the creatures. I know you’ve already seen the place, but it’s so close that we might as well stop by,” said Laura, leading us there.

“Here we are. I wonder if the feed has already arrived,” she said while standing in front of a door labeled “Biomagic Department,” which was promptly opened by someone, possibly a Ministry employee, who was shrieking and trying to run away.

*What is going on here?!* I thought to myself. I looked through the door and found the department in the same state as it had been during my first visit: a battlefield. Papers, shattered glasses, and broken dishes were all over the floor. The only difference was that the battle seemed to still be going on today.

“Ah, Elizabeth! Didn’t I tell you not to ride on there? Be a good girl and come down now,” said Delius calmly, while looking at the very monkey who, on my first day at the Ministry, had uprooted some weird plant while riding on my shoulder and caused me to pass out.

Everyone except for the director was doing their best to try to catch the monkey. That was enough to guess what had happened: Delius had probably let the monkey escape again by mistake, and now it was rampaging around the department and breaking things.

“Elizabeth! Come back!” said the director without moving while his subordinates were running around with nets and bags... This kind of scene made it clear why, after ours, this was the department that newcomers wanted to be assigned to the least.

*I’m glad I wasn’t assigned here. Look at those poor people fighting...* I thought, and then my eyes met the monkey’s.

Before I had time to process my surprise, the monkey had already started running towards me at an incredible speed. It jumped on my shoulder once again, where it stood as the employees came after it.

Startled, I tried to dodge them, but my legs didn’t move in time.

*They’re going to hit me!* I thought, closing my eyes... but I wasn’t hit. Instead, I felt enveloped by something warm.

I opened my eyes and saw Sora’s arm around me. He was enveloping me, protecting me from the incoming monkey-hunting employees. And what’s more, he used his free hand to catch the monkey. The love interests in FL2 also had incredible reflexes...

“Thank you, Sora,” I told him, and he immediately released me from his arm, looking away from me and giving only a brief “Sure” as an answer.

That wasn’t a very Sora-like reaction, so I tried to ask him what was wrong. *Tried*, because before I could open my mouth, Sora was surrounded by the Biomagic Department employees.

“Ahhhh, sorry! And thank you!” someone said, apologizing for almost bumping against us and thanking him for catching the monkey. Sora handed them the animal, and they collectively smiled and sighed in relief.

“Oh, thank you, I’m so sorry,” came a voice from behind them. It belonged to Delius, whose face didn’t look sorry in the slightest. He then explained what had happened, confirming my suspicions, while

completely ignoring the angry stares his subordinates were sending him.

"Oh, you see, I got distracted and let Elizabeth run away! She's so hard to catch! You're newcomers, right? I'm Hector Delius, director of the Biomagic Department. Nice to meet you," he nonchalantly introduced himself, probably forgetting that we had already met.

"I'm Katarina Claes. My pleasure," I said.

"I'm Sora Smith. My pleasure," Sora followed.

"The pleasure is... Katarina Claes? *The* Katarina Claes?! Perfect! I wanted to ask you a couple of things! Would you mind?" Delius said, his eyes suddenly sparkling, while inching closer to me.

*What does he want from me?!* I thought in fear, and then noticed that he had stopped moving. Upon a closer look, I saw that a female employee had grabbed his collar from behind.

"I'm out for *one second*, and you cause another accident! And why are you bothering newcomers now? Please get back to work!"

From her sharp voice, I recognized her as the woman who, after I passed out during the orientation, dragged Delius with her to apologize to me.

"Ah, welcome back. Don't worry, I wasn't bothering her," he replied unconvincingly. In response, the woman just yanked him inside the door before deeply apologizing to us and closing the door behind them.

"...I wonder what he wanted from me," I murmured to myself.

"Delius has taken an interest in you," said Laura with a hint of pity in her voice.

"Interest?! Wh-Why?!"

*I barely ever interacted with the guy! Why?!*

“He’s crazily passionate about magic creatures,” she said, confusing me even further, to the point where I might as well have had a question mark floating over my head.

“Some of the directors have found out about your pet,” she said with a sigh.

“Pet? You mean Pochi?”

Pochi was a Dark Familiar, specifically a black puppy who lived inside my shadow. The fact that I owned him had to stay secret.

“...Yes, Pochi... As you can see, Delius loves magic creatures. Larna said that he’s been obsessed with doing some research on it.”

“...I see... But I think that Pochi has undergone a lot of research already,” I said. As the first Dark Familiar ever found, the Ministry had previously borrowed Pochi for a while to do research on him. Since they couldn’t find anything problematic, they’d given him back to me and he now lived in my shadow.

“Yes, but Delius was traveling on duty when that research was done, and he only read the report on it once he came back. Then he started pestering Larna to let him research it.”

I didn’t know that. However...

“But I can’t send Pochi off by himself...”

Pochi only stayed in my shadow or right next to me. He could be forced away from me, but as soon as he realized that I wasn’t around, he turned into a shadow and came back to me.

“Yes. When he was told that, he asked to borrow you for a whole year.”

“Wha?! A year?!”

“He said he wanted to be thorough in his research... He tried to settle for even half a year, but Larna just told him off, so don’t worry.

But remember that if Delius involves you in his research, you won't be able to leave until he's done. Be careful around him."

"...I will."

*I wouldn't be able to leave for a year? And what kind of research would he even do in the first place? This whole thing is scary. I'd better be careful!*

I then followed Laura away from the Biomagic Department and into a hallway, where we saw a huge box-shaped container.

*Is that box... flying?!* I thought, squinting at it.

"Oh, perfect. That's the feed for the Biomagic Department," Laura said.

*Oh, so that's what it was. Wait, more importantly...*

"Excuse me, but... is that box flying by itself?" I asked Laura.

"Yes. This container is a flying magic tool, which makes it easier to carry stuff around. But it doesn't fly by itself. There must always be someone behind it, moving it."

I took a second look and noticed that the Magical Tool Laboratory employee with the tanktop who I'd met earlier was behind the container. He saw us and stopped to greet us.

Even when looked at up close, the container just looked like a normal, nondescript box. But from behind I could see a few sticks connected to it. Laura said that they were used to control the direction the container would fly in.

"That's incredible," I said, amazed at how our department apparently also made useful tools — the ones we had been shown before the exam were the exact opposite.

"I know, right? A lot of our tools are used throughout the Ministry," Laura said proudly.

"Well, because of that, we're slowly turning into the Handyman Laboratory..." said the tanktop-man with a tired expression on his face.

Sora and I cocked our heads questioningly, and Laura explained what he had meant.

The Magical Tool Laboratory took on the other departments' tasks to try out the effectiveness of newly designed tools. The tools made performing these tasks more efficient, and so the other departments asked that we keep using them. In particular, magic tools were especially useful for small, trivial tasks, which led to more and more of them being passed onto us.

So envy towards Larna wasn't the only reason behind the department being so busy. After this explanation, we left the tanktop-man and started walking to the next department.

*Why is he only wearing a tanktop, anyway? It's still spring... if anything, it's a bit chilly...*

We went on walking for a while, and then Laura stopped. "This is the Magic Powers Department," she said, pointing at the fancy black door in front of us.

"Oh, this is where Maria and Dewey were assigned," I said, remembering that from when the newcomers' departments were assigned.

"Yes. This is one of the most popular departments within the Ministry, and the most talented people usually end up here," Laura said.

Well, Maria was a powerful magic user with excellent grades, and I'd heard that Dewey passed the Ministry's entrance exam with the highest score, so it made sense that they would be assigned to the Magic Powers Department.

"This department doesn't usually ask us for help... but," Laura was saying when the black door squeaked open and an incredibly handsome man walked out of it.

He had brown hair, and wore a pair of frameless glasses over his green eyes. He was Cyrus Lanchester, one of the romantic interests of *Fortune Lover II*.

All I knew about him was what I had learned from the note about FL2 I found in the book I borrowed: He had a strict and serious personality, he was a powerful magic user and department director in the Ministry, and he was good at his work but not so good at dealing with women.

I was frozen in surprise upon seeing Cyrus, who then noticed us.

"Guy Handerson? Then you must all be from the Magical Tool Laboratory..." he said, visibly grimacing.

*What's with that face?! First Dewey, then him?! Does he hate me from the start too? But why...? We met during the orientation, but we didn't even talk... I was thinking to myself when Cyrus started talking, pushing his glasses up his nose.*

"Tell the foolish woman in charge of your department that maybe this year she should finally make sure that her subordinates are properly trained," he said before disappearing like the wind.

*What did he mean? The foolish woman... Larna?*

I looked at Laura for answers.

"Lanchester, the director of the Magic Powers Department... doesn't really like us — or rather, he doesn't really like Larna," she said dejectedly, putting a hand to her cheek. As always, her mannerisms (and only those) looked very cute.

Anyway, the "foolish woman" was, as I had thought, Larna.

"He's a very serious person who strictly follows the rules, so he doesn't get along well with Larna... She's a very good boss, but she can be eccentric. She often skips directors' meetings and, when she's interested in something, she just goes ahead without thinking of anything else... Lanchester makes it really clear he doesn't like her."

"But right now he looked like he didn't just dislike Larna, but all of us," said Sora, taking the words right out of my mouth.

"Yes, exactly... he doesn't like any of us, since our department is full of unique people who don't follow the rules," she said, looking even more dejected than before.

I took a good look at her, her flamboyant makeup, and her modified, frilly uniform. The rulebook we'd received before entering the Ministry said that modified uniforms and excessive makeup were prohibited, meaning that Laura was breaking the rules.

*I wonder if crossdressing is against the rules to begin with...* I was now so used to seeing Laura that I'd forgotten how peculiar she looked. And then there were all the other colleagues in my department, almost none of whom were even wearing the uniform. It was no wonder that a person as strict as Cyrus would hate us.

However, as one of the new love interests of FL2, he was likely to lead me to doom. I had to befriend him, like I had with Dewey, and learn more about him... but he hated my whole department. I let out a big, sad sigh inside my heart.

Our tour went on and ended without any other remarkable event. Since the building was so large, Laura only showed us the most important places (just like during the orientation).

"This place is huge, but you only need to remember a few points of interest. Don't start walking about willy-nilly, or you'll get lost. A colleague from our department actually got lost just a few days ago,"

she said, scoldingly raising her index finger. Of course, she was talking about Nathan Hart.

Thus ended our tour, the explanation of our work, and my first day at the Magical Tool Laboratory.

“Starting tomorrow, you’ll be doing real work,” Laura said, and I went back home feeling excited about the next day.

The Ministry actually had a dormitory, where Maria, Dewey, and Sora were staying, but they didn’t let me stay there. The reason, I was told, was that there was no room fit for the daughter of a duke. Not that I cared about the room I stayed in, but I was only allowed to live somewhere befitting my rank, and so I had to travel from home to work and back.

The swaying carriage brought me back home, where Mother had been (apparently impatiently) waiting for me.

“Did you do anything improper?” she asked me.

“Not at all! Things went perfectly,” I replied briskly.

Keith and Father, on the other hand, appreciated my hard work.

Starting this spring, by the way, Keith had become a sort of secretary to Father, to learn about his work and become ready to inherit the title of Duke Claes. He was so busy that we couldn’t see each other as often as usual, and that made me feel a bit lonely.

I ate dinner with my family, talking with them about my day at work, and then went back to my room.

“Hmpf! Hmpf! Hmpf!”

“Excuse me, young miss... you seem to be very busy, but may I ask you one question?” said Anne, my maid.

“Yes, of course. What is it?” I said, dropping the dictionaries I was holding in each hand.

"Why are you making strange groans while moving those dictionaries up and down?"

"Ah, this? I'm just working out my arms. I'll start work tomorrow, so I thought I'd need as much muscle as possible."

"Young miss, you work at... the Magical Ministry, do you not? Why would you need muscle to do that?" she asked, confused.

"There's a lot of manual labor in our department, like carrying stuff around," I explained.

"Manual labor? Carrying things around?! Y-Young miss, you are a duke's daughter... That kind of toil does not..."

"That kind of toil? I prefer using my body over my head, so I'm totally happy about it."

"...I see. That is very like you."

*Hm? Is she praising me? I think so. In that case...*

"Perfect! Another 30 reps with the dumbbells! Hmpf! Hmpf!"

I started moving the dictionaries up and down again.

"If you need to work tomorrow, would that not just make you too tired? I suggest you just rest for today," Anne said.

I agreed with what she said and went to bed.

The next morning, like on most mornings, I had Anne pull off my covers, help me prepare while I was still half-asleep, and put me on the carriage that would bring me to the Ministry.

The Ministry was in the same area as the academy, so I already knew the place and it wasn't that far away to begin with. But I was so used to life in the dormitory, where I didn't have to travel in the morning, that even this little distance felt like a drag. I also had to wake up earlier to account for the commute time — so of course, I had to

make up for that lost time by falling back asleep the second I got in the carriage.

I reached the Ministry and walked to the Magical Tool Laboratory, where Laura and Hart, who were assigned to me as mentors, were already waiting. The two lived in the Ministry's dormitory, and always walked to the office together to prevent Hart from getting lost.

"Starting today, you will actually work together with us," said Laura, whose makeup was already on point this early in the morning.

She then guided us to a warehouse near the Ministry's entrance, while Hart once again kept working in the office lest he got lost.

"What is this place?" I asked, looking at the room full of all kinds of stacked boxes.

"This is where all packages delivered to the Ministry are stored before being sorted and carried to the appropriate departments," Laura explained.

*Oh, that's why there are so many boxes. Wait, she doesn't mean that...*

"Excuse me... are we going to sort and carry all of these packages?" I asked with worry. Working in the fields had made me sturdy enough, but this room was chock full of boxes. It wouldn't be easy.

"Of course not, if we were to do this all by ourselves, a whole day wouldn't be enough," she said with a wry smile. *Phew.*

"There are people specifically hired for this job, but the Magical Ministry has grown so fast in the past few years that they aren't enough anymore, and so we're helping them with magic tools. We're only going to carry a small portion of these packages," she said, explaining which ones we would need to take care of.

"I'm going to show you how it's done, and then you two can go and do it yourselves."

After her explanation, Laura started showing us how it was done in practice. She went to the edge of the warehouse and retrieved the same container that the tanktop-man had been flying around yesterday. Each package stated the name of the department that it needed to be delivered to, and she chose those meant for specific ones and put them inside the container.

The "small portion" she had told us about was still large enough, but she moved those packages around so fast that we couldn't even try to help her, proving that all those muscles weren't just for show. The usual cutesy maiden had turned into a macho manual laborer.

"Since we are going to visit the departments in order, you want to put the packages for the farthest ones on the bottom, and the packages for the closest ones on the top," she said, without stopping what she was doing. It wasn't long before she was done, and then she placed her hand on one of the sticks attached to the container, which made it lift up and hover mid-air.

"Oh!" I said, impressed despite having seen this magic tool at work just yesterday.

"Try flying it. It's easy once you get the knack of it," Laura said while pointing at the (joy)stick.

"Yes," I said, eager to try my hand at controlling the container... but all it did was shake around a bit. It was difficult.

"It's harder than it looks," I warned Sora as he went to try after me, but he instantly managed to make the container fly as he wanted.

"Well aren't you slick?" I said, feeling defeated.

"Kind of, yeah," is all he said in return.

Like all the other love interests of FL2, Sora was incredibly talented.

*I wish I was too...*

Since he was so good at maneuvering the container, he went on to deliver the packages as Laura oversaw him. I was walking behind them, looking with envy at how skillful Sora was.

“Don’t worry Miss Katarina, you’ll be able to do it yourself very soon. You just need to get a feel for it,” Laura comforted me. Her looks were unusual, but she was really kind.

While I was busy thinking about how good of a person my colleague was, we reached the first department on our delivery route. I wanted to help, of course, but in the time it took me to take one package out of the container, Laura had already taken out three. *I have to try harder!*

After someone in the department took the packages, we had to ask them for a signature. It looked just like what the delivery people of my previous world did.

“And this, more or less, is all you have to do when sorting packages. One or two people must take care of this every day,” Laura explained. “No time to lose. Let’s go to the next one,” she added.

Sora, who had been working at the Ministry longer than me, had already memorized most of its layout, and was able to move from one department to another even without Laura’s instructions. *I have to memorize it too.*

The three of us kept going around like that, and even though I still couldn’t fly the container, I at least got a feel for how to handle packages and became faster at taking them out.

“Ah, can you drop that over here?” asked a woman from the department we were now delivering to.

“Sure thing!” I replied briskly, feeling like one of those delivery boys from my previous life who were popular because of how muscular they were. “Here?” I asked with a smile.

“Yes, there...” she replied, suddenly shocked after seeing my face.  
“...I-I am sorry, asking you to do this. I will carry it myself,” she said, reaching for the package in my hands.

I was surprised by how abruptly her attitude had changed, but I couldn’t stop what I was doing.

“No, no, this is my job. Don’t worry. Right over here?” I asked, and then placed the package down.

“Th-Thank you...” the woman said, looking ashamed.

I wanted to ask her what was wrong, but Sora and Laura were already waiting for me outside, so I just bowed respectfully and left.

Similar exchanges, inexplicably, also happened in some of the other departments I visited.

“I wonder if I look that weak...” I muttered to myself, looking at my arms, while walking to the next destination.

“Why would you say that?” asked Laura, who had heard me, cocking her head to the side.

I told her that a lot of people were trying to take the packages from me while I was still halfway through delivering them. “So I thought that maybe they do that because I look weak.”

I’d spent my years since being reborn into this world working the fields, so I was positive I wasn’t weak, but maybe I gave off that impression because I was standing next to the musclebound Laura...

After looking surprised for a moment, Laura started giggling. “As expected of you, my dear. You come up with the funniest ideas. But I’m sure it’s just because you are the daughter of Duke Claes.”

“Because I’m the daughter of Duke Claes?” I repeated, unsure what the connection was, making her giggle even harder.

“Have you ever seen a noble lady carrying packages around?” she asked, and I finally understood.

I was used to doing all the heavy work in the fields by myself, carrying around fertilizer and everything. That was so normal in my house that the people around me, even when they offered help, wouldn’t go as far as offering to do all the work for me — or maybe they did at first, but eventually stopped after I declined again and again while telling them that it was all part of my training.

So maybe a normal noble lady would never do things that I took for granted, such as carrying heavy things and cleaning. I had even heard that some ladies refused to pick up anything heavier than a spoon, so that explained why people would be so eager to help me.

“What should I do then? I like this delivery duty.”

Carrying packages and other manual tasks were one thing, but if I were to stop doing this, the alternative would be what Hart was doing... Working through piles of documents while holed up inside the office. *I could never stand that! I want to keep doing this!*

I looked at Laura, who was still giggling, and waited for an answer.

“Tee-hee, just keep doing what you did today. People will eventually grow used to it.”

She had a point. The people at home had grown used to it as well.

“Thank you. I will!” I replied.

“Very good,” she said, patting my head. “I’m sure the rumors will also stop,” she mumbled to herself.

Her voice was so low that I hadn’t heard what she said, so I asked, but she smiled and said it was nothing.

We then spent the rest of the day making our rounds at the Ministry, helping with this and that as Laura taught us about the job.

“Haaah, I’m tired, but that was a good workout,” I said, stretching out at the end of the day while we were walking back to the office.

“That doesn’t sound like something a noble lady would say,” said Sora, laughing.

“Really?”

“Really. Well, noble ladies don’t usually do anything that would count as a workout in the first place. Is it really okay for a duke’s daughter to go around doing manual labor?”

“What? If I stopped doing manual labor, I’d have to stay closed up in that office sorting through papers! Anything but that!” I said, emphasizing how much I’d hate it.

“You really are a weird one,” he said, laughing again.

I first met Sora under unique circumstances, and when we were supposed to part ways, fate brought us back together at the same workplace. I was really glad to share my first job with him. Having a friend who I could speak freely to was part of it, but he was also very resourceful, and had a positive personality that kept me optimistic. Working wasn’t so scary if he was with me.

*But oh, right, he’s actually one of the romanceable options in FL2. I’d almost forgotten that.*

There was always the possibility that Sora could lead me to a Catastrophic Bad End... and what did he think of Maria, anyway? I’d never asked him about that. *It’s only the two of us right now. This is the perfect chance.*

“Hey, Sora, what do you think of Maria?”

“What’s this all of a sudden? I can never guess what you’ll think of next.”

“C-Can’t you? But you know, Maria... isn’t she cute? Dewey completely fell for her a couple of days ago during the examination, so I was wondering what you thought of her.”

I kept going, trying to get some information out of him. He thought for a while and then finally started speaking.

“She’s cute alright, and she also has a good personality. No wonder a lot of boys fell for her.”

“I know, right? She’s cute *and* kind! Having her as a wife would be so wonderf— wait, I want to know what *you* are thinking. Do you, like, want to date her or anything?”

“Not really. She’s cute and all, but I’m not that interested,” he replied, to my surprise. He was one of the game’s love interests, so, even if not to Dewey’s extent, he was supposed to be after Maria.

“What? Why wouldn’t you want to date a girl as cute as Maria?!”

*If I were a boy, I know I would!*

“Why...? That’s just my taste. She’s not my type,” he said coolly.

“If a girl as cute and kind as her isn’t your type... then what kind of girl is?”

“...Dumb girls who always give their best,” he said after thinking for a while.

I wasn’t expecting that.

“...You have really weird taste, Sora,” I said, and he gave me a noogie.

*I was just speaking my mind... no need to be offended...*



His taste in girls was really unique, but, through interacting with Maria, he could change and fall in love with her. *I'd better keep an eye on him.*

Once we reached the Ministry's entrance, the Claes carriage was waiting for me.

"See you tomorrow, Sora!"

"Don't oversleep, and come here on time!" he said before I disappeared into the carriage.

Looking through the window, I saw Sora walk back towards the entrance. That made sense, since he lived in the Ministry's dormitory. He didn't need to pass the gate to go back home. Had he come all the way here just to see me off? *He's kind of rough around the edges, but deep down he's really kind too.*

The note on FL2 said that in one of the Bad Ends Katarina would fight the love interest, who would fall victim to her Dark Magic. Of course I didn't want to get killed, but I also wouldn't want to permanently injure Sora by fighting with him. I prayed that I'd never have to choose.

The next day, I was once again able to wake up (or, more precisely, to be woken up by Anne) early enough to get to the Ministry on time.

Despite the previous day's hard work, I, trained by all my years tilling the fields, felt no pain anywhere. I was so glad for farming. Though now that I was busy with this job, I didn't have time to take care of the fields anymore. I had to keep up doing manual labor to ensure that, if I were exiled, I'd have the strength necessary to survive abroad on my own.

*Today Sora and I are going to work mostly on our own! I'm going to do my best!*

The first task was delivering packages, and I was ready to fill up the flying container as much as I could, but I didn't manage to do much.

Laura said that she'd help out "just a bit," but I could never compare to what she called "just a bit." She filled up the container so quickly and effortlessly that I only contributed less than half of what she and Sora had. I would have to find another way to train my muscles.

Since I still hadn't learned how to control the container, Sora would be doing that today too while I followed him and Laura from behind.

Just like the previous day, some people told me that they would carry the packages themselves, or that I didn't need to worry about it, but I refused every time and told them with a smile that it was my job. I hoped they'd stop saying those things soon.

We completed a few deliveries, and our next stop was the library. The librarian was usually behind a counter so far from the library's entrance that she wouldn't hear us if we called on her from there, so yesterday Laura told us that we should leave the packages at the entrance and then walk to the counter to inform the librarian about them.

Since he was the one controlling the container, Sora stayed outside. Meanwhile I, happy to finally be able to offer some help, went inside to find the librarian.

"We have a package for you. It's right by the entrance, so please come and confirm the delivery," I told the old woman behind the counter.

"Thank you. I will come immediately," she said, standing up.

That very second, several Ministry employees came out of the other side of the library, approaching her.

“I’d like to borrow this one book,” said the closest one.

“Oh, I am sorry. I need to go and receive a delivery, so please wait for a little while,” the woman, who apparently was the only one tending the counter, replied.

“Receive a delivery?” asked the man who was trying to borrow a book. “What is it, the *Errand Department*?” He looked at me with disdain in his eyes. “Forget about those losers and serve us first,” he went on with a sneer. All the other ones behind him quickly followed suit and started grinning.

*I can’t believe these guys...*

The librarian was looking very troubled, but, not seeming to care, the people in front of the counter kept being rude.

“Be quick. Whatever dumb task the Errand Department is doing can’t be as important as our work anyway,” one of them said, looking condescendingly at me.

“Take that back. There is no dumb task. If packages weren’t being delivered, you wouldn’t be able to do your work. All work is equally important,” said a calm but intense voice.

A man with brown hair, green eyes, and frameless glasses appeared behind the employees who were waiting in line. It was the same man I’d met the day before: Cyrus Lanchester, one of the FL2 love interests.

“...S-Sir Lanchester...” said one of the men, as all of their faces turned grim.

“I cannot allow a Ministry employee to say such things. Tell me your names and departments,” Cyrus said, staring sternly at them.

“That is... we just...” they mumbled, avoiding looking directly at him, before forgetting about the books that they wanted to borrow and running away from the library.

“No running inside the building,” Cyrus called after them.

“Thank you,” I said, grateful for what he had done.

“I only reprimanded those men for their behavior. You have nothing to thank me for,” he said coldly, before turning to face away from me.

“I’m going back to the office. You all keep doing your research, and come back once you’re done,” he said to someone deeper inside the library before leaving.

Realizing that some of his subordinates were in the library, I craned my neck ever so slightly to peek at them.

“Maria! Dewey!”

I found Maria, my dear friend and protagonist of *Fortune Lover*, and Dewey, the young genius who was one of the game’s love interests.

We had completed our examination together just a few days ago, and now the two of them were looking at the open books in front of them with great concentration.

“Lady Katarina!” they said in unison, surprised at hearing my voice calling them. I couldn’t resist the urge to approach my two fellow newcomers and the piles of books they were reading.

“What are you two doing here?”

“Director Lanchester told us to research some material regarding Light Magic, so we were doing that,” replied Maria.

Taking a closer look at the books, they were full of difficult words that triggered a sort of reading-allergy reaction in my brain.

“That looks hard...” I said.

“Not at all! You have to walk around the building doing a lot of different things,” she replied kindly.

“I’m just doing that because I’m not good at tasks where I have to use my head... But wait, why do you know what kind of work I’m doing?”

Since our departments had been decided two days ago, I’d had no chance to talk with Maria about my mostly manual labor and all the weirdos working with me.

“Well... you are somewhat well-known inside the Ministry...” she said with a troubled expression, further explaining that the daughter of a duke going around running errands had become a sensational piece of news.

*Hm... I wish everyone in the Ministry would get used to it and start taking it for granted, like my family does.*

“Are you also here for research, Lady Katarina?” asked Dewey, with a smile on his face that I could have never even imagined seeing during our examination.

At first I had been afraid that he hated me, but now I was really glad that he would talk to me normally like this. All that I had to do now was become even closer to him so that I could find out his weak spots in case things progressed like the game’s script and push came to shove.

“No, I’m just here for a delivery.”

“So you really are delivering packages! Incredible as always, Lady Katarina,” he said with a sparkle in his eye.

I had no idea what about that was supposed to be incredible, but he was obviously praising me, and I enjoyed it. At least until his next words.

“So, where is the package that you are delivering?”

“Right! The package! I was still delivering it! See you guys later! Let’s talk again when we have some free time!”

I had completely forgotten that I still wasn't done with my delivery. I went back to the library's entrance, where the librarian had already received the package and brought it back with her.

I apologized over and over to Laura and Sora for how useless I had been.

"Don't worry," said Laura, "the librarian told me that you were harassed by some jerks."

But even after that, I had forgotten all about work and started talking to my friends, so I honestly apologized about that.

"Now, that won't do. You're an adult, so you should concentrate more on your work," Laura said. I thought she would scold me more harshly, like Mother always did, but she was kind.

"Aren't you going to get mad?" I asked, surprised.

"It's only your second day working here; of course you're going to make mistakes," she replied.

Moved by her kindness, I decided to concentrate more and do my best.

"Anyway, you already ran into some annoying people, huh? Our department's work is very unique, as are the people in it. But despite how weird they are, they are very talented individuals, so remarks like those you heard earlier are nothing new. Don't worry too much about them."

"Sure. I'm very good at not worrying about things."

I'd been engaged to Jeord since I was eight, so I was used to unsavory remarks. Pointless insults went in one ear and out the other.

"You're a very strong girl," Laura said while giggling to herself, before frowning slightly. "But all we do here is run errands... Aren't you

envious of Maria? You're both newcomers, but she gets to research magic powers in the most popular department," she said.

*Envious? Of having to do research...?*

"Not at all. I'm not very good at using my head, so things like research are out of my league. I prefer carrying packages, cleaning, and other manual labor like that. I'm glad I was assigned to this department," I said honestly, and, for some reason, Laura started patting my head.

"You're such a good girl..."

Being patted by that huge hand hurt a little bit, but she looked so happy doing it that I just let her keep going.

And so, apart from that one minor mishap, my second day of work went on and finished successfully. Sora saw me to the carriage again.

"You must be tired. I appreciate the thought but you don't need to come this way," I told him, knowing that he didn't need to come in this direction.

"I can't have you get lost or fall asleep along the way," he said, coming with me all the way to my destination. I didn't think that getting lost could be a problem, but the previous day I had fallen asleep the second I sat down in the carriage and had to be shaken awake, so Sora wasn't far off the mark.

*My colleagues are so kind,* I thought to myself while sitting in the carriage.

I had worked for my first two days, and tomorrow would be off. The people at the department told me to rest well after what must have been two tiring days, but I had no time to rest. There was something I had to do right away.

I had to find out more about the note. My future depended on it.

*Who wrote it? Why was it inside that book?*

The next day I would go to the castle and ask both Jeord, who had returned the book to me, and the person who was looking after it after I'd lost it.

*It's time to do what I can! Yeah! Sequel? Returning villainess?  
Come at me! I'm going to overcome doom again!* I swore to myself before falling asleep inside the swaying carriage.

Like on the previous day, I was so deeply asleep by the time we reached the mansion that calling my name wasn't enough to wake me — I had to be grabbed by the shoulders and shaken. I went back to my room, still drowsy, and, without any energy left to even eat dinner, I fell asleep until the next morning. I guess I was more tired than I thought.

## ***Chapter 2: Deep Inside the Castle***

I could sleep longer the next day since I had no work, and I woke up feeling nice and refreshed. The weather was good too — a perfect day for going outside.

Keith would usually come with me whenever I went to the castle, but today he was busy helping Father with his work, so my maid, Anne, came with me instead.

“Don’t do anything reckless and make sure that you are not, under any circumstance, alone with Jeord,” Keith said.

“Do not do anything abnormal. Do not run around with your skirt pulled up,” Mother followed up.

The two of them then asked Anne to be very, very careful.

*Is it just me, or am I still being treated like an 8-year-old child despite being a 18-year-old, respectable, adult lady?*

Regardless of this treatment, at least they gave me permission to go to the castle (I insisted that I wanted to thank someone for returning something important which I had lost), so I promised to do as they said and boarded the carriage.

Upon reaching the castle, I decided to go to the room where my book had been kept. If I went there, I could probably seek out the person who had found my bag, and ask any questions I had directly.

I also wanted to ask Jeord if he knew about the note, but Keith had told me that “Prince Jeord is very busy with his official affairs, so if you want to greet him, limit yourself to a brief goodbye right before coming back home,” so that would have to wait.

Accompanied by Anne, I went to the storage room. I was walking deliberately and elegantly, as Mother had instructed. *I can be ladylike if I need to.*

The last time I'd been to the castle was during the graduation party for the twin princes. Back then the whole place had been covered in festive decorations, but now it was back to normal.

When I reached the room, I spoke to one of the servants who was working there and, after stating my name, asked to see the person who had found my bag. That servant rushed to lead me to a table in the corner of the room, quickly bringing me tea and snacks.

I hadn't received the castle-treatment in quite a while, so I went ahead and commented to Anne under my breath. "When I'm treated like this, I kind of feel like I'm some kind of noblewoman!"

"...Young miss, in case you have forgotten, you *are* a noblewoman," she replied, amazed.

Of course she was right — I was a noblewoman who had people take care of everything, from dressing up to preparing meals, for her. But Mother gave orders to all the servants to be very strict with me, so they would say things like "*Do not leave crumbs around when you eat.*" That didn't really make me feel like a noblewoman.

I was still thinking about that when the person in charge of the room, a middle-aged man, came in. He greeted me gracefully and replied to my questions. Unfortunately, he didn't know who had first found my bag and brought it in here. The mysterious benefactor just found it lying around in the castle, carried over to this room, and left it here. The servants all happened to be very busy at the time, so nobody took the trouble to look at the person's face, and now they couldn't even agree on whether it was a man or a woman who had done it. I felt disappointed that I had gained no information at all, but the

man's sincere apology at being unable to help kept me from saying that out loud.

"After it was brought here, could anyone have touched it?" I asked him.

"Was anything missing from your bag?!" he replied, turning pale.

Of course I couldn't just tell him that there was a note talking about an otome game in there, so I came up with an unrelated, half-hearted excuse.

"No, it's just that thinking that anyone could have touched it is a bit... you know..."

The man, relieved, explained that in general only the servants had access to this storage room, but, considering that sometimes they were all so busy that they had to leave the place unattended, he couldn't say with 100% certainty that nobody had access to it.

Furthermore, only one of the servants, a woman, had opened the bag to check its contents. I casually asked that woman whether she had looked inside the book, but she said that she hadn't, as she wasn't really into reading and wasn't interested in books.

This left me with two possibilities as to who had put the note inside my book: either the person who had brought the bag here, or someone who had snuck into the storage room while the servants were away.

I left the room, convinced that it held no more useful information for me. I planned to ask Jeord if I ran into him, but that didn't sound likely.

Neither he nor Sophia knew that this world was set inside a game. If they did, they would know what the "routes" and "ends" I sometimes talked about meant, and they wouldn't look so weirded

out. And they definitely would have mentioned it in the 10 years we'd known each other.

So, it was only reasonable to think that the note had been put in there by someone else who had entered the castle, or more specifically the storage room.

But who? If this person knew about the game, were they another person reincarnated into this world from Japan?

While I was walking alongside Anne, thinking hard about the information I had collected so far, Pochi came out of my shadow all of a sudden and started running away while wagging his tail.

*This is just like that time at the party...*

I knew that a Dark Familiar like Pochi wouldn't soil the castle floors or anything, but I still couldn't let him run around by himself. *I have to do something!*

I forgot about Mother's warning, pulled up my dress, and started running after Pochi as fast as I could.

"Young miss! Wait!" I heard Anne call out from behind me, but I was too busy running after my dog to worry about her.

Following him, I ended up in a dark hallway. It was weird that the hallway would be so dark, since it was still afternoon. I looked behind, and Anne was nowhere to be seen. *I'm going to get scolded once I come back, aren't I?*

Anyway, I had seen this hallway somewhere. I picked up Pochi, who had finally calmed down, and looked around.

*Oh, right, this is the same place he ran off to during the party!*

The hallway had also looked very dark back then, but I hadn't given it much thought, since it was at night.

*Maybe there are a lot of trees planted around the windows or something.*

I also saw that even though it was still pretty early in the day, the torches were already lit. I remembered that, during the party, I saw a woman in this hallway who told me that I wasn't allowed to go any further.

I squinted to see through the darkness and made out the outline of a door. Was there a room at the end of the hallway? What kind of room could there be in the castle that people weren't allowed to enter?

Curious, I started moving forward.

"Oh, a guest? That's quite unusual," said the cold voice of a woman from behind me.

I turned around and saw an elderly woman, followed by several servants, elegantly walking towards me.

Now that she was close, I could tell two things: the first was that she was probably somewhere in her fifties, and the second was that she looked so beautiful that, in her younger days, she must have been extremely popular.

"...My dog ran away, and I just followed him here, to catch him..."

The woman didn't look angry, but since I was stepping in a place I had been told was off-limits, I thought I had to explain myself.

"Really? I am glad you were able to catch up to him," she replied with a warm laugh. I was relieved that she wasn't mad at me, but seeing her laugh so nonchalantly, I couldn't keep myself from telling her what was on my mind.

"Excuse me... what is at the end of this hallway? It looks like there's a door, so I think there must be some kind of room..."

“Oh?” replied the woman, blinking in surprise at my uncouth question. The servants behind her shot me cold stares.

*I’m pretty sure I screwed up right here.*

“Sorry, I was just wondering... I’m sorry I was so uncouth with my question,” I hurriedly apologized.

“Oh-hoh-hoh, do not worry,” laughed the woman. “We have nothing to hide here.” She then looked at the door behind me. “My son lives there,” she said.

“Your son?”

“Yes. He is well of age, but he refuses to leave his room — or do anything at all, really. Quite the troubled son, is he not?”

She sounded really casual despite the gravity of what she had said. First of all, I was surprised to know that there were shut-ins in this world as well.

“But,” she said, staring sadly at the door, “the reasons why he became like this are so serious that I cannot bring myself to force him out of his room. I let him stay there, and sometimes, like today, I visit him.”

“...That must be tough for you...”

Previously, I had considered shutting myself in the mansion to avoid the Catastrophic Bad Ends, but seeing the sad expression of a mother worrying about her child made me glad that I had ultimately decided against it.

Still, a shut-in inside the castle... who could that be?

*Ah! I’m pretty sure that only the royal family and the servants live inside the castle. The servants have their own, separate quarters... and this place doesn’t look like that, which means that the shut-in is a member of the royal family! Unbelievable! And wait, if he’s royalty, then his mother must be...*

“Excuse me, but you are...” I said.

“Oh, I have not introduced myself yet. I am Estella Stuart,” she replied.

“Stuart...?” I said to myself, surprised, as she chuckled.

“In regards to my rank, I am the dowager queen and stepmother of the current king. But now I am but an old woman, living away from the public eye and with too much free time on her hands.”

*I've been talking to the former queen without any hint of formality... that's why the servants were staring at me like that!*

I introduced myself in a hurry. “I am Katarina Claes, daughter of Duke Claes.”

“Oh? The Katarina from the rumors?”

*Rumors? What rumors?*

“Oh-hoh-hoh, I am glad I could meet you,” she said with a smile. She seemed like a calm, kind woman.

“Katarina!”

“Lady Katarina!”

I heard two voices calling for me — Jeord and Anne. They were probably looking for me.

“I wish I could have spoken with you a while longer,” Lady Estella said, still chuckling. “But it seems that there are people looking for you. Let us meet again.”

She gestured for me to go towards Jeord and Anne. I bowed to her like a proper noblewoman should and went back through the hallway.

I walked back to Jeord and Anne, who started scolding me. “Don’t run around with your dress pulled up,” “Don’t do weird things on

your own,” “Think before you act,” and so on and so forth. I knew it was my fault for running off like that, but I still felt dejected.

I also found out that it was Anne who had told Jeord that I was lost inside the castle, and the two had then started looking for me together.

“I’m very sorry. I heard that you were very busy with work today, and I made you lose time looking for me,” I apologized, and he looked at me in confusion.

“I did indeed have official business today,” he said, “however it was only a greeting which lasted but a few minutes. Who, exactly, told you that I was busy?”

“Keith told me, but I guess he was wrong.”

“Oh, I see,” he said, with a smile that seemed to be hiding something.

We went back to the guest room while chatting, and I was served tea and pastries. That was the second time that day, but I definitely wasn’t going to complain. Chasing Pochi had made me thirsty. As soon as I took my first sip of tea, Jeord started talking.

“How far into the castle did you go?” he asked. He and Anne had seen me walk towards them from deep inside the hallway, and they had apparently been wondering about that. I told him about my encounter with Lady Estella.

“Oh, so you met the dowager queen,” he murmured, staring down pensively. His usual smile was nowhere to be seen, and instead he had a concerned expression.

*This must mean I’ve done something really bad this time...*

“I shouldn’t have spoken so casually to her... I didn’t even know who she was,” I said, and Jeord looked at me, his expression still troubled.

“Not at all. Since the previous king died, she has avoided the public eye almost completely. Most people our age would not know her appearance, and, in any case, she is not the kind of person to be offended at not being recognized. You should not worry about it.”

“I see! So, what’s the problem?”

“Problem? What do you mean?” he asked, surprised.

“Well, you look so distressed...”

“Oh, *that* is what you meant,” he said, laughing gloomily. “I was simply embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed? Why?”

“Because you have come to know a most unfortunate truth about my family — the fact that my uncle has barricaded himself in his room and has not left it in years. We are not actively hiding that, nor is it a complete secret, but it certainly is not something we are proud of.”

The royal family would never be proud of an adult shutting himself inside the castle, that much was clear.

“But I heard that there were very serious reasons why he started doing that,” I said, remembering what the former queen had told me. Maybe he was scared about some Catastrophic Bad Ends waiting for him outside his room.

“Indeed, he has his reasons. But those, too, all relate to trifles amongst relatives... Katarina, you do know that the previous king had concubines, yes?”

“Yes, I know that much.”

Sorcié’s current king (Jeord’s father) only had one wife (Jeord’s mother) and no concubines. And since he already had four sons ready to succeed him, he had announced that he didn’t plan to take

on any concubines in the future. I didn't know about other kingdoms, but, at least here in Sorcié, monogamy was the norm.

However, I had heard that the ancient practice of holding concubines still remained in high society, with some nobles going as far as having several lovers. Apparently, the former king was one such noble. Because of my young age, the only king I directly knew of was the current one, so I didn't have any more details.

I just figured that, as the most powerful person in the kingdom, kings would have to take concubines for political reasons, and I didn't give it much thought. If anything, I was a bit surprised that the current king had only one wife.

"I see. But do you know how many?"

"...I don't. Sorry," I apologized for my ignorance. Maybe I'd heard about it before entering society as an adult and then forgot it.

Jeord shook his head. "No, it is expected that you would not know that. The royal family has tried to keep that embarrassing number hidden from public knowledge."

"Did he have so many that it'd be embarrassing?"

"Yes. He felt five official concubines, but in truth he had so many that it would be impossible to count. And, as if that was not enough, he also had an incredible number of lovers," he said with disgust on his face. "That information is supposed to be a royal secret, but all nobles at least as old as my parents know about it. Indeed, your father probably knows too, but elected not to tell you — this is no topic a young lady would want to hear about."

Knowing that your king — well, *former* king, but still — had so many concubines and lovers wasn't exactly pleasant. Much more so because my parents were so tenderly in love with each other that the idea of having a concubine just sounded unfaithful.

"You can imagine that such a large number of concubines would lead to a large number of children. As you know, in our kingdom the king personally selects his successor from amongst his sons, but the former king left this world before he had the chance to do so. Obviously, this resulted in a heated battle for the throne."

The king had died before deciding who would get his crown, and left behind several children. Jeord went on to explain that the queen had no children of her own, and the concubines' children joined the race, either supported by the high-ranked families of their mothers or by unrelated nobles who hoped to raise their social status. I was too young to have any direct memories of it, but most of the candidates either lost their lives or were exiled during this dispute, which lasted almost two whole years.

I already knew about this battle for succession, but I didn't know that it had been this extreme. According to Jeord, that was because the details had been kept hidden as much as possible.

"My father was the son of one of the official concubines, a woman of high rank, but he did not care much for the crown. He says that he entered the conflict because he could not stand how unsightly the whole affair had become, but I do not know the truth about it. I only know that my uncle was the king's youngest son, so his life was spared and he was left to live inside the castle. However, he has not left his room since," he said, looking sad.

Even if his life had been spared, he had probably suffered tremendously at the hand of the other competitors. Now, Jeord said, the former queen was taking care of him.

With Sorcié as peaceful as it was now, this was hard to believe. And the fact that it hadn't happened that long ago made it even scarier.

"I am far from proud of these circumstances, and I was anything but eager to talk about them, but I also did not want to hide the truth

from you,” Jeord said, dropping his gaze. “My grandfather’s licentiousness disgusts me, and I have no intention of becoming like him. However, I cannot deny that I am his grandson.”

Jeord sighed, then went on. “Katarina, do you hate me now that you know what kind of promiscuous blood flows in my veins?” As he asked this, he had neither his shady smile nor his usual confident expression. I had never seen him look like this.



So that was why he didn't want to talk about it. It was true that I couldn't think well of a man who surrounded himself with dozens of women like that, but... "The former king and you are two different people. Something like this would never change my opinion of you, Prince Jeord," I told him with a smile. "I also know for sure that you're not the kind of person to be unfaithful or play around with women."

I had known him for around ten years now, so I had a pretty good idea of the kind of person he was. "So don't worry about your granddad, and... Prince Jeord? What's wrong?"

He was looking down even lower than before, hiding his face. I made to get up and move towards him, worried that he may be feeling sick, but he gestured for me to stop.

"I am sorry. Please... wait for a while. I cannot... show you my face right now," he said.

Why couldn't he show me his face? I took a good look at him and noticed that his ears were turning red. Maybe he had gotten a nosebleed from the heat! It was a very hot day, he had been running around looking for me, and to top it all off, he had been drinking this hot tea.

The handsome, perfect prince with a nosebleed... of course he wouldn't want to show that to anyone.

Understanding the situation, I went back to eating pastries, trying as much as possible not to look at him, waiting for his nosebleed to stop. *Look at me. I've grown into such a thoughtful lady.*

After a while, presumably after his nosebleed stopped, he turned his beautiful face back up. "Thank you, Katarina," he said with a smile.

Pretending not to see a nosebleed was expected of a noblewoman such as myself. Taking care not to look at his nose, I smiled back, saying, “You’re welcome.”

After chatting about unrelated things for some time, I remembered why I’d come here in the first place.

“Ah, Prince Jeord, I meant to ask you something. Did you see the book that was inside the bag I forgot here at the castle?”

“Book? Oh, you mean that kind of book which you and your friends like reading. I saw the cover, but I did not open it. Why do you ask?” he asked suspiciously.

“It’s nothing. It’s just not the kind of book that I’d like boys to see,” I said, making up a random excuse.

“Is that so?” he asked with a smile.

That meant that Jeord probably didn’t know about the note. My investigation had been fruitless.

“I have work tomorrow, so I’d better go,” I said after a while, and he saw me off to the gate.

“I will go to visit you the next time I have a free day,” he said, smiling at me.

“I know how busy you are, so don’t worry if you can’t.”

“Not being able to see you is what worries me the most,” he whispered sensually in my ear, making my whole body go limp.

So little time after having a nosebleed, he had already got his cool back, and his mannerisms were as sexy as usual. I didn’t expect anything less from FL1’s main love interest.

I let the breeze coming into the carriage's window cool off my blushing face and eventually reached home. Once there, I worked in the fields for the first time in a long while.

*Ah, farming is awesome. I feel so relaxed the second I take my trusty hoe in my hands. And the weather's so good! This is the perfect day off.*

However I had learned nothing new about the note, and had no more leads left to follow. Unsure of what I should do next, I stared at the blue sky, waiting for a good idea to come to me. None came.

I stayed in the fields until it was time for dinner. Both my parents and Keith had already come back home, so we all ate together.

The fact that I had run around in the castle while pulling up my dress had already been reported to Mother, who ignored the fact that it had been an emergency and got mad at me, giving me a lecture so long and tiresome that, when I finally went back to my room, I ended up falling asleep before I could worry about any of the many things that I had to think about regarding my future.

★★★★★

After finishing what little official business I was required to attend to in the morning, I returned to the office that was adjacent to my room to begin work on some documents.

That morning's matters had taken less time than I had expected, so as soon as I was done with this paperwork, I would be free. Since my fiancée Katarina was not working that day, I could visit her house to see her.

Just when I was done and preparing to leave, I heard that Anne, Katarina's maid, had lost sight of her inside the castle. I had been intending to visit her, but to think that she had already come here — and that she was lost, at that...

I met with the maid and asked her for details. It turned out that Katarina had been chasing around her dog, who had run away. Losing sight of one's mistress inside the castle would normally be worthy of reprobation, but, considering that her mistress was Katarina, if anything I felt pity for the poor maid.

My lovely fiancée was not quite like any other noblewoman. When she ran, she did not hold anything back. If she was wearing a dress, she would just pull it up and go off at such a speed that no normal woman could hope to catch up to her.

I thanked the maid for her efforts and helped her look for her mistress, deducing where Katarina could be based on the direction she had been running towards.

"Katarina!" I called out again and again while making my way through the hallways.

After a while, I finally heard her carefree voice, replying casually from deep within the castle.

"Yes?"

She came towards us, and I made sure to sternly tell her not to do weird things on her own, and to think before running off. After I had scolded her, and she had realized that her maid had requested my help in looking for her, she apologized to me.

"I'm very sorry. I heard that you were very busy with work today, and I made you lose time looking for me," she said.

That was most curious. My official work for the day was a simple greeting, and my schedule was no secret. I asked her who had told her that, and she said that it was her brother.

My rival in love had lied to her so that she would interact with me as little as possible. I made a mental note to give him a piece of my mind at the next opportunity.

We eventually reached the guest room, where the servants had prepared tea, and I asked Katarina something that I had been wondering about — namely, how far into the castle she had gone.

She had run towards me and her maid from deep inside the hallway. It was not that there was anything dangerous in the building, but I could not control the whole place at once. I needed to know how far she had wandered in order to properly admonish her.

With her usual casual, endearing expression, she gave me the most surprising answer: she had reached *that place*, the one where we normally did not go, and there she had met the former queen.

That room, hidden in a corner that people rarely approached, was surrounded on the outside by trees, covering it in darkness even during the day. I remembered thinking of it as a somewhat frightening place as a child.

While I tried to recall at what age I first found out about my recluse uncle, who was not himself much older than my older brothers, Katarina suddenly frowned and apologized about not knowing the former queen. I told her that it was not a problem at all — Katarina certainly was far from good at remembering people, but, in this case, it was not her fault.

“I see! So, what’s the problem?” she asked, looking even more troubled.

As it turned out, she had seen my expression grow concerned, although I had not noticed it myself. That would normally never happen to me, but my self-control was not as steady when I was with her.

*I should just tell her the whole truth*, I thought. After knowing her for all these years, I understood that Katarina was completely immune to subtlety.

I honestly told her that I was embarrassed that she had found out about the unfortunate circumstances of one of my relatives. She cocked her head to one side, looking genuinely confused. I told her that the man refusing to leave his room was my uncle, and she remarked that she had heard there were serious reasons for why he was doing so.

*Of course, I thought to myself, surprised. How could I forget that my fiancée is such a person? She would never despise someone because of something so superficial. She always gets to know people before judging them.*

That is why I decided to tell her what I had not planned to reveal until after our marriage — the truth about my despicable grandfather...

I told her about him, his promiscuity, the way he used his power to gather women around him, and the terrible battle for the throne that ensued because of him. She listened to my explanation without ever averting her gaze.

Finally, I mustered my courage and told her my opinion of him. "My grandfather's licentiousness disgusts me, and I have no intention of becoming like him. However, I cannot deny that I am his grandson," I said, unable to contain a sigh.

I then asked her, "Do you hate me now that you know what kind of promiscuous blood flows into my veins?"

If I may say so myself, I had always been an extremely gifted prince, without any noticeable flaw. I was good at reading people and well-liked within noble society. But, even then, there was nothing I could do about this heritage of mine.

No matter what I thought of him, I could not change the fact that the former king, a man whose mere mention was enough to upset many

people, was my grandfather. That was why I had hesitated to speak about him to Katarina before our wedding.

I was worried that she would despise him, and, by extension, his grandson — me. I knew that Katarina was not like other people. I knew that she likely would not care, but still, I could not shake this fear.

I waited for the answer like a criminal waiting for judgment.

“The former king and you are two different people. Something like this would never change my opinion of you, Prince Jeord. I also know for sure that you’re not the kind of person to be unfaithful or play around with women.”

That was even more than I could have hoped for. Not only did she not think less of me, but she also said that she knew that I was not the kind of person to act like my grandfather.

I once again felt that Katarina Claes was the greatest person I had ever met, and meeting her was, in fact, the happiest thing to have ever happened to me.

I could not keep my face from turning red as my composure fell apart, but I did not want Katarina to see me like that. I hid my face and thanked her.

When I finally regained enough self-composure to look back at her, she was smiling at me. We chatted some more about other trivial matters, and then I escorted her to the carriage that took her home.

I promised to visit her as soon as I had the time. Missing the point, she said not to worry if I could not make it. I whispered, “Not being able to see you is what worries me the most,” in her ear, and the way she blushed was so lovely that my expression risked falling apart once more.

## ***Chapter 3: I Found a Fantastic Field***

Anne woke me up, and I went to work. I was well rested after a day off.

I reached the Ministry by carriage and I went to the office, where Laura would be leading me as I did manual labor like on the previous days.

*I'm going to do my best today too!* I thought to myself while rolling up my sleeves. However, looking at my sleeves, I realized that my outfit wasn't exactly ideal for manual labor.

"Having to wear a dress, and then the uniform on top of it is really cumbersome..." I murmured to myself, catching the attention of my tanktop-wearing colleague.

"Cumbersome indeed!" he said. "Do you want one of these?" he asked with a smile, offering me a tanktop that looked just like the one he was wearing.

I had to refuse his kind offer. I could have accepted it if I was still the monkey-like girl of my previous life, but as an adult noblewoman, a tanktop would be too much. Not to mention that it was still too cold to go sleeveless. But even if I didn't go all the way to a tanktop...

"Maybe it'd be okay if I wore work clothes..." I murmured to myself.

"Definitely not," said Sora coldly. "The rules say that we have to wear the uniform. This is the only department where people dress as they please."

*Well, he's right.* Tanktops, lab coats, frilly dresses... Everyone was wearing what they wanted, even though it was obviously against the rules.

As it turned out, it was because the department's director, Larna, didn't really care about rules, and wouldn't scold anyone for their

clothes. Her subordinates took this as an opportunity to substitute the uniform for whatever they liked.

It was no surprise that the rule-abiding Cyrus Lanchester disliked us. This smart and handsome romanceable character from FL2 was the head of the Magic Powers Department. He attached great importance to rules and laws, and he disliked the Magical Tool Laboratory for being a collection of weirdos who couldn't care less about such things.

But he did help me when those jerks were harassing me in the library, so he probably wasn't a bad person. Just like Dewey, he could have something to do with a catastrophic Bad End, so, if possible, I wanted to befriend him and gather more information. But... even if he didn't categorically dislike our department, I didn't see how we could ever become friends.

According to my colleagues, he came from a relatively high-ranking family. He was diligent and talented, and he was considered a perfect, flawless individual. He was held in high esteem within the Ministry and respected by his subordinates, but he only spoke the bare minimum and wasn't on particularly friendly terms with anyone.

Being in a different department (and one that he hated, at that), it wouldn't be easy to casually chat him up. If I had at least played through FL2, I would know more about his background and tastes, and I could use those things to start a conversation... But I hadn't, and all the information I had came from that dream and that note. I had nothing that could help me befriend him.

And if we were inside the game, I'd just need to wait for him to talk to me and then choose the dialogue option which would make him like me the most... But unfortunately, this was reality. And I was the antagonist anyway, not the protagonist. He'd only approach me to fight...

*...Haah, this is so sad,* I thought to myself, sighing deeply.

“Sorry to interrupt you while you’re busy reflecting, but Laura said we should get to work,” Sora said all of a sudden, giving me an exasperated look.

“Yes,” I said, forgetting my sorrows to concentrate on my job. Today, too, I’d be delivering packages. I still had much to learn and I made a few mistakes here and there, but the whole day went by without any major problems.

When we were close to the end of the day, our other tutor, Hart, taught us a little about paperwork. He only showed us the relatively easy documents, but even then there was a lot to be wary of, and I definitely would have preferred to keep delivering stuff throughout the building.

“Good. Now they are complete. Would you deliver them to the proper departments?” Hart said, handing me and Sora some documents.

“Should I tag along?” Sora asked, worried that I might get lost.

But the documents he had were supposed to be delivered to a department on the other side of the building from where I was headed, so if he came with me, he’d have to go back and forth for no reason. Plus, I had already been to the department I needed to go to a couple of times to deliver packages, so I knew where it was. I explained that to Sora, and went to deliver the documents on my own for the first time.

I was a bit nervous, but the kind-looking colleague who I found there just accepted the documents without any problem. Feeling accomplished after having completed my first solo task, I was on my way back to the Magical Tool Laboratory when I heard a lot of fuss behind the door of *that* department.

It was the Biomagic Department, and the monkey was probably at it again. I was warned that I'd be in for some trouble if their director, who was interested in Pochi, caught sight of me, so I wanted to avoid that as much as possible. I walked faster to get away, but...

“Ooh ooh ahh ahh!”

“Huh? What?”

I looked back, surprised by the weird noise I'd just heard, and I felt something heavy fall onto my head.

*Wh-What is this?!*

The *something* on my head started pulling at my hair.

“Ouch! What?! Ouch!” I screamed, and I felt the weight lift from my head. The monkey I'd met before was now standing in front of me, holding my barrette — the one I always used to fix my hair — in its hand.

“Hey! That's mine! Give it back!” I said, going after it. But it just grinned and started running away!

“Wait! Give my barrette back!” I said, pulling up my skirt and sprinting after the monkey, just like I had done with Pochi the previous day at the castle.

“...Where am I?” I asked myself, panting.

I had been running blindly after the monkey and ended up in a place I didn't know. Getting lost two days in a row... Just my luck.

At least yesterday I'd managed to get Pochi, but today, even after all the running I'd done, I'd lost sight of the monkey. What a complete fail.

I really liked that barrette! *You friggin' monkey, what do you have against me?!*

Dejected, I looked around to try to find my way back, but there was no clear path. There weren't even any buildings in sight.

*Why am I in the middle of nature all of a sudden?*

The Ministry's entrance had a gate which was guarded, and you had to identify yourself before leaving, but I hadn't passed by anything like that. So that meant that this place, surrounded by grass and trees, was inside the Ministry. What was this place?

I knew that the building was very large, but I didn't expect it to have a place like this inside it. I worried that I wouldn't be able to ever find my way back.

*Maybe Sora or Hart will realize I'm missing and come looking for me. No, wait, if Hart started looking for me that would just be one more lost person, and then they'd have to go looking for him too... Please stay in the office...*

*Oh?! What's that next to the bushes?!*

I saw the monkey standing next to some bushes and ran towards it at full speed. I slid on the ground with a shout, managing to catch the animal between my hands.

"Ha! I've finally got you, you troublemaking monkey! Give my barrette back!" I said, staring at my prisoner as menacingly as I could.

And then, it tossed my barrette over the bushes.

"Hey! What did you do that for?!"

I let go of the monkey and waded through the thick foliage, getting to the other side. Luckily, I found my barrette lying on the ground. I picked it up and was relieved to see that it wasn't broken. Still, that monkey was a real nuisance. I even considered complaining about it to the Biomagic Department.

*At least I got my barrette back. Now, to find my way back...*

“Whaaa?!” I screamed, surprised at what I saw in front of me. It was a beautiful vegetable field. “Wh-Why is such an amazing field in a place like this?”

It had ridges, seedling supports, and even nets to keep the birds away. This was no amateur field — it was the work of a professional. It looked like the proper fields I’d visited back in the day. The one I’d made at home would pale in comparison.

*But why is this here? This is the Magical Ministry, right? Is it a Ministry field?* I thought to myself, staring at it.

Some distance from where I was standing, there was a small hut. Its door opened loudly and someone came out of it wearing a hat and work clothes and holding a hoe. That person must have been the one tending to the field.

“Excuse me,” I said, walking towards the hut, relieved that I had finally found someone that I could ask for directions.

Hearing my voice, the person in front of me looked up, and I could now see the face that was previously hidden by the large hat.

“...Uh?” I said, so shocked that I couldn’t move any further. I knew that face. It was...

“Director Cyrus Lanchester...”

The words slipped from my mouth as I stared at him. He fidgeted around for a bit, and then, straining his voice as if to camouflage it, he said, “That’s not me.”

“What?!”

“I said that’s not me. I’m not Cyrus,” he said coldly, turning his face away from me.

*Nope. Nope. He doesn’t have his usual glasses, sure, but these green eyes, brown hair, and handsome face are Cyrus Lanchester’s.*

I wasn't that good at remembering faces, but I'd last seen him only two days ago.

"...But, you look just like..."

"I said that's not me!" he said with such determination that it sounded like the truth... *But he's even trying to hide his face. He's definitely Cyrus.*

Maybe he was embarrassed being seen with work clothes and a hat, since he was always nice and tidy in his uniform in front of people. Nobles didn't usually dress like this, and I remembered that Mother once told me to "change out of those unsightly clothes." Now she was so used to it that she didn't say anything anymore, but still.

*Hm... The smart thing to do here is just pretend he's someone else and ask him for directions. But then again, this is a rare chance to talk with Cyrus...* I was thinking about the best course of action when a majestic row of asparagus caught my attention.

*Asparagus? That's the sign of a real farming pro.*

"Wow, you can tell that they'll be delicious just by looking at them," I said, unable to contain my excitement at the superb vegetables in front of me.

"What?! Duke's daughter Katarina Claes understands the beauty of this asparagus?!" Cyrus replied, matching my excitement.

"Yes! I've never seen ones with stalks this big and tips this straight! They're perfect!"

"I know, right? Yer good with them greens, ain't ya? When they've got them tips all plump like that it's when they're the yummiest! And take a gander at the... Ah..." Cyrus had started sounding like a bumpkin in his enthusiasm. He caught himself, stopped speaking, and sighed while putting a hand on his forehead.

“Lady Katarina Claes,” he said with his eyes closed, “there is something I would like to discuss with you.”

He had gone back to his usual cool way of speaking, and his expression was grave and intense.

“Okay,” I said, nodding.

And then he started to explain.

Cyrus Lanchester was born as the second son in a land-owning, high-ranking earl’s family. However, their land was located in the middle of nowhere, far from the capital, and the rank of earl didn’t hold the value it once had. His family had lost all of their fortune long ago, and they now lived in the country and tended to the fields just like all other farmers.

Cyrus was no exception. Despite being born a noble, he was raised as a peasant. He grew up sweating in the fields, and since that was what his whole family was doing, he never thought twice about it.

However, when he turned ten, he discovered that he had magical ability and would have to attend the Academy of Magic. In order to prepare for his new life surrounded by nobles in the faraway capital, he studied as hard as he could, even learning about the etiquette and manners of high society all by himself.

He entered the academy armed with a reasonable amount of knowledge under his belt, but he still couldn’t fit in with the other nobles and the way they talked and acted. His studies had taught him about them, but, as someone raised as a lowly farmer, he could not become one of them. He would sometimes accidentally revert to his peasant speech patterns when he was caught off guard — another reason why he dreaded even speaking with his classmates.

Cyrus kept to himself, never making any friends, trying his best not to slip up, and studying as diligently as possible. This lifestyle led him to

great academic achievements and, eventually, to being scouted by the Magical Ministry.

Tired of having to fit in amongst the capital's nobles, he actually wished to go back home to work on the fields. But partly because his parents had been very happy about his potential job, and partly because he wanted to send money back to his younger brothers and sisters, he ended up accepting the Ministry's offer.

Even at his new job, he remained his strict, friendless self. People started calling him things like "the lonely genius," making it even more difficult for him to show his true self to others. He had kept playing his role as a strict, dedicated department director... until, a few years ago, he couldn't take it anymore.

Cyrus eventually pushed himself too hard, and his body just couldn't keep up. The doctor told him that his collapse could have been caused by psychological stress rather than physical illness, and he was suggested that he find a hobby he could enjoy in his free time to forget about work.

Cyrus chose as his hobby what had been his work for many years before joining the Academy of Magic: farming. He created a field for himself in an area within the Ministry where people hardly ever set foot.

He soon realized that working on his field after work or on days off was relaxing, making him feel happier and even increasing his productivity at work. And so, he had been tending this field all of this time as a hobby.

After telling me this very long story, which covered most of his life, Cyrus let out a deep sigh.

"Now you know what I'm doing here. After you saw me like this, I knew I could not lie to you... But please don't tell anyone about it," he said, looking dejected.

Personally, I thought that keeping a field as a hobby was a wonderful idea. If anything, I was just impressed by how good he was at it, but I understood why he wanted to keep it a secret. After all, the difference between Cyrus's public image within the Ministry and his real self was huge.

"I won't," I said, and his face sprung up, making his eyes, hidden behind his frameless glasses, meet mine.

*Oh! I have an idea...*

"...But on one condition," I added.

Cyrus looked at me, perplexed. "A condition? As long as it's something legal and within my power... Let's hear it."

"Let me help you with this field. And, while we are at it, I'd love it if you could teach me what you know about growing tasty vegetables," I said.

He stared at me with his mouth open.

*Did I push it too far?*

"Is that not okay...?" I asked, staring at his green eyes.

"...I don't really mind..." he replied.

*Yay! If he teaches me, I'm sure I'll be able to grow all kinds of delicious veggies!*

After agreeing to my request, Cyrus told me how to get back to my department, and I returned.

Since it had taken me so long to come back, my colleagues had started looking for me. As I'd feared, Hart, feeling the responsibility of having sent me on the errand that made me get lost, personally joined the search party and inevitably got lost himself.

Luckily he was found by the time I came back, but I was scolded for running around in a place I wasn't familiar with, even though it was

that monkey's fault from the start. But I could clearly see how much my colleagues had been worried about me, so I decided to be more careful going forward.

Sora saw me off to the carriage again, and I was so tired from chasing the monkey that I fell asleep as soon as I got inside.

From the next day forward, I started visiting Cyrus every evening right after work. I helped him with the field, and he taught me about growing vegetables. The more he taught me, the more I realized that he was a pro — leagues ahead of an amateur farmer like me. His many years of farming before coming to the Ministry were showing, and I was deeply impressed by his skill.

*I need to learn as much as possible so if push comes to shove and I'm exiled, I'll be able to make a living abroad as a peasant.*

I learned about farming with much more passion than I had ever put into my studies at the academy.

Of course, I also did my best at work. It had been around a week since I'd started my job at the Ministry, and Sora and I were slowly being entrusted with more unsupervised tasks.

I still wasn't very good with paperwork, but when it came to delivering packages and cleaning, I was doing a decent job.

*Today the janitor even praised me, saying that I was always full of energy! Heehee!*

After I was done with my work, as had now become usual, I went to Cyrus's field.

“Good evening,” I greeted him after changing into the work clothes that I stored in the small hut near the field. I had come to think of him as my farming teacher.

“Hey,” he greeted me back while cleaning the sweat off his forehead.

Usually he came here later than me, but today he was already here working.

Cyrus, as the director of the Magical Powers Department, the most popular department in the whole Ministry, seemed to be endlessly busy. But he would still come to his field every day, no matter how late it was.

“Isn’t that exhausting?” I’d asked. But he said that on the contrary, being able to work the soil, even if just for a little bit, made him feel much better. He probably used it as a way to relieve stress.

Actually, no matter how tired I was from work, I always found myself overflowing with energy as soon as I stepped onto the field too, so I understood how he felt.

“Mister Cyrus, where should I put these seedlings?”

“Oh, right over there,” he said. His face looked relaxed and peaceful.

During the day when he was doing his Ministry job, he always looked so tense and strict, but now his expression was soft and calm. And lately he had even started using his unfiltered countryside speech sometimes, making him sound much more natural.

He sounded like the old women who used to gather in the field near my childhood friend’s house in my previous life. Hearing him speak like this made me feel at home, so much so that I risked forgetting that I was a noble lady.

“Hey, Miss Katarina, let’s rest for a while and drink a cup of tea.”

“Oh, sure!”

Cyrus’s policy was to rest and drink tea whenever work was almost done. “If you try to push harder, you’ll just get tired and get nothing done,” he had said, and I had promptly written that down on my farming notes.

We sat on a blanket laid out on the grass, sitting on either side of a tray that Cyrus had prepared with tea (green, not black as was the custom for tea parties) and pickled vegetables instead of snacks.

*Ah, this is just wonderful.*

The first time he served me pickles, I'd been so surprised that they even existed in this medieval Europe-inspired world that I'd ended up stuffing my mouth with them.

Cyrus explained that, in fact, they didn't exist near the capital, but that they were common where he had grown up and the ones he had served me were homemade by him. I asked him for the details of how to prepare them, but no matter how much I tried, they never came out tasting like his. I still had a lot of trial and error to do.

I ate one of the pickles that I was determined to replicate, enjoying its crunchy texture and pleasantly salty and sour flavor. It was delicious on its own, but I had always eaten pickled vegetables with rice in my previous life. The more I thought about it, the more I craved rice. With pickles as delicious as these topping it, I could devour bowl after bowl of rice.

"Ah, I wish I had some rice," I said without thinking.

"Rice? Do people also eat rice around here?" Cyrus asked, confused.

"You know about rice?! Wait, first of all, there's rice here?" I asked him, leaning towards him.

"...Yeah, it's just like with the pickles. I never see it around here, but we ate it all the time back in the country," he replied while leaning ever so slightly away from me.

He told me that they ate rice more often than bread in his hometown, and now that he couldn't get it, he was craving rice too.

"My town's near the border, so the culture and food resemble the ones in the neighboring country, rather than this one."

It turned out that the food there was similar to Japan's.

*Ahh, he's so lucky! I want to go there!*

"Mister Cyrus, I want to visit your hometown!"

"Well, it's a really lovely place, so I wish I could just tell you to come visit it, but... it's so distant that the fastest carriage around would need four days to reach it from here."

"...U-Ugh..."

It was on the border farthest away from the capital, even farther away than I had imagined. But... *I want to eat rice... Rice...*

"Well," said Cyrus, noticing how shocked I was, "I've also been really wanting to eat rice, so I was thinking of asking my mother to send some over. Of course it'll take some time, but it could be here by next week. You can have some then."

*Cyrus Lanchester, my Lord and Savior! My angel! My only deity!  
You are so wonderful!*

"Thank you so very much!" I said, bowing deeply, but he gestured for me to stop. "But really, doing something like that for me..." I thanked him again.

"No, I'm really just getting homesick. For some reason, when I'm working here on the fields with you, I can't help but think about my farmer grandma and the others..." he said nostalgically.

"I'm glad," I said.

*I see, I remind him of his grandma, and... Uh?*

"Excuse me, but... does that mean I look like your grandmother?"

I was kind of shocked that he didn't even say farmer sister or something, and instead went straight for grandma.

"No, I mean, yeah, you kinda do, but not in looks. Ya kinda got this air 'bout yerself, y'know...?" He was clearly flustered as he tried his best to come up with an explanation.

*But does this even count as an explanation?*

"...So I do remind you of her..."

"But it's in a good way. Like, yer easy to talk to."

"Easy to talk to...?"

"Yup. Back home the young'ns all left fer the big city, so the whole place's chock full of grandpas and grandmas, y'know? Young girls were so rare I ain't ever had much of a conversation with one. And then I done come here, and there be lots of girls, but I ain't fond of speakin' with them. But ya got sumthing 'bout ya, just like grandma back home, which makes ya easy to talk to. And that's a good thing."

So he had been trying to compliment me by saying that I was easy to talk to. That was one of the most backhanded compliments I'd ever received.

"Oh, I see. You also remind me of the old man who helped me with my field at home, so I know what you mean."

We basically saw each other as old people. At least it was reciprocal.

"So you don't like speaking with young ladies... I never noticed, since you seem to be doing that just fine at work," I said.

At work he was always calm and collected, even when he was speaking with girls. I even saw him escort one like any other noble would on one occasion, and he didn't look like he was having any trouble with it.

"Of course. I pay extra attention to hide it when I'm speaking with girls. Can't have them notice I don't like doing it," he said, sounding proud of it.

To be honest, I didn't think there was anything to be proud of there... If all the girls who swooned at "the intellectual, handsome, wonderful Lord Cyrus" knew about it, they'd be really shocked.

"And now that there's a girl in my own department, I have to be even more careful..." he said, sighing.

*So there were no girls in his department until now... Hm? A girl in his department? Does that mean...?*

"Excuse me, do you mean Maria Campbell?"

"Oh, so you knew about her. She's also famous throughout the Ministry, even if for reasons opposite to you."

So he *was* talking about her. She was known as an extremely talented Light Magic user, whereas I was followed by bad rumors... But did he have to say that right in front of the interested party (me)? Maybe Cyrus was *too* relaxed when working on his field.

That also meant that he was comfortable around me, but it wasn't exactly flattering. And yet he was always so thoughtful of people during work...

"She is just as talented as they say... but she's no good," he mumbled to himself.

*What? As one of the game's love interests, he's supposed to like her!*

"Wh-Why?! Maria is a very good girl!"

*She's kind, cute, and a good cook! Anyone would want her as a wife!*

"Oh? You know her?" he said, taken aback by my enthusiasm.

"Yes! I've known her since I was at the academy!" I said proudly.

*I consider her one of my best friends! Not that I've ever asked her what she considers me.*

“I see... I agree that she is an outstanding girl, but...”

“But what? Are you trying to say that there’s something wrong with my Maria?!” I said, accidentally giving Cyrus my villainess stare.

“Please calm down, Miss Katarina. I’m not trying to say that there’s anything wrong with her. I meant that she’s no good *for me*, since I get nervous when talking to girls. It’s nothing personal,” he hurriedly explained while shaking his head.

“...*Phew*, I see. No problem then.”

*I got so worked up thinking that he was speaking ill of (my waifu) Maria. I even started looking like a proper villainess there. I’d better be careful.*

“But why are girls such a problem? I understand that there were very few back in your hometown, but you’ve been here for quite a while. Haven’t you grown accustomed to them yet?” I asked him once I got my cool back.

He leaned forward like I’d done moments before and started explaining. “You don’t get it. Fifteen years! I spent my first fifteen years without ever meeting a girl, not even one! There’s no way I could get used to them in just a few years, and especially not when we only have little, superficial exchanges at work! And the girls in the capital are all prettied up, so I get even more nervous!”

He had said all of that in a single breath, with surprising passion, and now he was panting. I didn’t really understand him, but I guess a man’s feelings are complicated.

“And even among those prettied-up girls, Maria Campbell is one of the prettiest! To be honest, she’s so pretty that a bumpkin like me has no business talking with her!”

To think that the calm and collected Cyrus was hiding a personality like this... It was like talking to a completely different person.

“I agree that she’s beautiful, but isn’t it a problem work-wise if you can’t even talk to her?”

“No, I can communicate with her, keeping my voice and expression the same as usual. After years of effort, I can do it without any problem.”

*Wouldn’t it have been better to put that energy towards something else? Like, learning how not to be nervous around girls in the first place?*

“But you see, the more I have to hide it, the tireder I get,” he said with an exhausted expression on his face. The dark circles under his eyes had been getting worse day after day, and this finally explained it. Overworking wasn’t the only reason.

“All the more reason to do something about it, I think,” I said.

*How can I make him get used to Maria? If he keeps talking to her only for work-related communication, he’ll never get past his fear of girls... If only he could talk to her like he does with me when he’s working on the field... Ah! Of course! I know!*

“I have an idea. I will help you get used to speaking with girls, as thanks for teaching me so much about farming,” I said with a smile, and he looked back at me with a troubled expression.

The very next day after learning about Cyrus’s problem with girls, I visited the Magic Powers Department. As soon as I opened the door, I saw the director sitting inside.

Since I couldn’t just enter another department without a good reason, I decided to ask the nearest employee to relay my message.

“Oh, Lady Katarina! It is good to see you.” A handsome boy with orange hair and blue eyes came running towards me, like a puppy welcoming back his owner, before I could say anything.

“Dewey! Nice to see you.”

It was Dewey Percy, one of FL2’s love interests. I had last seen him a few days before in the library.

At first, Dewey, who was now working in the Magic Powers Department together with Maria, had absolutely hated my guts. But when we traveled together for an examination, a series of things (which I honestly don’t fully understand) had happened, and now we were friends.

“Thank you for visiting us. Do you need anything from our department?” he asked.

Being shorter than me, he always looked up at me from below. I wasn’t into younger guys or anything, but he was so cute that I risked grinning just by looking at him. However, this was no time to enjoy his cuteness. I was on an important mission.

“I need to speak with Maria. Can you call her over for me?”

“Of course,” he said with a very, very handsome smile before going to look for his colleague. Seeing him from the back as he walked away from me, he still looked like a puppy. *So cute.*

He came back with Maria, who, just like him, seemed happy to see me. I asked her if she could spare some time for me after work.

“Yes, I would just be going back to the dormitory anyway.”

“Thank you. I want you to come with me somewhere. It’s inside the Ministry, so it won’t take that much time.”

“Gladly,” she said with a smile.

Perfect. The first step of my mission was complete. I silently rejoiced inside my head.

“Ah, Lady Katarina, since you are here, would you like to eat lunch together?” she asked.

“With pleasure! Can Sora come too?” I asked. He and I always ate lunch together.

“Of course,” she replied with another smile.

I was ready to go back to the Magical Tool Laboratory to tell Sora when I got the feeling that someone was looking at me. It was Cyrus, staring at me from inside the office with a gaze that anyone else would have considered menacing. But I could tell that it wasn’t that. I knew about his hobby and about his real personality... That was an anxious gaze.

He saw that I was talking with Maria and was worried about what I was doing. I had told him that I would help him overcome his fear of girls, but I hadn’t given him any more details than that, because I thought that he’d complain or chicken out.

*This will work. I’ll make sure it does.*

I tried to tell him “*Don’t worry, it’ll be alright*” with my gaze, but he probably didn’t get it. He looked even more preoccupied.

*Oh well, I’ll just explain everything to him later today at the field.*

I then went back to my department.

I told Sora, who had been waiting for me to come back, that Maria had invited us to have lunch together.

“I was expecting that to happen when you went to her department,” he said. I was impressed by how he seemed to practically read the future.

“Some things are just too predictable,” he said, noticing my stupefied look. “Anyway,” he continued, “let’s go before lunchtime is over.”

We walked together to the Ministry’s dining hall, or rather, one of the Ministry’s dining halls. There were several of them, all of different sizes and with different menus. Some of them were very

large, like normal company lunchrooms, and others were smaller, only offering a few seats and serving lunch boxes and other things that were easy to take out. There were even some that looked like fancy cafes.

Everyone would just have lunch when it was convenient for them. For example, Hart would ask a colleague to get a lunch box for him, and then he'd eat it inside the office (probably to keep from getting lost), and Laura always ate in the fancy cafes. To each their own.

Since there were four of us today, we went to the largest dining hall, the one which resembled a company lunchroom, so that we could all sit comfortably. Maria and Dewey were already waiting for us at the entrance, and, when we arrived, we all started looking for free seats. Thankfully it wasn't crowded, and we easily found a table. All that was left was to order the food.

"Hm... The daily special looks good for the price, but I also want to try the new course..." I mumbled to myself.

"I have been wondering for a while," said Sora, exasperated, "but do you really need to bother about the price? Could you not simply purchase both and only eat what you wanted? Many nobles do just that." His contrived polite speech was probably because Maria and Dewey were with us.

"But that would be such a waste! I don't know about other nobles, but I hate wasting food!" *Let the others do as they please. I live by my own rules.*

And, while the Claes family certainly didn't have any money problems, my allowance wasn't that generous. Since I was a child, Mother always insisted that if she gave me more, I'd end up wasting all of it. And I also had to save for things that she didn't approve of, like sweets and farming equipment.

“Speaking with you, one starts doubting that you are the daughter of a duke,” said Dewey, who was listening to Sora and me.

*What does he mean? Is this a compliment? Is it an insult?* I was thinking to myself, and my confusion must have been obvious, because Maria intervened to explain.

“He means that you are a wonderful person, Lady Katarina.”

*Now, now, you’ll make me blush.*

I eventually decided to go for the daily special, ordered, and came back to the table with my tray. I was sitting next to Maria, facing Sora and Dewey.

“Let’s eat!” I said, and didn’t wait a second longer to take the fork in my hand to eat the daily special — hamburger steak.

It was still steaming hot, and it was covered in a fragrant tomato and onion sauce. For vegetables there were appetizingly charred broccoli and corn. The bread was a freshly baked, still-warm butter roll.

I started by cutting off a piece of the steak and chewing it, making the delicious juices spread in my mouth, their decadent richness balancing the sauce’s refreshing sourness. I followed with the vegetables, which were slightly sweet and incredibly aromatic. The bread, which I ate next, was so soft that it melted in my mouth.

*Ah, it’s all so tasty. This is wonderful. Totally fitting of the great Magical Ministry’s dining hall.*

“Lady Katarina always seems to enjoy her food so much,” said Maria while she and all the others smiled and watched me eat.

“What can I do? It’s just delicious,” I replied.

For some reason, Maria replied with, “I will bring some homemade sweets for you next time.”

*Heck yeah!*

Once I was done delivering lunch to my stomach, I asked Maria about her and Dewey's work. She told me that on most days they were in the library rummaging through books, like I'd seen them doing some days before.

Most of my department's tasks involved manual labor, but they actually had to use their heads. Having to read research documents every day sounded so harsh. I was glad I was assigned to the Magical Tool Laboratory.

We also talked about our colleagues. I told Maria and Dewey that my department was full of oddballs, but they already knew that. It turned out that this was common knowledge throughout the whole Ministry. Sora even said that some people called it "the loony bin."

They were all good people, but... I couldn't deny that they were weird.

"What about your department? How are your colleagues?" I asked Maria.

"They are all kind, talented people," she said.

As expected of the most popular department. Of course everybody would be talented. And I was glad to know that they were kind too.

"They have been teaching me so much. I have been learning a lot," Dewey started explaining.

*That's nice. Nothing like having good relationships with your colleagues.*

I was listening with a smile, but I noticed that Maria's expression had become darkened.

"What's up, Maria?" I asked her, very quietly, because Dewey was still talking enthusiastically.

"It is nothing," she said at first, but after I kept looking at her for a while, she whispered something to me.

"All of our colleagues are very kind to us, but I cannot help but think that Director Lanchester treats me differently from the others... I am afraid he might dislike me." After a pause, she added, "I could just be thinking too hard about it," but her expression didn't change. She really thought that he hated her.

And what about Cyrus? He was so proud to say that nobody would ever notice. *Well, would you look at this. You've been noticed, alright.*

I had to do something about this... Not only for Cyrus's sake, but for Maria's as well.

"Don't worry," I said with a smile, "if you come with me after work, I'm sure that problem will be solved too."

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking surprised.

"I'll explain later," I said, but she stared at me with a troubled expression.

"Alright..." she said with a nod.

The meal went on as we chatted about our respective departments and work at the Ministry.

"Let's eat together again soon!" I told Maria and Dewey in front of the dining hall's exit before leaving for the Magical Tool Laboratory.

"Are you planning to do something weird again?" Sora asked me as we were walking back to the office.

*How does he always guess what I'm thinking? Does he have psychic powers or something?*

"N-Not at all," I said, still scared about his ability to read my mind.

He looked at me and sighed. "Just don't do anything dangerous, okay?" he said. He could really read me like a book.

Evening came, and I was finally done with work. Sora warned me again not to do anything dangerous, and then I went to meet Maria. She was already waiting for me, looking nervous.

“Come on, let’s go,” I told her, and we started walking together.

“Excuse me, but, where exactly are we going?” she asked me when she noticed that we had gone deep into the Ministry with nobody else around.

I had kept it a secret because I didn’t want anyone else to know about Cyrus’s secret hobby, but since there wasn’t anyone else around anyway, I thought that I might as well tell her.

“We’re going to a field.”

“A field? Have you started a field inside the Magical Ministry?!” she asked, surprised.

Indeed, I’d cultivated my own field back at the academy, partly as a hobby and partly as a Bad-End countermeasure. Maria definitely had reason to suspect that.

“No, not me. Someone else’s field. I found it by accident a few days ago.”

“There is someone else who likes to farm within the Ministry?”

“Yes, and their field is an incredible one. I’m sure you’ll be surprised too.”

“Hehehe, I am looking forward to it.”

We kept talking like this while walking until we finally reached Cyrus’s field.

“Oh, it really is a wonderful field!” Maria said as soon as she saw the perfectly arranged rows of vegetables.

“I know, right?” I said proudly, almost as if it were my own field.

Cyrus didn't seem to be there yet. He'd been there every single evening since I'd started showing up, and he even said that he hadn't been missing a day recently.

I thought he'd eventually come, but what if he'd realized my plan and run away?

All of a sudden, I heard a squeaking sound. It was the door of the hut near the field, being opened from the inside by Cyrus in his farming clothes, hat and all.

He saw us, and, just like the first time he'd seen me on his field, he stood there frozen with his eyes open wide. After looking at us for a while, motionless... he turned around and started *running*!

Years of escaping Mother's lectures had trained my reflexes well enough that I lost no time and went after him, quickly managing to grab his arm.

"Wait! Why are you running away?"

"I'm the one who wants to ask *why*! Why is Maria Campbell here? Did you bring her with you?" he asked under his breath so that Maria wouldn't hear.

"Exactly," I replied, whispering as well. "I thought that rather than overthinking things by yourself, it'd be faster to just talk to her and get used to it."

"...Hm, you kind of have a point, but... why did you need to bring her here?"

"Because this is the only place where you can be yourself! At work you are always, you know, hiding behind a mask..."

"I know what you mean, b-but..." he said, frowning.

"That's why I brought Maria here. If you can talk to her and befriend her here, I'm sure that you won't have any problem with girls anymore," I said, proud of my wonderful plan.

"That may be true," Cyrus replied with a bitter smile, "but why does it have to be Maria Campbell right from the start? I'm already bad with girls, but it's even worse when it comes to a beauty like her."

*So, men who aren't used to girls have an even harder time with beautiful girls. Hm, I didn't think of that.*

"Hm... But Maria's a very good girl! I'm sure you'll be fine," I said, dragging Cyrus back to her.

Now able to take a better look at him, Maria realized who he was.

"...Mister Lanchester..." she said.

Cyrus, noticing the slight surprise in her voice, looked at his own clothes.

"Ah, you see, this is..." he started mumbling, but I intervened to help him.

"This is Mister Cyrus's field. He's really knowledgeable about farming, and he's also very skilled with a hoe!"

"Mister Lanchester? Farming...?" she asked, her eyes widened in disbelief.

"Yes, he actually comes from a family of farmers, and *mfghfgh...*"

Cyrus had put a hand over my mouth as I was talking.

"I'll just explain it myself from here," he said, finally sounding calm.

"Maria Campbell," he said, looking towards her, "what Miss Katarina just said is true. People call me a noble at the Ministry, but my family, despite its rank, lived off the fields in the country. I, myself, have grown up as a farmer. This is the truth behind my noble birth. Laugh at me, if you must."

I thought that being able to manage a field so well was a wonderful thing, but apparently Cyrus didn't agree. He looked very sad.

“Mister Lanchester,” replied Maria, “I have nothing but admiration for your beautiful field, and I see no reason to laugh at you.”

*As expected of my (one-sidedly appointed) close friend. She took the words out of my mouth. That makes me a bit — no, it makes me very happy.*

“...Maria Campbell... I’m the one who admires you now,” he replied, smiling and blushing.

It was probably for a different reason, but Cyrus seemed to be happy as well.

“E-Excuse me,” said Maria, looking deadly serious, “but I thought that you... hated me?”

She had talked to me about it earlier that day. She was mistaking Cyrus’s cold treatment for hate, which is why she was so surprised at being told he admired her.

“H-Hate? Why, I would never...” he said, becoming nervous once again.

Cyrus had thought that the way that he was hiding his feelings was so perfect that nobody would notice anything weird. I had to intervene again.

“You see, Maria, Mister Cyrus has always lived in the country, with nobody but old men and women around him, so he isn’t used to talking with young girls. He says that he gets nervous around them, especially cute ones like you, and *mfghfgh...*”

I felt Cyrus covering my mouth with his hand once again.

“Katarina Claes, could you be any less subtle?!” he asked, staring at me while his face had become completely red.

*Was there anything wrong with my explanation? It’s a complex subject after all,* I was worrying to myself, but Maria’s face seemed more relaxed.

"S-So, does that mean that you do *not* hate me, Mister Lanchester?" she asked.

"Th-That's right. I don't," he said, nodding and still blushing, his face red. "As Miss Katarina remarked, I've almost never talked to a young girl before coming here, and so I become nervous about it... Pitiful, I know. I believe that this time you may really want to laugh at me. Go ahead," he said sadly.

"I am so glad..." Maria said with a smile.

"...Huh?"

Cyrus stared at Maria in surprise.

"I always thought that you hated me, but I am so glad to realize that that was not the case," she said, sounding relieved.

Cyrus's face turned an even brighter shade of red.

"And I am also happy to be able to speak with you like this, Mister Lanchester, since I do not get the chance to do so at work."

She must have been really happy, because she was sporting a beautiful, innocent smile. I thought that Cyrus couldn't get any redder, but he did. He now looked more like a boiled octopus than a human.

"B-But... Aren't you disappointed seeing how different I am when I'm here compared to when I'm at work?" he said.

When he was his honest, farmer self, he could be very pessimistic.

"Not at all. Seeing you like this has a charm of its own. You are as wonderful here as a farmer as you are as a superior at work, Mister Lanchester," she replied with the cutest of smiles.

The wind started blowing, and the petals from the flowers near us flew into the air and between Cyrus and Maria as the two stared at each other.

*Th-This is it! It's that picture from my dream! It looks exactly the same! It's so pretty!*

I was overcome with emotion. In my excitement, I was breathing so heavily that my nostrils had visibly flared.



“When we’re here,” Cyrus, who had probably completely forgotten about me, said in his sweetest, gentlest voice, “don’t call me Lanchester. Call me Cyrus.”

“Yes, Mister Cyrus,” Maria cutely replied.

*Now this really looks like an otome game! It’s so beautiful.*

I’d managed to get Cyrus, who was one of the romanceable options, to fall in love with the protagonist, and we all decided to go home for the day. After all, Cyrus had just fallen in love (probably for the first time in his life) and was spacing out so much that there was no hope of him getting any work done on the field.

From the next day on, Maria would be coming to the field together with me.

“I want to talk with Mister Cyrus more, and if I go to that field, I will be able to see Lady Katarina every day!” she had explained.

It seemed that Maria was interested in Cyrus as well. *Very good. You’re on the right path.*

Not being able to work the field today, I went back home earlier than usual.

“Haah, I’ve done my share of good deeds for the day,” I said to myself while lying down on my bed. I had helped Cyrus overcome his nervousness with girls and cleared up Maria’s misunderstanding. I felt like a generous Cupid.

*Hehe, me? Cupid? Nice... I was grinning to myself and staring at the ceiling when I remembered the cute young boy who had eaten lunch with me today.*

*Now that I think about it, Dewey’s been in MARIA-LOVE mode since the examination.*

We weren't on the best terms at first, but now that we were friends, I also felt that I wanted him to succeed in his romantic aspirations... But there was only one Maria. What could I do?

To be honest, I had almost no experience with romance, so I was at a loss.

It was time to summon *them*.

Meeting chairwoman: Katarina Claes.

Meeting representative: Katarina Claes.

Meeting secretary: Katarina Claes.

"Very well. We are now going to think of the fairest option in regards to the romance between Maria and two of the romanceable options for *Fortune Lover II*, namely Dewey and Cyrus."

"I am afraid that we Katarinas have little to no experience with love, but we shall nonetheless put forth our best efforts in dealing with this issue for the sake of Maria and our two friends."

"Does anyone have any good ideas?"

"Ideas? Well, we haven't really done much romancing, neither here nor in our past life. I'm clueless."

"But our performance today was outstanding!"

"It was, yes, but we weren't really going for that, were we? It just kind of happened."

"Whatever the case, Maria said that she'll be coming to the field too from now on. Maybe we should stop going so that she can spend some time alone with Cyrus and get closer to him."

"That sounds good! But wait, wouldn't that leave Dewey out?"

"What about inviting Dewey to the field as well?"

“Hm... Would Dewey be interested in farming work? Also, Cyrus wouldn’t take well to that many people knowing about his secret...”

“I am sorry to interrupt, but may I speak?”

“Katarina Claes? What is the matter?”

“The two of you seem to be focusing on how to make Maria and the two love interests come together...”

“Yes, we are! We are Cupids, angels of love! Hehehe!”

“...I see. But, are you not forgetting something very important?”

“Important? We definitely didn’t forget dinner, nor did we forget dessert, and we certainly remembered to secure some late-night snacks for today.”

“...It will just be faster to tell you. Katarina Claes is a villainess — the antagonist in FL2, and the romance between Maria and the other characters will put us on a route that leads to doom!”

“*Gasp!*”

“*Gasp!*”

“Judging by those reactions, you had both forgotten about it, had you not?”

“Y-Yes... I had been paying attention at first, but there was a lot to learn at work, and working on the field was so fun that I just forgot about the whole villainess thing...”

“For some reason I’d also forgotten that detail...”

“That’s the problem with us, Katarina. The second something new catches our attention, we forget the important stuff. We have to be careful.”

“You are right. Maybe we should write important things on sticky notes, or better yet directly on our hand.”

“That’s smart! We’ll put the notes up in our room!”

“Yes. What should we write on them?”

“...Pardon me, but maybe that can wait. For the time being, can we discuss how to avoid doom?”

“Y-You’re right. Chairwoman Claes, please change today’s agenda from ‘making Maria grow closer to Dewey and Cyrus’ to ‘avoiding doom.’”

“Yes. Good. Let’s start our meeting on avoiding doom in FL2, then.”

“So, does anyone have any good ideas?”

“Yes. We must stop helping Maria and the others fall in love and give up on being angels of love.”

“...That makes sense, but they are already on friendly terms, and both seem to be in MARIA-LOVE mode... I am afraid that we are headed for doom.”

“What can we do? Should we shut ourselves in our room?”

“That does not seem reasonable...”

“If that is the case, we should study how to dodge attacks, how to run away from jails, and how to get our sentence reduced to exile abroad.”

“I agree. That is the best thing to do.”

“It is decided then. We will investigate Dewey and Cyrus to see if they have any weaknesses, like Jeord.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“We successfully went through the plot of *Fortune Lover* while (somehow) avoiding doom. In the process, we became smarter (even graduating from the academy, somehow) and stronger (at tilling the

soil). We shall survive! We shall spend a peaceful retirement with a cat on our lap!"

"Yes!"

"Yes!"

And thus, another Katarina meeting came to an end, even though the agenda changed halfway through. I sat up on my bed and raised a clenched fist.

*Yes! I'm going to do my best!*

★★★★★☆☆

My name is Cyrus Lanchester. After graduating from the Academy of Magic, I started working at the Ministry. I was appreciated for my skills, and, perhaps due to how diligently and passionately I worked, I became a department director before others who had been there longer than me.

Many envied me for this... but sometimes I wished I could go back to the country, where I was raised — that peaceful village where there were more cattle than people.

Colleagues at work considered me a high-ranking noble, but I was brought up as a farmer, and surrounded by other farmers for all my childhood.

However, I'd been hiding my heritage since the time I enrolled into the academy so that people wouldn't laugh at me. It was too late to stop pretending, so, day after day, I did my best to play the part of the noble. The only place where I could relax was the field that I'd secretly built in a little-visited part of the Ministry.

Everything changed one spring day, a short time after newcomers had been welcomed into the Magical Ministry.

I finished work and, as I always did, made for my field. I entered the small hut next to the field and changed into my farming clothes, grabbed my hoe, and went out. Nothing unusual so far.

But the second I left the hut, my life took a strange turn.

“Excuse me,” I heard a voice call out to me. Nobody was supposed to know about this place, so I was surprised to find someone there, but what was even more surprising was who this someone was.

Katarina Claes, daughter of Duke Claes and fiancée of Prince Jeord. She was a real-life high-ranking noble who had nothing to do with a country boy like me, who was only noble on paper.

What was she doing in this empty place at the edge of the Ministry?

Unable to grasp the situation, I froze in place, staring at her.

“Director Cyrus Lanchester...” she muttered, making me snap out of my trance.

“That’s not me,” is all I managed to reply. This surprised her, and made her stare at me even harder. I repeated my lie while hiding my face, fully aware of how unconvincing I was. We had met just a few days ago, and now I could feel her gaze piercing through my profile.

However, I could not admit that Cyrus Lanchester, director of the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department, was in farming attire with a hoe in hand, ready to plow a field. The image of me that I’d worked so hard to maintain would be utterly destroyed.

Katarina remained silent for a while. I couldn’t look at her face, but I hoped that she would just give up and leave. And then...

“Wow, you can tell that they’ll be delicious just by looking at them,” she said all of a sudden.

I turned to face her, and she was looking excitedly at the asparagus I was so proud of.

Those feelings that I had repressed for so many years started flowing back inside me.

When I was living in the country, we would show each other our vegetables and comment on how good each other's harvest was. However, here in the city, no one did any such thing. All I could do was anonymously bring my vegetables to the dining hall, so I couldn't even ask what people thought of them directly. I was proud of them, but I was longing — nay, *starving* for external recognition!

"What?! Duke's daughter Katarina Claes understands the beauty of this asparagus?!" I asked her in my excitement.

When she said that she did, I felt happier than I had in many years. I started extolling the virtues of my asparagus, before realizing that, in my enthusiasm, I had gone back to the accent that I had been struggling so hard to hide all these years. Understanding that I couldn't salvage the situation anymore, I sighed, and asked Katarina Claes to listen to my story.

She nodded with a serious face, and I went on to explain my background for the first time.

Once I was done, I asked Katarina not to tell anyone about my secret, and, surprisingly, she immediately agreed.

I was extremely relieved, but then I noticed her eyes squint ever so slightly as she said, "...But on one condition."

I frowned, but I wasn't surprised. Knowing the secret of my field and my story was a major weakness. Anyone who knew this secret could use it against me and blackmail me with it. I had already realized this when I'd started talking to Katarina, and I was ready to pay to keep her quiet. I just made sure to tell her, while staring at her blue eyes, that I could only meet requests that were legal and within my power.

"Let me help you with this field. And, while we are at it, I'd love it if you could teach me what you know about growing tasty vegetables," she said, betraying all of my expectations.

I predicted she would ask for special treatment at the Ministry or something to that effect, but... helping with the field?

*First of all, why would a noble young lady understand the value of my asparagus? Most nobles have never even seen vegetables before they are prepared for them to eat, so why?*

I was so confused that I stood still, unable to answer her, as more and more questions popped up inside my head.

"Is that not okay...?" she asked me timidly.

Utterly perplexed, I told her that I wouldn't mind, and she seemed overjoyed at my answer.

Still unable to process what had happened, I saw Katarina off from the field. She was smiling as she said that she looked forward to starting work on the field the next day.

I was too confused to keep working, so I went back to the dormitory.

Even when I thought about it more calmly while lying on my bed, the situation was just as perplexing. Was it some novel kind of prank? Was it a dream?

However, the next day, I got confirmation that our exchange had not been a dream.

"Good evening," a smiling Katarina greeted me, in full farming attire and even donning a kerchief on her head as only the oldest women used to do, even back in the country.

It turned out that she hadn't been joking, and actually planned to work on the field. I decided that thinking about it wasn't worth the effort and started farming with her.

I quickly realized that she had some amount of experience with growing vegetables. She still had a lot to learn, but she wasn't a complete amateur either, and she picked up new information fast.

"Have you ever worked on a field before?" I asked her.

"Yes! In my garden at home and then at the Academy of Magic," she replied briskly.

The garden of a duke's manor and the Academy of Magic... I was working a field inside the Ministry myself, but I was still taken aback. And the biggest question still remained.

"But why would a noble like you do something like that?"

"Well, I just wanted to learn some practical skills in case I needed to find a job in the future."

"...You are the daughter of Duke Claes, and you're engaged to a prince... I don't think you'll ever need to find a job..."

"You never know what life has in store for you, right? You've got to be prepared."

After that reply, I found myself at a loss for words.

And, anyway, why farming of all things? She could use magic and had received the training and education of a noble — she could choose any practical skill that she wanted. I had tons of doubts, but she looked at me with twinkling eyes, saying, "So, please teach me more about farming!" and I decided that I didn't really need to inquire any further.

I stopped asking her questions, and we started working together as I taught her all I knew about vegetable growing.

A few days passed with Katarina coming to the field every evening, and, before I noticed, I had grown closer to her. Because of the

environment that I grew up in, I wasn't comfortable around girls, but she had none of the girly aura that made me nervous.

For example, when making tea for the two of us, I ended up serving pickles with it out of habit. I thought that that would make any young person squeamish, but she happily munched on them while praising their taste. She reminded me of the old women back home who worked on the fields with me.

Therefore, I eventually stopped feeling any hint of nervousness around her, and I occasionally even spoke with my old accent, despite all the efforts I'd made to hide it so far. After all this time farming alone, it was fun to have someone do it with me.

One day we were taking a short rest, sitting on a blanket on the ground with tea and pickles between us.

"Ah, I wish I had some rice," she said after sipping on the tea and eating the pickles with delight. That was a word I hadn't heard in a while, and I was surprised at hearing it, because I thought that the people here in the capital had no custom of eating it.

I asked her about it, and, suddenly excited, she leaned towards me and asked, "You know about rice?! Wait, first of all, there's rice here?"

Shocked by her enthusiasm, I explained that, just as with pickles, I hadn't seen it since moving there, but that I used to eat it as a child. I also told her that the culture and food of my town were closer to that of the neighboring country, which made me all the more nostalgic.

Katarina, who apparently loved eating and appreciated my native cuisine, said that she wanted to visit my hometown.

I told her of how far that was, and her expression changed to one so dejected that you'd think the world was coming to an end.

Seeing her like that, I couldn't help but feel pity for her, so I told her that I'd share some rice with her when my mother sent it to me. She rejoiced at that, and for some reason started genuflecting in front of me with her eyes filled with sparkles. I'd been thinking this for a while, but Katarina was really an unpredictable girl.

"Thank you so very much!" she then said, bowing deeply. At least she wasn't genuflecting anymore, but still, a noble being so grateful for sharing some rice was weird.

I didn't want her to feel so indebted to me, so I told her that I was really just growing homesick myself, and that I'd have that rice sent to me anyway.

"For some reason, when I'm working here on the fields with you, I can't help but think about my farmer grandma and the others..." I then followed. I'd felt like that for a while now.

"Excuse me, but... does that mean I look like your grandmother?" she said.

*That's no good. I was so relaxed I ended up being too honest.*

"No, I mean, yeah, you kinda do, but not in looks. Ya kinda got this air 'bout yerself, y'know...?" I tried to explain myself.

"...So I *do* remind you of her..."

My explanation had backfired.

"But it's in a good way. Like, yer easy to talk to."

"Easy to talk to...?"

"Yup. Back home the young'ns all left fer the big city, so the whole place's chock full of grandpas and grandmas, y'know? Young girls were so rare I ain't ever had much of a conversation with one. And then I done come here, and there be lots of girls, but I ain't fond of speakin' with them. But ya got sumthing 'bout ya, just like grandma

back home, which makes ya easy to talk to. And that's a good thing," I said, noticing that I'd completely switched to my old accent.

She seemed to be satisfied this time, but she also said that I, too, reminded her of an old man. I wasn't sure how to feel about that.

"So you don't like speaking with young ladies... I never noticed, since you seem to be doing that just fine at work," she then said. I'd talked too much and let her know about another one of my weaknesses.

However, I understood that there was no point in hiding the truth from Katarina, so I told her about the efforts I was making to mask my nervousness, and about how much more tiring it had become since a new girl had been assigned to my department.

I sighed. I grew up surrounded by men and old women, and now that I had a young girl amongst my subordinates, every day was stressful.

"Excuse me, do you mean Maria Campbell?"

So she knew about Maria Campbell. After all, even if it was for reasons opposite to Katarina, she was also famous enough throughout the Ministry that it was no surprise that someone from another department would know her name.

The rumors (which I now knew to be completely false) about Katarina were that she was an entitled noble girl who'd come to the Ministry just to kill time, whereas Maria was spoken of as a talented Light Magic user.

Every department wanted Maria to work with them, but the higher-ups decided that, if she was so talented, she would make a wonderful addition to my team. I wasn't grateful in the least.

"She is just as talented as they say... but she's no good," I honestly said. She was skilled and a fast learner, but she was too much to handle for someone as nervous around girls as I was.

“Wh-Why?! Maria is a very good girl!” Katarina said, her eyebrows slanted all of a sudden.

I asked whether she personally knew her, and she proudly said that she had known her since her time at the academy. I hadn’t known that.

As Katarina said, she was a very good girl, and a kind and talented one at that.

“Are you trying to say that there’s something wrong with my Maria?!” she asked, with a stare more menacing than I’d ever seen before.

It turned out that she really liked Maria, so I had to explain myself properly.

“Please calm down, Miss Katarina. I’m not trying to say that there’s anything wrong with her. I meant that she’s no good *for me*, since I get nervous when talking to girls. It’s nothing personal,” I explained, shaking my head.

She sounded perplexed that I still wasn’t used to girls after so many years in the capital, and I couldn’t restrain myself. I leaned forward and emphatically explained the heavy burden that a girl-less life had placed on my shoulders.

After catching my breath, I went on to explain the biggest problem I had with Maria. Sure, she was talented and kind, but she was also prettier than any girl I’d ever seen. Even someone used to dealing with girls would feel nervous around a girl so beautiful.

“I agree that she’s beautiful, but isn’t it a problem work-wise if you can’t even talk to her?” Katarina asked.

I told her how, with many years of training, I had learnt to communicate while keeping my voice and expression unchanged. Of course, since she was a newcomer, I had to care for her now that she

was in my department, and I actively talked with her about her tasks and frequently checked on her. Obviously, the more I did that, the more exhausted I would become. I knew that I was being too tense around her, but I couldn't help it.

"All the more reason to do something about it, I think," she said, and started silently thinking about something.

"I have an idea. I will help you get used to speaking with girls, as thanks for teaching me so much about farming," she said with a smile that, for some reason, gave me a bad feeling about how things would turn out.

She told me she'd help me with my problem, and then, without explaining what she was actually planning to do, she left.

The very next day, Katarina visited my department and asked to speak with Maria. She was too far away for me to hear what she was saying, but I could sense that it wasn't good, whatever it was.

Before leaving, Katarina noticed my gaze and gave me a proud, satisfied look. I started feeling even worse about it.

After she had left, I overheard one of my subordinates saying, "The director always looks at the people from the Magical Tool Laboratory so sternly..." My preoccupied stare probably looked like a disapproving one to them.

It was true that I wasn't particularly approving of that department. They were talented in their own way, but Larna, their director, didn't care about rules in the least. I couldn't stand that, maybe because I was envious of how free she seemed to be. As a result, I was sometimes stern with them... but I didn't hate them.

However, since I had no friends to speak of in this department, I couldn't do anything about that misunderstanding. And since that didn't cause any issues with my work, I didn't care too much about it.

For the first time, I realized that there were many more things about me that I'd never made any effort to improve.

Once I was done with work in the evening, I went to my field despite still having a bad feeling about what Katarina was doing.

I went into the hut and changed into my farming clothes. Just wearing that outfit that I was so used to was enough to relax me. I then grabbed my hoe and left the hut and saw something that, for the second time, made me freeze.

Katarina was standing in front of me... next to Maria.

I had known that Katarina's smile meant nothing good, and that she was planning to do something terrible, but I had felt safe enough in assuming she wouldn't go as far as bringing Maria Campbell here. But that girl had a way of betraying my expectations.

*I've never seen a noble girl so bold and unique...* I thought to myself, before coming back to my senses and turning around to run away. However, Katarina, running at an unfathomable speed, quickly reached me and grabbed my arm, asking me why I was running away.

In return, I asked her why in the world Maria was here, and whether Katarina was the one to blame for that. Of course, I was already almost certain that she was...

Katarina explained that she wanted me to get used to talking with Maria, and that the only way to do so was to actually go ahead and do it. What she said made perfect sense, but I didn't understand why I had to do that in my field.

Her response, that I could only be myself when I was here, once again made perfect sense. She was right, but it was all too sudden. Katarina was really unpredictable.

She then went on to say that she chose Maria because, if I managed to speak openly with her, I would be able to do the same with any girl. That was true, sure, but Katarina obviously understood nothing of how sensitive a man who wasn't used to girls could be, especially when it came to one so beautiful.

Katarina insisted that everything would be fine and forcibly dragged me back to Maria, who, this time, realized who she was looking at.

"...Mister Lanchester..." she said, surprised.

I noticed what I was wearing, and I hurriedly tried to explain myself. Being in front of a young woman made it so difficult to come up with anything coherent.

While I was still mumbling, Katarina, out of the blue, intervened.

"This is Mister Cyrus's field. He's really knowledgeable about farming, and he's also very skilled with a hoe!" she said, sounding proud. Why was she proud of that? This girl was such a mystery.

Maria, understandably, looked very surprised. Then, Katarina started proudly explaining my background before I managed to cover up her mouth. For some reason, seeing her so pleased about what she was saying made me feel calm, and I decided to continue the explanation myself.

I looked at Maria and told her all the truth about where I had come from.

When I'd done the same to Katarina I still didn't know her that well, but having to reveal my secret to a subordinate who worked in the same office as me made me feel miserable. However, I had no chance of lying my way out of this situation, and all I could do was wait for Maria to laugh at me.

*"You act all high and mighty at work, and this is the truth about yourself?"* she could have said. But she didn't.

"Mister Lanchester, I have nothing but admiration for your beautiful field, and I see no reason to laugh at you," she said.

That was so unexpected that I stared at her, trying to ascertain whether she was serious, but her blue eyes were not those of a liar.

Looking into them, I realized that, just as Katarina and others had said, Maria Campbell was not only beautiful on the outside, but on the inside as well.

"...Maria Campbell... I'm the one who admires you now," I said, letting words that I would never utter at work slip from my mouth.

And then, even more surprisingly, Maria asked me whether I hated her. That was so confusing that I ended up panicking slightly.

"H-Hate? Why, I would never..." I started mumbling. But as I stopped to think of what to say next, *she* opened her mouth once again.

"You see, Maria, Mister Cyrus has always lived in the country, with nobody but old men and women around him, so he isn't used to talking with young girls. He says that he gets nervous around them, especially cute ones like you, and *mfghfgh...*"

I forgot about delicacy and shoved a hand over her mouth. Couldn't she choose her words a little more carefully? Did she have to be this blunt? She really didn't understand anything about the fragile hearts of men.

"Katarina Claes, could you be any less subtle?!" I said, glaring at her.

Maria, whom I'd been avoiding looking at out of embarrassment, spoke up again. "S-So, does that mean that you do not hate me, Mister Lanchester?" she asked.

I told her that no, I did not hate her, and that yes, what Katarina had said was true. Surely, this time, hearing the truth about me after seeing how I usually behaved at work, she would laugh at me. I

nervously waited for her answer, wishing only that my position as her superior would keep her from berating me too much.

“I am so glad...” Maria said with a lovely smile on her face. I couldn’t hide my surprise.

She told me — sounding genuinely happy — that she had feared that I hated her, and so was relieved by the truth. I could tell that I was blushing, and for a different reason than before.

“And I am also happy to be able to speak with you like this, Mister Lanchester, since I do not get the chance to do so at work,” she added, making my face feel even hotter and my chest tighter.

“B-But... aren’t you disappointed seeing how different I am when I’m here compared to when I’m at work?” I managed to ask her despite how nervous and confused I was.

“You are as wonderful here as a farmer as you are as a superior at work, Mister Lanchester,” she said with a smile so cute that I felt my whole body warm up.

She was a very beautiful girl to begin with, but now she looked even prettier. It seemed as if even the air around her was sparkling.

*Wh-What is happening to me? Why does my chest hurt like this?*

Still dazed, I asked Maria to call me Cyrus when we were here. What had I done? Under normal circumstances, I’d never have said something like that. I felt as if I had a fever.

Yet, Maria smiled once again as she said, “Yes, Mister Cyrus.”

I could hear my heart pounding even faster inside my chest.

## **Chapter 4: Lost Magic**

The day after Cyrus fell in love with Maria, I went to the field together with her.

I waited for her after work, and Dewey looked envious when he saw us together. I would have gladly asked him to come along if it were my field, but I couldn't do the same with Cyrus's field. Maria was an exception, since she was part of my plan to help him overcome his fear of girls, but I had no such excuse for Dewey.

I apologized to him in my heart, as he looked at the two of us walking away with a sad expression. *He's always so cute though. Makes you want to pat his head.*

On the other hand, though, Dewey was one of the characters who was supposed to bring Katarina (that is, me) to her doom... But how? Unlike Cyrus, he couldn't use magic, was shorter than me, and, most importantly, he was so cute. If anything, I think I could even win against him in a fight.

"Is anything the matter?" asked Maria, noticing that I was spacing out while thinking about that.

*Right, Maria's been working alongside Dewey all this time. I'm sure she knows a lot about him.*

"Ah, I was just thinking... Dewey's cute and small, but, uhm, can he like... lift heavy stuff and such?"

*Is he actually stronger than he lets on? Would I win against him in a fight?* Is what I actually wanted to ask, but that would raise too many questions.

"Lady Katarina, Dewey is a boy, so he would take offense to being called cute and small," she said with a dry smile. "And despite his looks, he is quite strong. He used to do a lot of manual labor at home."

That was surprising, but I guess you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. Now that I thought about it, I remembered hearing about him being raised in a poor, troubled household, and also about how he was picked on because of how smart he was... Maybe he was stronger than I had originally thought.

*Ugh! And I thought I could defeat him easily! My only hope is training to become stronger!*

We finally reached the field, where Cyrus was already waiting, though he looked more gussied-up than usual.

“Hello there,” he greeted us with an unusually radiant smile. Actually, he was probably mostly greeting Maria.

Romance novels say that people change when they fall in love, but this was just incredible. *Cyrus's fear of girls is cured, isn't it?* I thought, but unfortunately he still looked nervous when talking to her.

She started skillfully helping with the field, explaining that, “I often helped Lady Katarina when she was farming at the academy.”

“That’s wonderful!” he commented happily, showing that he had made at least *some* progress.

After that — possibly because of the *power of love* — Cyrus more or less kept talking with Maria. I was positive that at this rate, he’d overcome his fear in no time.

For our usual break, the blanket we were sitting on was larger than normal to make space for our new guest, and there were also sweets to go with the tea.

*I'm feeling some disparity in our treatment here... Oh well, a farming buddy can't compare with the girl you like, I guess.*

Maria, curious, tried the pickles. “I have never tried anything quite like this. It is delicious,” she said, munching on them with a smile. I was happy that she also liked them.

We then talked about pickling practices, Cyrus’s hometown, rice, and more, after which Maria started looking around herself.

“Apart from the field itself, the whole place seems to be cared for. Did you do all of this, Mister Cyrus?”

Now that she mentioned it, the area around the field, despite the lack of a proper pathway, had a well-trimmed lawn and no large rocks lying around. It was surprising, considering how hidden away this place was. Was it Cyrus’s doing, like Maria said?

“No, I couldn’t really manage such a large place all by myself. It was like this to begin with,” he said, shaking his head.

“Do you mean that this place was just cared for all along?” Maria asked, confused.

“Yes. It seems that back in the day there used to be a garden here. There was a magic spell in place to keep it tidy, and it must still be working.”

“A spell to keep the garden tidy?! That kind of spell exists?!” I asked, interested by this type of magic I’d never heard anything about.

“Yeah. But it’s Lost Magic now.”

“Lost Magic?” I asked. I’d never heard of that expression before.

“There are lots of different types of magic, right? As magic changes with the times, new types come along, and some old types become extinct. Didn’t you learn about it at the academy?” he said, chuckling.

I turned to Maria, and she was looking flustered. *Yup, turns out we did learn about it at the academy. I guess that’s one downside to my “forget everything I learned right after the test” policy.*

“But then, why did the garden disappear?” I asked, trying to change the subject to take attention away from my ignorance.

“I don’t know. The Ministry has a long history, with new things being built and old things being torn down all the time. The garden must be something left over from a project that was abandoned a long time ago.”

Indeed, the Ministry was as old as the kingdom itself, and a lot must have changed since its establishment. Maybe even this place, which was now empty and forgotten, had been different in the past.

“Right now it’s just empty land,” I said, looking around, “but if it used to be a garden, did it have like a pond or something?”

“There’s a circle made of stones right over those bushes. Maybe there used to be a pond in the middle,” said Cyrus.

“I’d like to see it,” I said, and he looked at me like a tired father hearing his child’s troublesome request. But then Maria added that she wanted to see it too, and he immediately stood up to guide us there.

We followed him and reached the place that he was talking about. It was a conspicuous circle of stones around what probably used to be a pond, but it had either been filled up or had naturally dried up. The pond looked as if it had been considerably smaller than the one in the Claes garden.

Most of the stones reached up to around my knee, but there was one that was wider and about as tall as me — it kind of looked like a tombstone from my previous world.

Curious whether there was a name or something written on it, I started cleaning the large, dirty stone with my handkerchief, but with very poor results. It was some *really* stubborn dirt.

“Lady Katarina, what exactly are you doing?” asked a confused-looking Maria.

“Oh, I was just wondering if there was anything written here.”

“Written? On the stone?” she asked, even more confused.

I had never seen a tombstone in this world, so maybe they didn’t exist here. That would explain her confusion. It would also mean that there probably wasn’t anything written on this stone here, but I figured that I might as well keep cleaning it up just to be extra sure.

After some serious rubbing and scrubbing, I finally managed to get rid of most of the dirt on the stone, but there was nothing written on it. However, I noticed that there was something sparkly.

*Oh? Is it a jewel or something?!*

I scrubbed the sparkly portion even harder — so hard, in fact, that my hand slipped and I ended up scratching my skin.

“Ouch!”

It was literally just a scratch, but it stung a lot, and I was bleeding.

“Lady Katarina! Are you okay?!” Maria asked while running towards me, then taking my hand into hers. “You are bleeding! I will heal you.”

She probably meant to use her Light Magic to heal me, but I felt bad having her use her powers for such a small wound (that was also entirely my fault).

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing,” I said, but she shook her head.

“It could get worse, and I wouldn’t want for you to be left with a scar,” she replied, so I happily accepted her offer. I let Maria grab my hurt right hand while my left one still rested on the stone.

A faint light appeared out of Maria’s hands. I’d already seen this happen a few times, but I was excited because this was the first time

I was the one actually being healed. I stared at the faint light... and all of a sudden, it turned into a blindingly bright flash. I shut my eyes, and even when I reopened them, all I could see was white light.

White above, white below, white left, white right. Nothing but white as far as I could see. White, empty space.

*I was in front of that stone just a few seconds ago... Where is this?*

I was stunned, but thanks to Maria, who was still holding my hand, I managed to stay on my feet. However, she was staring at her surroundings too, looking as surprised as I was.

“L-Lady Katarina... Wh-What happened to us?” she asked me nervously, her voice shaking.

“I’ve got no idea either. Where are we?” I asked, and noticed that my voice was a bit shaky as well. I was too scared and confused to move, but the silence made it all the scarier, so I kept talking. “Just a few moments ago, we were standing in front of the stone, and...”

Suddenly, a second flash of light forced me to close my eyes again. I fearfully opened my eyes, and saw an orb of concentrated light floating in the air. It was smaller than my head, and kind of looked like a light bulb. But unlike a light bulb, it wasn’t suspended from the ceiling — it was just levitating in mid-air.

“What is going on? What’s with this light bulb?” I asked, puzzled at the absurdity of this series of events.

“Light bulb? What’s that?” asked... the light bulb.

*D-Did the light bulb just speak?! What?!*

“Eek! It talked! It’s a ghost! Ghooost!!!” I screamed, terrified.

“That’s a mighty rude thing to call someone,” said the voice from the light bulb, sounding slightly displeased.

*I’m sure of it this time! The voice came from it!*

“It talked agaaaain!!! What kind of ghost are you?! Begone! Begone!” I shouted at it.

“Do me a favor and shut up, will you? We won’t get anywhere if you keep shouting,” it said in an annoyed tone.

I suddenly found that I couldn’t open my mouth anymore. I was trying as hard as I could, but my lips were sealed together.

“I’m just making sure you’ll stay quiet for a while,” it explained.

*This thing has terrifying powers! It looks like a normal light bulb, but it’s actually one heck of a ghost!*

“And now that I look at you, you aren’t even a *worthy one*! You just slipped up in here by mistake, didn’t you? What a troublesome kid.”

I couldn’t see the thing’s face, but I was pretty sure that it was mocking me. *How dare it?*

But I was feeling a bit calmer now. Maybe it was because I’d screamed the fear out of my system, or maybe because I couldn’t scream anymore. Either way, I looked at the light bulb which, even upon closer inspection, definitely looked like nothing but a light bulb. It didn’t even have any mouth. How was it speaking?

And then, after forcefully shutting me up, it started speaking to Maria. “Oh, it seems that you’re a worthy one, young girl.”

*Worthy one? What’s it talking about?*

“...M-Me? Worthy?” Maria asked, obviously scared and confused as well.

*She’s such a polite girl though. A light bulb starts speaking, and she just replies to it.*

“A worthy one, yes — a Wielder of Light,” it explained as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

*I still have no idea what it's talking about, but what I know is that I really don't like this thing's condescending tone.*

"...I am a Wielder of Light..." Maria said with a thoughtful expression.

"I know. Do you long for greater powers?"

"Greater powers? You mean... more powerful magic?"

"No. It's not about making your magic more powerful, it's about learning how to control it."

"What does that mean?"

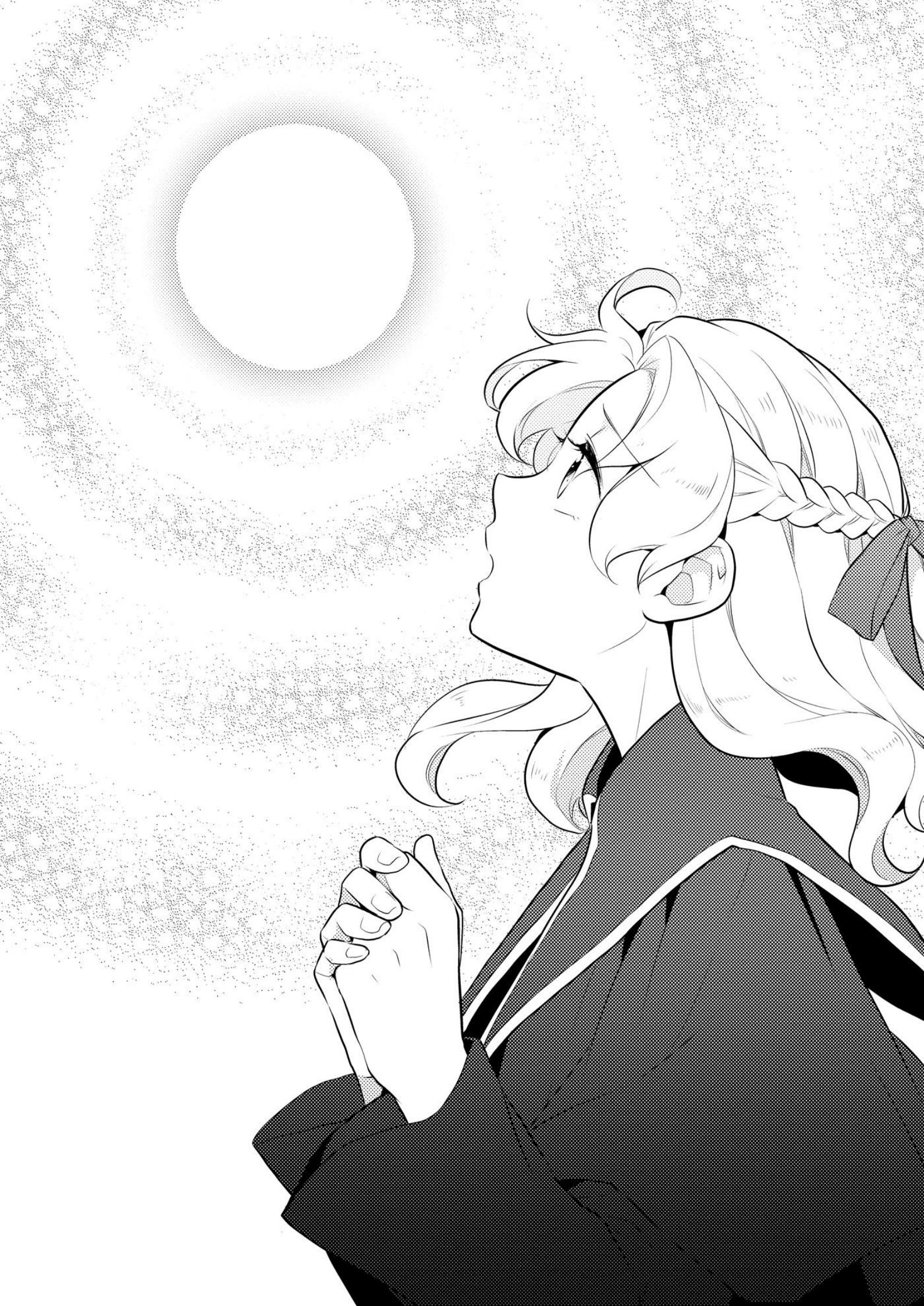
"I will teach you all I know about controlling magic. And *that* will make you much more powerful."

"More... powerful..." Maria said, looking at the orb and then, inexplicably, at me. Her eyes were staring into mine.

*Maria...? What's up?* I couldn't speak, so I had to communicate by blinking.

Maria nodded at me, as if to say that everything would be alright, before looking back at the light bulb. Her expression went from scared and confused to intense and fierce.

"I want greater powers," she said clearly.



The light bulb grinned. Well, it didn't have a mouth, so it didn't really grin, but it felt like it did.

"I see..." it said, satisfied. "If that's the case, find the covenant and come back to me. Then, I will teach you everything I know."

*What? She has to do stuff for him before getting her powers? And what's a covenant?* My head was full of questions, but since my mouth was sealed, I had to keep them to myself.

"Excuse me, this covenant you speak of..." Maria started speaking.

However, the light bulb interrupted her, simply saying "I'll be waiting," and there was yet another flash of light.

When we opened our eyes, we were back in front of the stone.

*What was that just now?*

Maria and I looked at each other.

"Hey, Maria... that thing just now..." I started saying, but then Cyrus came running towards us, visibly shaken.

"Hey! Are you two okay?! Where did you disappear off to?!"

He said that he saw Maria and me disappear instantly, and then he'd started running around to look for us.

"And when I looked back at the stone, you were back there... what happened?" he asked, but I was still too confused to explain it properly, so Maria started talking instead.

"To be honest, I am still trying to understand it myself..." she started, and went on to tell him what we had seen — the flashes of light, the white space, and the floating orb.

*I'm so glad she was with me. I'd never be able to explain something that weird so well.*

"If I hadn't seen you two disappear with my own two eyes, I'd have a hard time believing you," Cyrus said. "But after seeing how you vanished and then reappeared in the blink of an eye, it makes sense that you were transported... somewhere else."

He reflected silently for a while before speaking again.

"...This could be Lost Magic as well. It could be a spell placed here by the very person who built this garden way back when. That'd explain why the garden is being magically kept tidy to this day."

"So was it true, what the light orb said? Could it really grant me greater power?" Maria asked.

"I have no proof, but I'd say it's likely. As technology has advanced, magic users have become fewer, and their powers have become weaker. A lot of magic has been lost to time... If you could get some of that back, you'd definitely become more powerful, no doubt about it," Cyrus said, and Maria's face relaxed into a smile.

"I see. If so, I want to try my best to obtain that power. I will have to look for the covenant that the orb was talking about. I wonder where it is... If it is a book of some kind, perhaps it is in the library..."

"Hold your horses. Do you want to go to the library right now? It's already closed at this hour. And how do you plan on looking for something that you know nothing about?" Cyrus stopped Maria, who looked ready to run to the library that very second.

"...That is true. I should ask that light orb once again," she said, making for the stone.

"Wait, it's too late today. If you want to do that, wait until tomorrow," he said, and we decided to go rest for the day.

Maria and Cyrus saw me to the carriage. They both lived in the dormitory, so they would be going back there together.

“Maria Campbell looks tame, but she can be intense, huh?” Cyrus whispered to me. He was probably talking about how she wanted to go look for that covenant right away.

“Yes. She isn’t just some docile girl!” I said.

She was the protagonist of an otome game, after all. She was a strong girl who didn’t just wait to be saved, but who ran straight into danger when she had to protect her friends.

*I’ll have you know that my friend is cute and strong, sir.*

I left my two colleagues and rode back home, thinking of the weird events of that day. A white, empty space. A talking light bulb. Maria’s sudden eagerness. Just as Cyrus said, she could be intense at times.

That said, today she sounded even too eager, as if she were in a rush. Or was that just my imagination?

*She already has the ring made by Larna to increase her powers, so why would she need to become stronger? She’s always working so hard... She should learn how to relax. What kind of otome game protagonist works harder than the love interests? I wish that Cyrus would learn from her and try a bit harder to overcome his fears without running away.*

*Ah! I just left those two alone, but did Cyrus properly see Maria back to her room? I was so confused with all that stuff going on that I forgot about that... I hope he did.*

I was so worried about it that I didn’t even manage to fall asleep on the carriage like I always did.

★★★★★

After seeing Katarina off to her carriage, Mister Cyrus and I walked back to the dormitory together while talking about my plans.

For example we discussed how, if I really could achieve the powers that the light orb talked about, the Ministry itself could be interested

in aiding my search. But unfortunately, I had no proof that what I'd heard was true.

Mister Cyrus told me that he would report to his superiors and look into it, and that I should not do anything rash in the meantime.

"There's nothing to gain from scrambling ahead. There are too many unknown variables to this whole thing — diving in head first could be dangerous," he told me with a serious expression that left me no option but to agree.

"Anyway," he said right before we parted ways, "your Light Magic is already much stronger than anybody else's. Why do you even want greater powers?"

I thought for a bit before replying. "...I do not want others to protect me anymore. I want to be the one to protect them," I said, looking him straight in the eye.

"...I-I see," he said, before saying goodbye and making for his room.

I went back to mine, where I changed clothes and prepared for the next workday. I was too tired to go to the dining hall, so I made do with the sweets I had in my room before going to bed.

Today's strange events had left me exhausted. I had been so happy to be able to spend time with Lady Katarina after so long, and then all of a sudden we were transported to that mysterious place, hearing those incredible things... It all seemed like a strange dream.

But it was not. Lady Katarina experienced the same things, and Mister Cyrus also saw the two of us disappear.

*The covenant...* I did not know what that was, but I wanted to find it and become more powerful.

Since the time we first met at the Academy, Lady Katarina had always been the one protecting me. Every time I was in danger of being hurt, either physically or mentally, she would come out of

nowhere to rescue me. Even when I was kidnapped, she was the first one to show up.

And even during the examination, when we fought that dragon creature... That was so scary. Not the dragon, but thinking that Katarina could have died because of me. Had that happened, I doubted that I could have kept on living as before.

I did not want Katarina to stand in front of me to protect me, but I knew that she would never hesitate to do so, over and over. I knew that she was that kind of person, and that was one of the reasons why I held her so close to my heart.

I wanted the power to protect her. I needed much stronger magic, and I had reason to need it as soon as possible. Ever since the examination ended and we came back to the Ministry, I could ever so slightly feel an aura, a presence — an evil one. And I got the feeling that this presence was out to get Lady Katarina. It could all be my imagination, but I could not help but feel scared.

At the academy, Lady Katarina was once publicly shamed for things that she had never done. We later found out that it was all part of someone else's plan, but the feeling that I had at the Ministry reminded me of the one from back then.

It felt as if the universe was conspiring to take a loved one away from me. I absolutely did not want to lose Lady Katarina. I was ready to fight anyone — even the universe itself — in order to avoid that, and that was why I needed power. Lots of it. And fast.

I hoped in my heart that I could quickly find the covenant.

★★★★★

The day after meeting the lightbulb, I visited Maria's department during lunch break because I was curious about what she planned to do next. I had Sora come along with me, in case we'd be eating lunch with Maria and Dewey like on the previous day.

"Mister Cyrus reported to his superiors this morning, and now we are waiting for their reply before doing anything," she explained to me.

"I see. So you're not going to start moving just yet."

"...Exactly," she said with a disappointed look.

"Maria, I've told you this already, but don't push yourself too hard, okay? Learn how to relax. Breathe in, breathe out. In, in, out. In, in, out."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Sora asked, making Maria laugh.

After that, we called for Dewey and the four of us went to eat lunch together again.

I finished my lunch (today's special: stew) while chatting with Maria and the others, and before I knew it lunch break was over. Once I was back in the office and was preparing for that afternoon's work, Larna came back out of nowhere and told me and Sora to come to her desk because she had to speak with us.

At first I feared that we'd done something wrong and that she was going to scold us, but Larna looked pretty happy. As Sora and I walked towards her, I wondered what she wanted to speak to us about.

"I actually just received a mission from the higher-ups, and I want you two to help," she said, grinning.

"What mission would that be?"

"It's about looking for lost magic."

*Lost magic again. I've been hearing those words a lot since yesterday.*

“And the mission will be undertaken jointly by our department and the Magical Powers Research Department.”

*The Magical Powers Research Department? Wait... could it mean that we were looking for that lost magic?!*

I stared at Larna, eager to hear the rest.

“Katarina looks like she already knows what’s going on. It’s just what you think it is — the lost magic you and Maria ran into yesterday,” she said, before quickly explaining the details to Sora, who knew nothing about that incident.

“You got in trouble again?” he murmured in my direction. I tried to explain that it wasn’t my fault this time. I mean, it never was my fault — trouble just seemed to follow me around! I couldn’t do anything about it! Anyway, Sora just sighed wearily at my explanation.

Larna, who wasn’t really interested in our little quarrel, went back to talking enthusiastically about the mission. “We’ve been able to recreate some kinds of lost magic as far as keeping places tidy and such goes, but I’ve never heard of one that can transport people to another dimension. This is so interesting!”

I’d heard from my older colleagues that Larna was so into magic that she always went crazy about rare or interesting types of it. I’d also heard that when that happened, she forgot about everything else — including work.

Seeing how excited she was, I started worrying for the department’s wellbeing.

“Let me explain about this mission,” said Cyrus.

After hearing Larna’s explanation, we moved to a conference room. Maria, Dewey, and Cyrus had come from the Magical Powers Research Department to join Larna, Sora, and me. Apart from the

two directors, the rest of us were all newcomers. I wondered why that was — maybe it was some kind of test.

However, Cyrus told us that there weren't enough people available to dispatch on a mission that was based on such dubious information. Looking very sad, he added that he would still be attending to his normal director responsibilities, and that he couldn't help us that much throughout.

"Don't worry, Cyrus, I'll take responsibility here," said Larna, who was oozing enthusiasm.

"What about your responsibilities as department director?" Cyrus asked, perplexed.

"I have very talented employees to whom I can entrust everything. I'll focus on looking for the lost magic," she explained casually.

"There you go again... Raphael Wolt is going to get fed up with you," he said, his face having gone from perplexed to stern.

"There's no reason to worry about that."

"And on what basis can you say that?"

"Absolutely none."

"Speaking with you stresses me out..." Cyrus said with a sigh.

Anyone could tell that these two were incompatible. Larna was too unconcerned about everything, and Cyrus too concerned. My department colleagues had already assured me that "You can mostly ignore whatever Larna says when she's not talking about work."

"I asked for your help because you're the most knowledgeable about lost magic around here, but let's just operate independently as two departments. We'll both gather information and then compare and contrast here," said Cyrus, who obviously didn't want to work with Larna, and we started working as he said.

I had been looking forward to working together with Maria, so I was a bit sad about that. But we would still be able to meet when exchanging information, so I decided to do my best regardless.

“But where are we even going to look for information?” I asked once we were out of the meeting room, unsure of what we were supposed to do next.

“First of all, we’ll go see someone who’s an expert on lost magic,” Larna said joyfully.

“You know such a person?”

“Yes. He chases down lost and rare types of magic. He’s sort of a weird guy.”

If someone as weird as Larna was saying that, I could only wonder what kind of guy that could be.

“He doesn’t live in the Ministry, so we’ll have to ride on a carriage,” she said before starting to march away, with Sora and I doing our best to keep up with her.

The carriage brought us to a residential district not far away from the castle. The people living there weren’t nobles, but they were definitely well-off.

Larna knocked on the door of a house that’s size made it stand out even among the many large ones of that neighborhood. Someone, probably a servant, came out to greet us. They recognized Larna, bowed to her, and led us inside.

“Is the professor doing well?” Larna asked.

“Yes, he is as full of energy as usual,” the servant replied.

So we were here to see a professor. Larna had said that this man was an expert in lost magic, so maybe he was a teacher at a magic school.

Deep inside the house, we reached a closed door. The servant stopped in front of it and started speaking to someone on the other side.

“Master, you have visitors. May I open the door?”

Instead of a parlor, the servant led us directly to the professor’s room.

“Oh, hold on a second,” a man inside the room replied.

We heard rumbling and rattling. After a short while, the same man said, “There, come in.”

*What was all that noise just now?* I thought to myself, but I discovered the answer the second the servant opened the door and we walked inside.

I stared in awe with my mouth hanging open. The whole room was full of stacks upon stacks of books and documents, so many that anyone who was inside it during an earthquake would be buried under an avalanche of paper. That noise was probably the professor shoving some of those books aside.

And there he was, near the door: an old man with white hair and a white, bushy moustache, looking somewhat like Santa Claus.

“Oh, Miss, it’s been a while. How have you been?” he said upon seeing Larna, beaming at her with a smile so large that he looked like he was squinting.

“Well. And I am glad to see you doing fine as well, Professor,” Larna replied with a smile. “I have come here with some of my subordinates because there is something that I would like to ask you. May we have some of your time?”

“I see,” said the old man. “It’s a bit messy, but be my guests.”

He pointed to a table in the center of the room with some chairs around it. The servant who had welcomed us had quickly cleaned it

up so that it was the only surface not completely covered in books. I was touched by the speed-cleaning when I noticed that the servant had also prepared tea and snacks for us. *Impressive.*

We sat down facing the professor, and Larna introduced us.

“These are my subordinates, Katarina Claes and Sora Smith.”

“I am Katarina Claes. It is my pleasure.”

“I am Sora Smith. It is my pleasure.”

The man in front of us then spoke. “I am Morris Hyde. The pleasure is mine. People call me ‘professor’ and ‘doctor’ and whatnot, but I’m nothing more than an old man. Call me Morris, or Hyde, or whatever you like,” he said, laughing.

He looked like a pleasant, kind old man. But since it wouldn’t be polite to call him by his name or give him a new nickname, Sora and I decided to follow Larna’s example and just call him “professor.”

Sora and I told him about our backgrounds while drinking tea. I said that I was the daughter of a duke, and Sora talked about his story of scraping by as an orphan. This story was enough to surprise most people, but the professor didn’t bat an eye and just kept nodding and listening intently.

We also heard a few things about him, giving me the impression that he was a close acquaintance of Larna’s and that he was not an ordinary person.

The “professor” nickname, he told us, stuck with him because he used to work as a private teacher for noble children even though he had never actually taught in a school. The “doctor” one was given to him by some of his friends to taunt him for being so passionate about researching lost magic, but he wasn’t a researcher by trade and only looked into things that caught his interest as a hobby.

After chatting for a while, he took a sip of his tea and asked Larna what it was that she wanted to talk about.

"You see, we have just found an unheard-of type of lost magic on the Ministry's grounds..." she said. Then as if she'd been waiting all along for the opportunity to do so, she explained about how Maria and I were transported into another dimension and how a floating light orb had told Maria to find a covenant.

She explained everything in such detail that Sora started worrying. "Excuse me, Miss Larna, but is it appropriate to disclose all of this to people outside the Ministry?" he whispered to her.

"Oh, don't worry. I've got permission. And the professor's from the Ministry too, anyway. His name is still on the records, but he's already retired, as you can see," she said nonchalantly.

"My name is still on those records? I've retired! Tell them to erase that, will you?" the professor said.

"That is out of my jurisdiction," she said, deflecting the request.

"More importantly, do you know anything about this lost magic? That is your specialty, is it not?"

"More importantly...? Miss, you should learn to be a bit more... Ah, never mind, it's too late for that. A different dimension, a light orb, and a covenant, you say?"

The professor started thinking while staring at the ceiling. After a while he stood up, walked to a bookshelf (the whole room was basically a giant bookshelf, to be honest) and started looking for something. Not wanting to disturb him as he seemed so concentrated in his search, we waited while silently drinking our tea.

"Oh, here it is! Found it!" he said after a while, bringing a book back with him to the table. "A friend gave this to me many years ago, and I made a translation into our modern language. The content was so

unrealistic that I just left it to collect dust on a shelf, but here, take a look,” he said, opening up the book and moving it towards us.

More than the usual magic manuals that we saw at the Ministry, this looked like a fairy tale book, aimed at what in my previous world would be called “grade-schoolers,” with pictures and all.

“Excuse me... Isn’t this a made-up story, like a fairy tale?” I asked.

“Exactly,” said the professor. “It’s from a very old book of stories for children.”

*Just as I thought. How could that help us?*

“But forget that and take a look. Here,” he said, pointing to a specific part of the text.

*And the Prince was led into the garden which had been created with magic. There he met the shining goddess, who told him, “If you want greater powers, find the covenant and come back here.”*

“I will do so,” replied the Prince.

The content of the story was exactly the same as what had happened to me and Maria on the previous day.

“...But why? Isn’t this supposed to be fiction?”

The professor laughed at my surprised reaction. “Sometimes, old books talk about magic that was the norm back then and only just so happens to be lost now. Of course, some of them are pure fiction.”

“Professor, when was this written, and by whom?” asked Larna, leaning forward with eagerness.

“Miss, I understand your passion for magic, but please calm down. I’ll explain everything from the start,” he said with a smile. “The only information I have on this story is that it’s very old. I don’t know who wrote it, or when. The book that my translation comes from was given to me by a friend in the first place. This friend knew his way

around magic, and was convinced that the story was based on magic that once really existed. However, no matter how much I searched for evidence, I found none. I just translated it so that children could read it, seeing as it's a children's book anyway, but I'd completely forgotten about it until today."

"So you know nothing about the book... What about your friend?" Larna asked promptly, but the professor shook his head.

"If he were to hear of what happened, my friend would surely be ecstatic knowing that the magic is actually real. However he's not with us anymore, and I know nothing about how he got that book."

"Which means that we have no information at all..." Larna said, visibly disappointed.

"I told you to calm down. You really haven't changed at all, Miss!" the professor said, frustrated but amused. "I may not know about the book's origin, but the way to obtain the covenant is written right here."

"Really?! Where?!" Larna asked enthusiastically, and the professor reached for the book and started flipping its pages. After he found what he was looking for, he showed it to us.

*The goddess told the prince how to find the covenant so that he may obtain the power that he wanted.*

*"The covenant will draw to itself those who truly wish to find it. And, as soon as you find it, you will know."*

*The prince thanked the goddess and left the garden.*

"So... we just have to start looking for it and then we'll just find it?" I asked, with my head resting on one hand.

"That seems to be the case," the professor said while stroking his moustache.

"That doesn't tell us a lot about how to obtain it, though..." I said, unsure how to feel about that non-answer.

"Furthermore," the professor continued, "we can't tell whether all that the book tells is true. The author may have embellished the facts."

*I thought we'd finally found a hint, but we're back at square one...*

"Do you know of anything else that could help us?" Larna asked, trying to find even the smallest piece of information to work with.

"I'm sorry, but this is all I know," he said, but he let us borrow the book.

We thanked him and made to leave the Hyde manor. Right before we did so, the professor told us something.

"I don't know if knowing this would be useful to you, but in the story, the prince found the covenant in the form of a book in the largest library in the kingdom."

After that, Larna said that she would go questioning people who potentially held useful knowledge, and Sora and I were appointed to search the kingdom's largest library: the one in the Magical Ministry.

"The professor's room was so full of books and documents and all kinds of papers," I said while we were still in the carriage. That had impressed me the most out of anything.

"He's always loved collecting old and rare documents and manuscripts for his research. He has a research room, but it's completely full of papers," Larna explained. He had enough texts lying around to fill his research room and overflow into his study and guest rooms.

"His wife lives with him, but she doesn't want him to dump any more paper inside the rooms."

*Living in a house so full of books and documents must be hard. But there was something else I was wondering about...*

“Miss Larna, you’re on really friendly terms with the professor, aren’t you?”

She knew about his family, and she spoke very politely when addressing him. What’s more, the professor looked at her with the same kindness as a grandfather looking at his granddaughter.

Larna giggled, squinting slightly in a way that reminded me of the professor. “Yeah, we’ve known each other since I was a child. I used to go to his research room all the time.”

This explained the way he looked at her. He really did have the eyes of a grandfather thinking *“You’ve grown so much!”*

“So if you didn’t become acquaintances at the Ministry, how did you two first meet?”

Since she said that he’d known her since she was a child, that must have been before she started working at the Ministry. There were sometimes people around the Ministry who didn’t work there, but it certainly wasn’t a place for children to play around in.

“I used to know one of his friends. One day I was bored, and he told me he’d bring me to an interesting place, which happened to be the professor’s research room. I was so excited seeing all those books about magic around me,” she explained with a hint of nostalgia in her voice.

“Were you already interested in magic back then?” I asked, recalling what my colleagues had told me about her.

“Researching magic is something of a life mission for me,” she said with an innocent smile.

The carriage finally reached the Ministry, and Sora and I went to the library while Larna was asking more people for information.

*Sure, going to the library is the easy part, but now what? This place is huge and full of books... How are we going to find a single one which we don't even know anything about?*

“Since we have no clue, what do you think about beginning from the start and looking through each book in order?” I said, but Sora looked at me in dismay.

“That’s never going to work,” he said. “We should at least narrow our options.”

“But how? Even if we, say, ignored all romance novels and just looked at the books on magic, most books here are about magic anyway...” I said, pouting, and Sora sighed while putting a hand to his forehead.

“That’s not what I meant... We’re looking for an ancient magic book, right? So it can’t be among recent books. We should ask where they keep the oldest books and start searching from there,” he said.

“You’re right! Sora, you’re so smart!”

“I’m not. You should just use your head a bit more...”

Following Sora’s suggestion, we asked the librarian sitting at the counter where the oldest books were being kept.

“Oh? You two are also looking for ancient books? What a coincidence. Usually nobody ever cares much for those,” she told us, implying that someone else had already visited that area today. “I think the other people are still there, so try to cooperate and not take up all the space, okay?”

We went in the direction that she guided us to and found Maria and Dewey concentrating on reading some books. They were probably — well, definitely — looking for the covenant.

As soon as Sora and I stepped near them, they noticed us and looked up from their books. “Lady Katarina! Sora!” Maria said in surprise. Dewey, too, was staring at us with fluttering eyes.

“Oh, hi Maria, hi Dewey. We’ve come here to look for the covenant too.” I looked around, but didn’t see Cyrus anywhere. “Isn’t Mister Cyrus with you?”

“He has gone to question some people who may have useful information, and he also has his normal duties to attend to,” Maria explained.

As newcomers, the four of us could focus entirely on our search, but the directors had to balance this mission with their usual day to day work.

*That must be tough. Wait, that’s true for Cyrus, but Larna said something about entrusting her work to subordinates... So it’s the people left at the department who have it tough.*

My imagination went to Raphael and his desk, barely visible under a mountain of documents, and I decided that I had to find the covenant as soon as possible.

“Why are you two in the library? Pray tell, have you found any useful information?” While I was busy thinking, Sora asked Maria and Dewey with the most polite speech he could muster.

“Mister Cyrus told us to ask several researchers about it,” Dewey said, “but none of them have ever heard of any magic like this, leaving us with no clue. We are looking through these old texts to see if there is any mention of a kind of magic like the one in the garden.”

“So you aren’t looking for the covenant itself?”

“Well, of course we would be more than happy to find it, but I doubt things will play out that well,” Dewey replied calmly. He was so mature for a thirteen-year-old... At that age, I was romping around the mountains in my previous world and in the garden in this one.

I was looking at Dewey, appreciating how much of a grown-up he was, when our eyes met.

“Lady Katarina, did you happen to find anything?”

“Why, yes, we found a children’s book,” I said, and both Dewey and Maria stared at me questioningly. *I may have left out too much of the story there.*

Sora, after aiming a look of disapproval in my direction, started explaining the whole story behind our coming to the library: our meeting with Professor Hyde, what he had told us, the book we read, and its contents.

“That professor must be an incredibly smart person to be able to remember that book just by hearing your story!” Maria said in admiration.

“Do you have the book with you right now?” Dewey asked.

“Miss Larna took it to do some more research, so you will be able to see it if she comes here,” Sora replied.

“That means that if we keep searching, we may just happen to find it. And if the covenant is really supposed to be in the largest library in the kingdom... I am glad to know that searching this place was not a terrible idea after all,” Maria said.

She looked so relieved that I couldn’t bring myself to tell her that the professor had said that we had no way of knowing which parts of the book were true, if any.

With that, Sora and I joined Maria and Dewey’s search.

“How have you been looking through the books? In the order that they’re placed on the shelves?” I asked.

“No,” said Dewey, surprised. “We have been looking at them in chronological order, from oldest to most recent. Since nobody had heard of that magic, it is likely that it is very ancient.”

“Dewey, you’re so smart!”

Dewey blushed as he laughed off my comment, but Sora gave me one of his wry looks and whispered, so quietly that only I could hear it, “I told you to use your head a bit more...”

*Using my head has never been my forte. I think I can manage to look through some books though.*

“Okay then, we’ll start searching with you.”

Sora and I went to the shelf that Maria showed us, the one that had the oldest books on it, and took some that hadn’t been checked yet.

I froze.

“Hm, these old books have no pictures or charts; they’re so boring. Uh? What’s wrong?” Sora said, noticing how I wasn’t moving at all.

“I can’t read this,” I told him sadly.

Surprised, he looked at my book. “And... why is that?” he asked. That meant that *he* was able to read it.

“This is ancient script!” I replied. The book wasn’t written in our modern, everyday language, but in an old one that I couldn’t understand. “Do you mean you can read it, Sora? How?”

“It’s just that I once fell in love with a girl who said she liked ancient— Er... I just learned it because I needed it for work. Didn’t you learn how to read it at the academy?” he replied with a further question.

Sure, there were lessons on ancient script at the academy, just like the ones on classical Japanese that we had in school back in my old world. But to be honest, I never liked either of those subjects. I only studied as hard as I could before tests, having my smart friends teach me the most important parts and just memorizing those. As soon as I passed one of those tests with the bare minimum of required points, the information I'd crammed inside my brain would just evaporate, leaving nothing behind.

This had already been one of my special skills in my previous life — I called it “forgetting useless stuff.”

Because of this, I couldn’t read a single letter. Just to make it clear: not even *word*, but *letter*. Not a single one.

Since there wasn’t much point in lying, I admitted to everyone that I couldn’t read any of it. Maria and Dewey were also surprised, and the latter, just like Sora had done, asked me how that could be possible, since I was supposed to have studied that at the academy.

I started feeling really bummed out, and I stared at the floor in a mixture of embarrassment and self-pity.

“But were you not able to read that old story at professor Hyde’s place?” Dewey asked.

“No, that was a modern translation that the professor had made so that children could read it,” Sora explained for me.

Now that I thought about it, that was obvious. There was no way that such an old story would be written in modern language, and I only had the professor to thank for being able to understand it. Back at his house, the thought just hadn’t occurred to me.

“But this is quite the problem. If she cannot read ancient script, she will not be able to check most of the books in this area,” said Dewey, looking troubled.

“Yup,” said Sora, who, maybe because of how disappointed in me he was, had forgotten about using polite speech.

*What am I going to do? I’m completely useless!*

“If that is the case, you could check stories instead of these ancient books,” Maria said.

“Stories? What do you mean?” I asked as I looked up, noticing her smile.

“The hint that you found was inside a story, so you could try checking other stories written in modern script. They could hold something valuable.”

*Maria, my angel, why are you always so kind?*

“I guess that could be true...” Sora said.

“Yes, there is certainly a possibility...” Dewey said.

And thus, I started looking through stories. Thanks to Maria, I avoided being completely useless. She was such a good girl that I considered fighting off all the love interests to marry her myself.

I thanked my beautiful angel for her kindness and made for the area where the story books were being kept.

“Hm, it’s all boring stories,” I murmured to myself while flipping the pages.

The story books were kept near the library’s entrance, in a place easily visible from the librarian’s counter. Most of the texts here were technical books on magic, but there were also normal story books, if only a few (of course there were no romance novels, though).

However, these stories weren't particularly exciting — they were the kind of classical story that you'd find in a school textbook. The writing was also full of metaphors, making it difficult to understand.

*Oh well, still better than those ancient books though. At least I can read these. Thank you, Maria...*

A lot of these stories had a prince as protagonist, and he would usually end up married to a kind and beautiful princess or other noble girl. The explanation of how the protagonist used magic to defeat the villain was always so lengthy and detailed that it made you forget about the story itself. *Do we really need this many details?*

After all, I was looking for hints about lost magic, so I couldn't skip those parts... but most of the magic featured in the books was of the kind I'd already heard about anyway.

While I was focusing on one of the books, someone entered the library and started talking to me.

“Miss Katarina? What are you doing here by yourself?”

I looked up and saw that it was Cyrus. “Oh, Mister Cyrus, are you done with work?”

“Not yet, but I wanted to check on Maria and Dewey.”

*What a proper, thoughtful boss.*

“I see. They're reading through ancient texts right now.”

“I know that, but... Sorry to ask again, but what are you doing here by yourself?”

“Me? I'm reading through these story books.”

“Stories? And why would that be?” he said, looking perplexed. I explained about the story that the professor had shown us, and Cyrus responded, “He showed you a book like that? As expected of Morris Hyde; he's so knowledgeable.”

“You know him?”

“He’s famous as a great scholar, you know. Well, he’s also infamous for his difficult personality, which makes it difficult for people to talk to him despite his undeniable intelligence,” he said.

This was surprising to hear. “What?! He wasn’t like that at all! He let us in to talk to him in his room without a hitch!”

“That’s probably because Larna Smith was with you. I’ve heard she used to live amongst royalty, so she must have lots of connections.”

“She did say that she’d known the professor since she was a child... Wait, did you say that she used to live with royalty?!”

Despite being her subordinate, I didn’t know much about Larna apart from her knack for disguise and her passion for magic.

“Yes, I heard so directly from her, but I don’t know anything about her family. Some say that she’s a noble, but nobody except for a few of the higher-ups knows for sure about her background.”

It turned out that my superior’s background was classified.

“There are a lot of people like that in the Ministry, though. Just look at me. I come from a small farming village, but people treat me like a high-ranking noble,” Cyrus said, laughing at himself.

Then he got back to the subject at hand. “I understand why you’d want to look through these books, but why are you doing it alone? There aren’t that many here, so wouldn’t it be faster if you all cooperated and got it over with quickly?”

*Ugh, this is so embarrassing... I wish I didn’t have to explain it.*

“Well, actually...”

I told him about how I couldn’t read ancient script.

“You graduated from the Academy of Magic, correct?”

“...Yes.”

“And they teach ancient script there, correct?”

“...Yes.”

Confused, he looked at me silently. I felt so bad that I once again stared at the floor as I murmured, “I could read it back then, but after the tests I just kind of... forgot all of it...”

After a few moments of unbearable silence, Cyrus spoke again. “...I see,” he said. “Keep checking these books.”

He then went off to the area where Maria and the others were looking at the ancient texts, so I followed his order and kept doing my best to flip through the pages.

As the end of the workday grew closer, Larna came back and told us that she’d already interviewed several people. We then went back to the same conference room where we had been debriefed in the morning.

Cyrus, being the one in charge, spoke first. “I have asked historians and ancient magic researchers in and around the Ministry, but all of them said that they had never heard of any such magic. I sent Maria and Dewey to research ancient magic texts — did you two find anything?”

Maria and Dewey looked at each other, and the latter spoke. “We have checked dozens of books on ancient magic, but none of them mentioned the spell we were looking for. However, there still are several books that we have not yet checked.”

“I see. Good work. Keep on searching those books, then,” Cyrus said to Maria and Dewey, before turning to the people from the Magical Tool Laboratory. “Please tell us what you’ve found.”

We'd already told them about the professor's book, but Larna explained everything in detail once more. She might have been a problem child of sorts within the Ministry, but she really was smart. Her explanation was comprehensive and easy to understand, so much so that Cyrus, who had only heard the story from me, was surprised by several points throughout.

After leaving us, Larna had gone to find more information about the book, but, unfortunately, she had found none.

"I'm planning to go farther from the Ministry tomorrow to ask more people about the book, but I don't expect to find anything. The story said that the covenant will draw to itself those who look for it, and the library in the Ministry is the largest one in the kingdom. Realistically, that's our best bet at finding it," she said, and so it was decided that we'd be searching in the library on the following day as well.

The workday was now over, but Maria said that she would go back to the library to do some more research.

"There's no rush," Cyrus said, stopping her. "You're still a newcomer, and you aren't used to working here yet. It's way too soon to overwork yourself."

Despite what he said, Cyrus went back to his office to finish his own work. He probably wouldn't have time to tend to the field and relax for a while. Maybe because she was influenced by his diligence, Larna said that she'd be going to her office too, leaving us four newbies in the meeting room.

We prepared to go back home, and despite the fact that everyone but me actually lived in the dormitory, they all casually followed me all the way to the gate.

While we walked there, the conversation was naturally drawn towards the topic of searching through the books.

"You guys are all so incredible, being able to read through all of those heavy, difficult books," I said in awe.

"I haven't read even half of what those two have. They're the awesome ones," Sora said. He wasn't trying to speak politely anymore, probably because he'd gotten used to Maria and Dewey.

"Not at all," said Maria, smiling at her younger colleague. "Dewey has done much more than I have. He is so smart."

Dewey's face instantly turned red. Seeing his love grow in real time like that was really endearing.

We eventually reached the gate, and I hopped into the carriage. Tomorrow would be another long day of searching through books.

## ***Chapter 5: The Covenant***

We all kept looking for hints about the covenant for a few more days, but we had no luck. After all, it took a lot of time for the prince from the book too. There weren't any details about the number of days, but it said that he had looked in a cave full of monsters, a dark forest, and more before finally finding it.

I briefly considered looking for the covenant in caves and forests ourselves, but when I thought about it, it didn't really make sense. Why would you go there to look for a book? Wouldn't you start with the library? But maybe he was able to find the covenant in the library exactly because he had suffered those failures in other places.

"Maybe we should go fighting tanuki in the forest..." I murmured while looking through a book.

"Stop talking nonsense and focus on looking for hints," said Sora sternly.

That was my way of looking for hints, but seeing the face that Sora was making made me reconsider how good my tanuki idea was.

After a few days, thanks to the efforts of the talented Maria and Dewey, we finished looking through most of the old books. I had already finished looking through the story books since there weren't that many to begin with.

All that was left to do was for Maria and Dewey to look through the remaining ancient-script books, while Sora and I read through those that, while also old, were written in our modern language.

Cyrus and Larna, in the meantime, kept working on their normal duties while interviewing people. (Larna, to be precise, was having her subordinates take care of her normal duties.)

However, no matter how many books we checked, none of them said anything about the covenant. Since Professor Hyde had found a new

hint for us in so little time, I'd been expecting things to go more smoothly.

I was getting tired of spending day after day staring at letters, and I remembered nostalgically the manual labor and cleaning I'd done before that. I wondered how much longer it would take before our search was finished and I could get back to that.

"I can't even focus my eyes anymore..."

I wasn't used to reading difficult books. I had no problem with romance novels, but doing this kind of research for several days in a row was taking its toll on me.

"It's going to be lunch break soon, so why don't you go on ahead and rest? I'll follow you as soon as I'm done with this book," said Sora, seeing how exhausted I was.

I did as he said and left the library. I didn't hate libraries, per se — in fact, I loved the libraries of my old world, full of all kinds of novels. But after all the reading I'd done in the past few days, just being there was enough to make me feel tired.

Breathing some fresh air instantly made me feel better. "I'll have a nice lunch and then do my best again in the afternoon," I said to myself.

"Katarina?" It was the voice of someone who I hadn't expected to see here — Jeord.

"Prince Jeord? What are you doing here?"

"I have come to the Ministry for training. What a pleasant surprise to see you here," he said with a smile.

After graduating from the academy, all of my friends had started working. The nobles mainly took after their parents' duties, which is what Keith did. I'd heard that Jeord and Alan, as royalty, were now much busier with diplomatic work than they were last year. Last time

I went to the castle, Jeord had mentioned that he'd just come back from something like that.

Despite being this busy, he was also training at the Ministry. I knew he was an overachiever, but that sounded like a bit too much.

"You're training? Aren't you tired?"

Jeord was usually smiling as if nothing could stop him. That made sense to me when I was playing the game and he was just a character, meant to be charming above all, but now he was a real person, who could get tired and even hurt. The problem was how good he was at hiding that.

"Thank you, but I am fine. You, on the other hand, seem quite exhausted. What is the matter?"

*Does it show that much?*

"I've been doing research for work, but with no results." Of course I couldn't disclose any details, but I figured that saying that much would be fine.

After thinking for a moment, Jeord replied. "It is often the case that when you cannot find something, it was right beside you all along."

"Is that a quote?" I asked, intrigued.

"Yes. Mine."

I dropped my jaw in surprise, and, while my mouth was still open, Jeord threw something inside it.

*What?!*

I was obviously surprised at first, but quickly realized that it was a piece of chocolate.

"Nothing quite like eating sweets when you need energy. Next time you are free, by all means, let us partake of some delicious dessert together," he said while gently caressing my head.

Whether it was because of the sweet chocolate melting in my mouth or because I was being patted on the head, I started feeling warm inside.

Sora then came out of the library as well, and was as surprised as I was to see Jeord.

“I have heard that you are looking after my Katarina here at the Ministry. You have my gratitude,” the prince told him.

“Oh, no need to mention it,” Sora, somewhat taken aback, replied.

The bell signaling lunch break rang, and we were joined by Maria and Dewey. Jeord, after greeting the two, reminded me of his invitation and then left.

The four of us then went to the dining hall together. Along the way, I heard Sora murmur to himself, “Phew, that was scary. He was smiling, but his eyes were burning. Was he trying to threaten me or something?”

He sounded tired from all the reading as well, so I decided to give him a couple of good recommendations for lunch.

After recharging with a good meal, we went back to work. Once again, I was silently flipping through the pages of relatively ancient books together with Sora. I kept reading and reading, but found nothing useful. I let out a big sigh.

“You are working really hard,” I heard someone say from behind me. It was the smiling librarian, who had come to put some books back. She must have heard me sighing. I’d spent the last few days in the library, so she was getting used to seeing me.

“Yes... I’m looking for something, but I can’t find it no matter how much I search,” I said.

“That must be tough. I only wish I could help you somehow,” she replied, looking preoccupied as she saw my clearly exhausted face.

“Thank you, I really appreciate that.”

“If you are having that much trouble finding what you are looking for, perhaps it is back in the forbidden library?” she said with a laugh.

“Forbidden library? What is that?”

“You have never heard about it?”

“Not until now!”

“I see... Perhaps people outside my department do not hear about it as much,” she said, referring to the Library Department. As it turned out, the existence of this “forbidden library” was common knowledge there.

“It is a special section of the library that only a few select people can enter.”

“What?! That kind of thing exists?” I said, and she laughed again.

“Hahaha, of course not. There are a lot of rumors about it, but that is natural for a place as old as the Ministry. Every department has its own stories and myths.”

“Oh...” I said, disappointed, and she gave me a few words of encouragement before returning to the counter.

*If there really is such a place as the forbidden library, the covenant just has to be in there. If this was a game, it'd be a given. You open the door and there it is, the shining covenant, waiting to be picked up.*

*Too bad we aren't in a game. Wait, what? A game? Scratch that, we are in a game! And FL2 is set in the Ministry!*

With that in mind, I realized that the forbidden library probably did exist. I looked at Sora, who was close enough to have heard the conversation between me and the librarian.

“Hey Sora, what do you think of that?”

“I think it’s worth a shot. We should probably tell the others about it,” he said after thinking for a while.

And so, we went to the corner of the library where Maria and Dewey were sitting.

“This word connects to this one, you see?”

“Oh, you’re right! Dewey, you’re so smart!”

The two were hunched together over a single book, with Dewey explaining something difficult to Maria. His face now looked red and very happy.

*I can’t interrupt his moment of joy like this. Maybe I should wait,* I thought to myself.

“I know what you’re thinking, but we have no time for that,” Sora told me before barging in. He could be so cold...

Since Sora’s entrance had disrupted any semblance of romance anyway, I followed him up to our two friends and explained what I’d heard from the librarian.

“I have never heard about this forbidden library...” said Dewey, looking thoughtful.

“Neither have I, but we are still newcomers, after all. Maybe Mister Lanchester or Miss Larna know something about it,” said Maria.

That made sense — even if we didn’t know about it, our bosses, who’d been working here for years, might.

“But the librarian said that it was only a rumor, right?” asked Dewey.

“Well, yes...” I said.

Of course, I couldn't explain to him that it was likely to exist because we were living in a game. As I struggled for words, Sora came in to help.

"It may only be a rumor, but so what? The book we got from the professor is a fairy tale for kids, and we're still using that as a hint," he said. Both Dewey and I looked surprised. "What are *you* getting surprised about?" he asked me.

He probably thought I should have realized that from the beginning, which I had, but I hadn't given it any deeper thought than that.

Sora looked at me with an expression between disappointment and despair and went on talking. "Just because it's a rumor doesn't mean there's no truth behind it. The book we got from the professor is evidence of that. So the rumor about the forbidden library could also be based on a real place."

*Oh, that's impressive.* Sora wasn't brainy in the same way as someone like, say, Dewey, but he was smart in his own way.

"I agree. We should ask Mister Lanchester about it," said Maria, who, unlike me and Dewey, didn't seem to be surprised by Sora's words. She had a determined look on her face.

And so, we took a break from reading through the books and went to ask Cyrus about the forbidden library. Luckily he had just finished one of the tasks he was working on, and he happened to have the time to come with us to the meeting room to listen.

"Unfortunately, I've never heard about that," he said, looking troubled, "I know that there are many strange rumors around the Ministry, but I don't really involve myself in anything that isn't directly related to my work, so..."

I'd forgotten about it after his confession on the vegetable field, but Cyrus wasn't really the type to talk about things other than work. It was no surprise that he wouldn't know about rumors.

"We would probably have better luck asking Larna Smith about it. I don't know whether she's there, but I'll try going to the Magical Tool Laboratory," he said as he made to leave.

But we couldn't ask our boss to do that, especially considering how busy he was. Larna worked in the same department as Sora and me, so we offered to go look for her ourselves. With that, it was decided that I would be the one to go, so that Sora (who was better at that kind of thing) could report on our progress on the ancient books.

When I opened the door to my department's office for the first time in a few days, I was met with the sight of my colleagues looking dangerously tired.

"...Are you people okay?" I asked while standing at the door. When they noticed me, one of them raised his voice until he was basically screaming.

"Lady Claes! Is your special mission finished?!"

"N-Not yet," I stammered. Disappointed, he collapsed onto his desk.

I was still looking at him, trying to understand what was going on, when Laura walked towards me. She asked me the same question and, upon hearing my negative answer, reacted with just as much disappointment as her colleague.

"Excuse me, but what is happening here?" I asked her.

"Miss Larna disappeared again. And what do you know, just as she did that, we were hit by an avalanche of documents that need our attention. As a result, everyone is so overworked. If that special mission ended, Miss Larna wouldn't leave the office as much..." she said, staring into the void.

My earlier hope — that Larna might learn to be responsible by seeing Cyrus's example — was dashed.

Since I couldn't find her, all I could do was go back and report that to Cyrus. A newcomer like me wouldn't be able to help my colleagues with the paperwork anyway. I'd just be a nuisance.

"I'm sorry I can't be of help. I'll be going," I apologized.

"Don't worry, I know you have other duties to attend to. But why did you come here in the first place? Didn't you need something?" Laura asked.

Despite being so tired from work, she was still thinking about me. I was lucky to have colleagues like her.

"I wanted to ask Miss Larna about one of the Ministry's myths, but since she isn't here, it doesn't really matter."

"The Ministry's myths? You mean one of those rumors about the place?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes. Why, do you happen to know anything about those?"

"Not really. I don't care much for myths. But I know someone who does," she said, then told me the name and department of that person. "It's not too late. You should be able to see her if you go right now."

I thanked Laura for her help and hurried to the department she had told me about. The workday was almost over, but I wanted to ask her about the library today if I could. The sooner we found the covenant, the sooner Larna would be back at the office, and the sooner my colleagues would get some help with all of their work.

I was running so fast that I reached my goal in no time. I took a deep breath, looking at the plate on the door that read "Biomagic Research Department." I'd visited this place a few times so far and regretted it every single time. If the director caught me, he probably wouldn't let me go for quite a while.

I knocked very lightly on the door before opening it, hoping not to be found by either Delius or that wretched monkey. The serious-looking woman standing right next to the entrance looked at me with some surprise.

“Oh, you’re the girl from before...”

“Before?” I repeated. She looked somewhat familiar, but I couldn’t recall where I’d met her.

Seeing my confusion, she laughed dryly. “I’m sorry that our director and his monkey caused you so much trouble back then, and then again not much later.”

“Ah... You’re the one who came to visit me after I lost consciousness and then helped me a few days ago!”

She was the woman who’d dragged Delius to me to make him apologize! And then, she saved me when he was bothering me in front of his department!

She smiled and nodded, confirming my hypothesis.

“Thank you for all of your help, and also for your present when you visited me after I lost consciousness,” I said, referring to the snacks she had brought me while scolding Delius and the monkey.

“Don’t mention it! It was all our fault to begin with,” she said.

Seeing her apologize again made me feel for her. She wasn’t to blame for anything, yet she had to deal with all the problems caused by her director and his monkey...

Thinking about it, I got nervous at the idea that the monkey could appear again out of nowhere.

“Don’t worry,” she said, noticing that I was looking around, “the director is at a meeting today, and the monkey is in its cage.”

I let out a sigh of relief, which made her laugh.

“Anyway, can I help you with anything?” she asked.

I said that Laura had told me that a certain “Alice” from this department could help me with my search.

“Oh, that girl... Sure, I’ll call her here for you. Just wait,” she said with a troubled expression.

*Why did she react like that? I’ve got a bad feeling about this...*

She came back, followed by a girl so beautiful that she looked like a doll. Since she was probably older than me, I should have thought of her as a *woman* rather than a *girl*, but she was so short and cute that she looked younger.

Interestingly, her getup also made her look like a friend of Laura’s. She hadn’t changed her uniform drastically, but she had adorned it with several small ribbons, similar to the big one she had on her head. Her face was covered in meticulously applied makeup, and her nails were painted cute colors. She was treading the fine line between acceptable and unacceptable work attire (unlike Laura, who had crossed the line by so much that she’d probably lost sight of it).

“I’m Alice. What do you want?” she asked me as I was staring at her. Her voice was much colder than I’d expected from her lovely appearance.

“Oh, yes, I’m Katarina Claes from the Magical Tool Laboratory. Miss Laura told me that you were knowledgeable about the Ministry’s myths, and I wanted to ask some questions about them,” I said, and her eyes immediately started sparkling.

“Are you interested in the wonderful legends surrounding the Ministry?!”

“W-Well, I need to learn about them for work...”

“Oh, I see... work. So, what do you want to know? I’ll answer all your questions!” she said, still looking at me with sparkling eyes and

completely forgetting that I had mentioned work. I was happy that she'd help me, but her eyes reminded me of Delius's when he was talking about animals.

I told her that, rather than listening to her by myself, it'd be better if she could come to the meeting room and talk in front of everyone.

"Vice-director, my work for today is done, so I'll go with this girl. She said she wants to learn about the Ministry's myths, so I just have to help her," she said to the woman I'd been talking to before, who I now realized was the vice-director of the Biomagic Research Department.

"Okay," she said, looking concerned, "but try not to bother anyone."

"Me? Bother anyone? I'm going to help them! They're going to be grateful, if anything!" Alice replied, pouting.

The vice-director saw us off silently. Her expression told me that I was in for some trouble, but I was glad that I could at least find someone to ask about the forbidden library.

Everyone in the meeting room looked confused when I walked in with Alice, so I explained what had happened.

"You've got quite the dream team here..." Alice murmured to herself.

After all we had Cyrus, the director of the most popular department, and Maria and Dewey, who were known throughout the Ministry as two of the most promising newcomers.

"So," Alice then said to all of us, her attitude unchanged despite being in front of Cyrus, "which myth do you want to hear about? I know around 30 of them."

"There are that many?!"

I thought that there would be seven, like the stereotypical seven myths circulating in all the schools of my old world.

“Of course — the Ministry is large and has a long history. Some are similar to each other, though, like the ones about the screaming voices one can hear at night, which...”

“Thank you, but we don’t really care about that. What we want to know about is the library,” said Cyrus, stopping Alice before she could start her enthusiastic lecture.

She looked a bit displeased, as she obviously wanted to tell us about those stories. Nevertheless, she obliged.

“There’s the one about the cursed book that kills everybody who opens it after a few days, or the one about the invisible librarian who wanders through the library at night...”

*That’s not quite it... I mean, those sound scary, but I don’t even like horror stories. That thing about the invisible librarian is enough to make me determined to never go to the library at night ever again...*

Cyrus, unlike me, seemed completely unfazed. “That’s not what we’re looking for. We’re interested in something called the forbidden library. Do you know anything about that?”

“Oh, that one?” Alice replied, and her glaring expression changed to one of boredom.

“Don’t you know about it?” Cyrus asked, again completely unfazed.

*Surely he’s noticed how her expression changed, right?*

“Of course I do, but it’s very boring as far as stories go.”

Cyrus asked her to explain, and, despite being clearly disappointed, she did.

“It’s a story so boring, in fact, that most people outside the Library Department probably don’t even know about it. There’s a special library that only a few select people can enter... That’s it.”

“And does it really exist?” Cyrus asked, and Alice grinned.

“That I don’t know. It’s a very old story, so it could be true, but it could also just be a rumor.”

“I see. You said that the people in the Library Department know about this. Do you think there’s someone in there who could tell us more?”

“I doubt it. You’d probably only hear what I just told you. I like researching myths, even the boring ones, so I already asked all the librarians about it.”

She really was serious when it came to myths.

“So we can’t get any hints about it...” Cyrus said sadly.

“Well, maybe the Library Department Director could tell you something more,” Alice said after thinking for a while.

As everyone looked at her excitedly at hearing that, she started looking a bit troubled.

“I can’t make any promises though. When I went to ask about it, all the answers I got were so roundabout that I thought that there was something being hidden there. I didn’t learn anything new, though, so I just gave up. But maybe you’ll have more luck than I did.”

That was exactly what we wanted to hear, so we decided that the next day we’d be going to the director to ask about the forbidden library.

“Thank you for your help,” Cyrus told Alice.

“I was so excited about being able to talk about the Ministry’s myths after so long, but you only asked me about one of them...” she said, puffing up her cheeks in disappointment.

“But we heard what we wanted, so that’s...” Cyrus started to say, confused.

“But I want to tell you more!” said Alice.

The bad feeling I’d got looking at the vice-director’s expression had now been justified. Alice was a very peculiar girl. I realized that she wouldn’t be satisfied until we listened to her, and I was the one who had brought her here, so I spoke up.

“Tell me more, then. I’ll listen,” I told her.

Cyrus looked disconcerted, but Alice was smiling enthusiastically.

The former went back to his department to finish his work, while the latter stayed with me, Maria, Dewey, and Sora to tell us more scary and mysterious stories about the Ministry.

Before long, I regretted offering to listen to her. She kept talking and talking well after our workday was over and until the sun had completely set. Eventually, Cyrus had to come back and rescue us.

Plus, for a few days after that, I couldn’t walk to the toilet alone at night.

The next day, the whole “covenant search party” met in the conference room. Even Larna, who had been MIA for a while, finally showed up at the Ministry and was dragged along by Cyrus. He filled her in about the forbidden library, since she wasn’t there to hear about it the day before.

“One of the Ministry’s myths? That could be an interesting lead,” she said after listening to Cyrus’s explanation.

“Are you knowledgeable about that kind of thing?” I asked her.

"Well, not as much as Miss Alice, but I do know about a couple of them. For example, there's one about the screams that you can hear in the middle of the..."

"Please, we've heard more than enough about that," I promptly interrupted her. After what had happened the previous day, any mention of the scary myths surrounding the Ministry gave me chills.

"Everyone knows how obsessed Miss Alice is with that kind of thing. She's a weird one, isn't she?" Larna said, grinning wryly.

"...Yes. She told us about a bunch of terrifying stories," I said with a pained expression.

With that, Larna started telling us more about Alice. As it turned out, she was well-known throughout the Ministry for being obsessed with weird and terrifying stories, such as the Ministry's myths. What's more, she knew no greater happiness than retelling these tales to other people. In one word, she was weird.

If only I'd known about that, I could have avoided having to sit through her stories...

Larna noticed the sadness on my face, and in a backhanded attempt to comfort me, said, "Don't beat yourself up though; all newcomers fall for it the first time."

The conversation finally steered away from Alice. "Anyway, this is the first time I've heard about the forbidden library," Larna said.

"It seems that, for the most part, only people in the Library Department know about it, and they generally consider it to be a baseless rumor," Cyrus said.

"Of course they don't care for myths and fables... Most people in that department are straight-laced realists," Larna commented, and I remembered the librarian who had laughed at the idea of the

forbidden library. She had been the one to mention it, and yet had quickly dismissed it as nothing more than a rumor.

"However," Cyrus said, "it seems that the Library Department's director tries to avoid questions about it, so it's possible that there's something more to find there."

Larna's pupils widened a little. "You expect me to believe that Daurand, that prissy coward, knows anything about myths? Please."

It seemed that Daurand was the name of the Library Department's director.

"That would definitely be unlike him," Cyrus replied, "but I thought that it would still be worth the effort, so I went ahead and contacted him. He said he would be free in the afternoon today."

Cyrus really worked fast.

"You really work fast, huh," said Larna, apparently thinking the same thing as me. "If that's the case, let's go meet him later today," she continued.

"What? You plan on coming too?" Cyrus asked, confused and clearly disappointed.

"Of course. You're a talented guy, Cyrus Lanchester, but I'm better at getting information out of people," Larna said, ignoring Cyrus's clear chagrin.

"...Fine," he said, restraining himself from saying anything else with what looked like a considerable effort.

Larna nodded, and then said, "Good. Then you, I, and Katarina will go."

"Wait, why should *I* go?!" I asked. Surely Cyrus and Larna would be enough on their own?

"The fact that you're Duke Claes' daughter is known throughout the Ministry. We can leverage your rank's influence to pressure Daurand into talking. Don't worry, you won't need to do anything. You can just sit there and listen."

"Did you just say 'pressure him into talking'?" I asked, feeling like I had just heard something pretty shady.

"If he doesn't want to talk about it, then we need to compel him somehow, right? So we either need some information to offer him in return, some weakness of his to blackmail him with, or influence to coerce him," she said, sounding like a much better villainess than I could ever aspire to be.

Much to my dismay, since I wanted to go back to delivering packages as soon as possible, it was decided that we would keep looking through books until the afternoon.

After several unsurprisingly fruitless hours of labor, it was time to meet with the Library Department's director, and Cyrus and Larna made me follow them into an office where the director was already waiting for us.

I looked at him, with his business haircut, black-rimmed glasses, scrawny physique, and generally tense demeanor, and I felt that Larna's assessment of him as a "prissy coward" was pretty apt.

"Thank you for having us," Cyrus said.

"Why, I don't mind at all," Daurand replied, with an expression on his face that said that he *did* mind, and quite a lot at that.

After Cyrus and Larna, it was my turn to greet him and introduce myself, at which point Daurand was visibly shaken. Larna had already told me that he came from the family of a not particularly wealthy viscount, which made the title of duke all the more impressive to him. I'd already met several peculiar department directors at the Ministry, but none quite like him.

Larna, peculiar department director extraordinaire, started talking to Daurand, whose face had become even more tense.

"We want to know about the forbidden library," she said without mercy.

"...Yes, I heard as much from Lanchester. I wonder why'd you go through the trouble of asking me about such a silly rumor," he said, trying and failing to sound nonchalant.

"We're on a special mission straight from the higher-ups. So, where's the forbidden library?" Larna asked, speaking as if she knew that what she was looking for did indeed exist.

I was surprised by her boldness, but I just sat there in silence as instructed, waiting for the director's answer.

"Larna... there is no such library. It's just a fairytale," he said after a short pause, visibly troubled. "As are most of the Ministry's myths. You're wasting your time."

"That's not the case," she said matter-of-factly.

"Huh?!" Daurand and I said in unison. Cyrus remained silent, but he also looked surprised.

"There is no smoke without fire," she said, sounding pleased at our surprise. "Even myths have a basis in reality. Take the one about the nightly screams as an example. Tired employees, forced to deal with piled-up work without pause day and night, scream their anguish in the hallways. That's the truth that the myth is based upon."

That was one of the stories that Alice had told us the previous day, and, while I was surprised to know that it was real, I was glad to know that the screams didn't belong to ghosts or whatever.

"And that applies to most other stories in the Ministry," she said, looking straight into Daurand's eyes. "So, where's the library?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't know anything about it," he said, avoiding her stare.

"That's a shame. In that case, give us permission to search the library on a day when it's not open to the public," she continued.

"Th-That's..." he said, fumbling for words, and Larna grinned.

"What's the problem? We're just going to nose around a bit, especially directly under the library's floor," she said, making Daurand's eyes twitch with worry. "Is anything the matter?" she asked with an even larger grin.

After staying silent for a while, the Library Department's director sighed. "How much do you know?" he asked.

"Only as much as I just told you. We could break the entrance open, but it would probably be best for everyone if you just opened it for us."

"Your information network is really impressive," he said, sighing again. "Fine. I shall see you to the forbidden library."

"Very well. It seems that I won't even need to tell your wife that you secretly had lunch together with a young, pretty librarian," Larna said, making Daurand's face turn even more pale than it already was. In a perfect villainess move, she had also planned to blackmail him if necessary.

In the end, we got the power to enter the forbidden library without either me or Cyrus having to do anything. I had a feeling that with this, we were one step closer to getting the covenant.

Daurand told us that the other librarians didn't know about the forbidden library, so he would show us the entrance after everyone had finished their work for the day.

“Miss Larna, how did you know that the forbidden library was underground?” I asked while we were walking back to the meeting room.

“Know? How would I know that? I just took a guess.”

“Whaaat?!“ I screamed, shocked at her reply. Cyrus had frozen in place too.

“I looked at the floor plans for the library, and they matched the actual dimensions. Remember that the Ministry is full of smart people — if the plans were off, someone would notice. I figured that it could have stayed reasonably hidden all along if it were underground, so I just bluffed and pretended I knew all along. He was fooled so easily that I didn’t even need to use any of my other strategies to get him to talk. What a waste,” she said, disappointed.

Larna wasn’t very serious about her job, and she was often scolded by her subordinates, especially Raphael. But listening to her now, I thought that maybe she was more talented than she let on.

I also remembered that one of my department colleagues had told me that *“Larna is easy on her allies, but merciless to her enemies.”* Daurand wasn’t exactly an enemy, but I still felt bad for him.

We kept organizing all the information at our disposal until the workday was over, and then all six of us made for the library.

There was no need for all of us to go there, but, maybe because the forbidden library was too interesting to pass on a chance to see it (I, for one, was pretty excited about it), nobody offered to wait in the meeting room for the others to return.

Daurand was standing alone, looking grim, waiting for us. “I thought only the two directors would be going inside!” he said, sounding aghast. He obviously hadn’t expected six people to show up.

“Is that a problem?” Larna asked, and he was immediately cowed.

“Well, it’s a small room, so...”

“We’ll just go in one by one.”

“But it’s very dusty, so it’s not ideal for young boys or girls to go there...” he said, looking at Maria and Dewey.

“We would not mind,” the two said in synch, Maria looking fierce and Dewey looking offended.

I was also offended by the fact that I didn’t get so much as a glance when “girls” were mentioned, but Sora patted my shoulder and told me not to think too much about it.

“I see,” Daurand said with a defeated sigh. “Come along, then.”

We followed him to the ancient book corner, and then he stepped behind a bookcase, probably to press some kind of switch. We heard a click and, after a moment, the bookcase started moving slowly and loudly.

After almost a minute, the movement stopped and a staircase leading underground was revealed to us.

*There sure are a lot of hidden rooms in this world. I wonder if it's trendy or something. Back in that mansion we entered when I was still at the academy, we found what we were looking for after discovering the hidden room, so I'm sure the same will happen this time too. Covenant, here we come!*

“This way,” Daurand said, stepping onto the staircase, and we followed him.

I wondered why he’d let us all come in at once despite saying that the room was small, but once we were inside, I realized that there was actually plenty of room.

The room was large, and full of shelves that were stacked with books. It was about as big as the library — we called it that even though it was basically just a room with several books in it — in the town where I used to live before I was reincarnated.

I also thought that there must have been some magic at work over the place, because, despite being underground, it was tidy and well-lit. It was incredible that such a place could be hidden under the library without anyone noticing.

“This is incredible,” said Maria, unable to contain her awe.

“They call it the forbidden library, but as you can see, it’s just a perfectly normal collection of books. Now that you’ve all seen it, we can go back,” Daurand said while we were still gazing at the room around us.

*What? We just got here, and we still haven’t had time to look for the covenant!* I thought, and Larna gave voice to my complaints.

“No, we still need to search it. We came here to look for a book, and we can’t leave until we know whether or not it’s in here,” she said.

“And what book would that be?” asked Daurand, with an annoyed expression on his face.

“I can’t tell you the details, but it’s a book about lost magic,” she replied, and he sighed yet again.

“You could have told me that earlier! There’s no book about lost magic in here. You’d better search elsewhere.”

“Wait,” said Larna. Now she was the one with a worried expression, for once. “You mean you know the content of all the books kept in here?”

“I haven’t read all of them, but I at least know what kind of books they are. So I can tell you that the book on lost magic that you’re looking for is not here.”

“...But we do not know much about the book that we are looking for. Please let us check, even just for a bit,” said Maria with a determined look in her eyes.

When asked by a pretty young girl, Daurand couldn’t just refuse her as coldly as he had Larna. “Well, but...” he said, blushing and mumbling. While he was still coming up with an appropriate response, our trusty Larna had already walked to the shelves and was now flipping through the pages of a book.

“Oh, would you look at this...” she said to herself, sounding interested.

Daurand, upon hearing that, ran over to her and snatched the book out of her hands. “Y-You’ve seen it, right? All the books in here are of the same kind as this one. So now you know that the book you’re looking for is not in here,” he said, sounding extremely nervous and looking dangerously red in the face.

“What do you mean?” Cyrus asked.

Larna, grinning, took another book and handed it to him, telling him to take a look.

As soon as he opened the book, Cyrus blushed.

“Daurand, explain this! Why are books such as this kept inside the sacred library of the Ministry?!” he asked with the book still in his hand.

“That’s why I keep them hidden in here!” Daurand replied, pulling at his own hair.

“I see... but why are you keeping them in the first place? And you don’t mean to tell me that all of these books are like this one, do you?!”

“They are,” he replied, grimacing. “Every last one of them.”

“...This is unbelievable. But why? Who would do this?”

“Generations of library directors have collected them, little by little, as cultural artifacts.”

“...There’s something wrong with the Library Department...”

“I, myself, was shocked at first! The previous director brought me here and showed me these books, saying that they’d been passed down from one director to the next. What could I do?”

Cyrus and Daurand were talking fervently, but I still had no idea what was going on. I looked at Larna for an explanation.

“The only thing these books tell us is what fetishes the library directors of old were into. These are erotic books,” she said casually.

“Larna, please, couldn’t you choose your words better?” asked Daurand, who was gnashing his teeth.

“Erotic books?! All of them?!” I blurted out loudly in surprise.

“That’s not something a noble lady should say out loud,” Sora commented, but how could I help it? Who *wouldn’t* be surprised at this huge room being completely full of erotic books?

Larna laughed at my surprise. “At least that’s what Daurand says, and all the ones I’ve seen so far fall into that category. Some of them with just text, some with illustrations, some about love affairs, some about stealing lovers, and oh... this one’s about two men,” she said after looking at one of the books near her.

*There are even Boys’ Love books?! Sophia would be thrilled. Lately, she’s been getting bored with normal romance and has started getting interested in that genre.*

I was listening to Larna with utmost interest, but Cyrus, as strict as always, scolded her.

“Larna, mind what you say around women! A place so full of despicable materials is bound to be bad for the body and the spirit. Maria, Katarina, get out of here.”

I didn't see how it could be bad for the body, but he sounded dead serious.

I'd read a lot of romance novels in my time, but nothing that was straight-out erotic. Dewey, considering his age and upbringing, probably hadn't either. Sora, our most respectable older colleague, probably had first-hand, non-fictional experience with that kind of stuff. But as for Maria, I wouldn't be surprised if she didn't even know about the existence of books like these. All in all, it was probably better for us to leave.

"But the covenant could be hidden among these other books!" Maria said, refusing to go.

It was an unexpected comment from the most unexpected source.

"But Maria, the books in here are not appropriate for you..." Cyrus said, looking worried as he tried to convince her, but she looked like she wasn't going to give in any time soon.



Had Sora said the same thing, I'd have thought that he just wanted to look at the naughty books, but it was obvious that Maria had no such ulterior motive. She really wanted to find the covenant.

When I had first heard about the forbidden library, I had gotten a weird, inexplicable feeling that the covenant would be hidden here. Maybe Maria had felt something similar, which was why she was so intent on searching the place before giving up.

One would think that a place called the “forbidden library” would hold valuable ancient magic books or tomes full of dangerous spells, but... erotic books? I could see why they’d want to hide them, but why go through the trouble of building this underground room? Was the idea born out of the same instincts that compelled boys to hide adult magazines under their beds?

And anyway, why was this place so big? I couldn’t believe that they’d have built this room specifically for erotic books. I mean, if they really had, that would be impressive in its own right.

Larna, who had been thinking something similar, spoke up. “When was this place even built? I doubt that it was conceived as an erotic library to begin with.”

“I’m afraid that it was built specifically as an erotic library, right alongside the main library. The wife of the first library director was a very jealous woman, who wouldn’t forgive her husband if he kept as much as a single erotic book. She told him to throw away all the ones that he had collected before marriage, but he only pretended to do so, and hid them inside his mansion. However, she eventually found them, and the director, who had no better place to hide them, had this room added to the library, which was then under construction. This is what I’ve been told,” Daurand explained slowly, as if he were

narrating an epic tale, probably unaware of the fact that he had just called it an “erotic library” himself.

“That’s incredible,” said Larna, stupefied. “But does this mean that all of the books here were his? That would be a ridiculous amount for a single person, and some of them are more recent than others.”

“Some of them are, but several of the men who succeeded him added their own so that their wives wouldn’t find them. Some directors even added to the collection after they retired, which is why there are so many,” he explained, looking extremely tired. This great erotic collection must have come with great responsibility.

“That explains it, but that would also mean that the books just keep piling up.”

“Indeed. Which is why every once in a while I throw out ones that have become too old or worn out. I mix them in with other trash from the Ministry so nobody finds out.”

Having to do that while also making sure that nobody sees these books must have been a tiresome task... *Hm? I can’t put my finger on it, but something sounded off just now.*

“That must be tough,” said Larna, sympathizing with Daurand as he let out a deep sigh.

“It is. It’s a very troublesome duty,” he said. Then, looking at all of us, he continued, “So please keep this a secret. If those strict colleagues of mine knew that I was looking after this place, they’d all start looking down on me. And my wife, while lovely, can’t stand this kind of thing. She could even divorce me if she found me going in and out of a place like this. Please, please don’t tell anyone about it.”

He looked so intense in his plea that we all nodded gravely.

“...Thank you,” he said with tears in his eyes.

And so, since the director insisted that there were only erotic books in the library, and since Larna, Cyrus, and Sora all checked for themselves and found the same thing, we all went back upstairs.

I had been positive that we would find the covenant in the underground library, but now we were back to square one. We'd also already checked most of the ancient books in the library, which made me think that maybe the covenant wasn't in the Ministry at all. Which was weird, considering that this was, without a doubt, the largest library in the kingdom...

*Wait a second... What was that thing that sounded so off before?*

"Isn't there any place in the Ministry, besides the library, where ancient books are kept?" Maria asked Daurand while I was still thinking to myself.

"I'm sorry, but there isn't, at least not that I know of."

That was inevitable. If it wasn't among the other ancient books, it couldn't be anywhere else. Earlier, he'd also said that the old erotic books were being thrown out, so... *Wait! Of course!*

"Mister Daurand! You said that you throw out those erotic books when they're too old and can't be read anymore, but does that also apply to the other books in the library?" I asked so enthusiastically that he was surprised.

"Yes. We see if they can be repaired, and if they cannot, and it is judged that they do not hold particular value, we get rid of them."

This meant that even if the covenant really had been here, it could have been thrown away because it was too worn out! That hadn't occurred to me at all until then.

"And what do you do when you throw them out? Burn them?" I asked, fearing the worst.

“I don’t actually know. We throw them away, but other people take care of it from there.”

“And who are these other people?”

“The Magical Tool Laboratory,” he said, and I turned back to look at Larna, who was grinning.

“When we get the books to be thrown out, we don’t get rid of them straight away, just in case there’s a useful one amongst them. Except for the ones that were given to us a long time ago, they should all still be in a warehouse within the Ministry.”

So there was another place besides the library where we could look for books! I looked at Maria, who looked back at me and nodded.

“Miss Larna, please show us that warehouse!” I said.

“Yes, please!” Maria echoed.

“Since this all started in a garden that’s kept tidy by magic, I assumed that the book would stay in mint condition as well, so I didn’t even consider looking at the discarded books. It might be worth our while to check though,” Larna mused. Then she smiled at the enthusiastic Maria. “I’d tell you to wait until tomorrow, but you don’t seem able to wait any longer. I’ll show you the place, but you’re not allowed to keep searching until late at night,” she said, and then guided us to the warehouse.

The covenant, which I had almost given up on finding, now seemed to be within reach again, even if the chance of actually finding it was still minuscule. I really hoped that it would be somewhere in that warehouse.

The large warehouse, used for storing things that didn’t immediately need to be on hand, wasn’t far from the Magical Tool Laboratory office.

Larna unlocked the door and we all entered. The place was a bit dusty, possibly because people didn't go there often — after all, nothing that people would normally want was stored here. It looked huge from the outside, but when we went inside, I saw that it was so full of stuff that it actually had very little free space left.

"Hm, I think books were over here..." said Larna, starting to walk forward. If she hadn't been there with us, finding the place where the books were being kept would have been a feat all on its own.

"Oh, here they are," she said pointing to a bunch of books. Literally a bunch, since they weren't neatly stacked on shelves like in the library, but just lying around in piles on the floor. There were so many that they could fill a small library room.

"Looking through these won't be easy," I said to myself.

"Of course," said Larna, who had heard me. "They're all piled up at random, and you need to move all the ones on top before you can even see the ones on the bottom. This will take a while, so let's start after the weekend."

We had the next two days off, so it made sense to rest and start searching on Monday. I was nodding at Larna when I noticed Maria walking towards the books by herself and then stopping in front of them.

"Maria?"

She removed a few books from a pile and then took one of them in her hands. This was so sudden that we were all staring at her in confusion.

"Maria? What are you doing?" I asked her.

"I have finally found it," she said with a smile.

"Found it? You can't possibly mean..."

I stared at the book she was holding. It was a dusty, old book with a cover which had lost almost all of its original color.

“Yes. This is the covenant,” she said, shocking everyone.

*What?! The covenant?! For real?! How can she even tell?!*

“Maria, how can you be sure that that is the covenant? And why did you go straight for that one in the first place?”

It was Larna who asked this, but everyone else was probably thinking the exact same questions.

“I am not sure of the reason, but I just realized it as soon as I saw that pile of books. This is the one that I have been looking for,” she replied, with a stare so intense that nobody could doubt her words. Regardless, anyone who knew her also knew that she never lied anyway.

“The protagonist of that fairy tale was able to tell that he had found the covenant as soon as he saw it, but could such a thing really work in reality? Do you mind showing that book to me?” Larna asked.

She took the book from Maria’s hands and opened it. “This is...” she said, staring at the book’s contents.

*What is it?! Is it a book on incredible, unmatched magic powers?!* I was leaning forward, hanging on Larna’s every word.

“...an introductory book on basic magic.”

“Whaaaat?! But why?” I found myself screaming. The whole thing made no sense anymore.

“How am I supposed to know *why*? I’m just telling you what I see. Look for yourself,” Larna said, handing me the book, which was full of... ancient script, of course.

“I’m sorry, I can’t read this...” I said, giving up immediately.

“Oh, right,” Larna said, and then explained that it described very basic magic that academy students learned at the start of their first year.

Since all the other people around could read the book — unlike me — they all took turns looking at it and then asking Maria the same kinds of questions.

“Are you sure that this is the covenant?”

“Yes. I am positive.”

“But why does it only talk about basic magic?”

“That could be on purpose, so that people cannot tell what it is really about.”

“It’s no wonder that they wanted to throw it out, since it only describes basic stuff and it’s this battered.”

Once again, I felt sad about being left out of the conversation because of my ignorance. *Maybe I should go back to studying ancient script. Like, right now,* I thought to myself, and took the top book from the pile closest to me. It looked as worn-out as the one that Maria had found, and inside it were tons of difficult letters which I didn’t understand.

I quickly realized that kind of study wasn’t for me — looking at difficult script made me sleepy. I wished that Larna would build a magical tool to automatically translate books.

“Well, it seems we achieved our goal here, so let’s go home. It’s quite late already,” Larna said, and only then did I realize how late it had gotten.

“Let’s get out of this dusty warehouse,” she said, and I quickly followed her, amused by the fact that she also thought it was dusty.

Once we were all out of the warehouse and ready to go home for the day, Larna said, “As soon as the weekend is over, let’s bring that covenant to the garden.”

“Actually, I would like to go tomorrow. I can go by myself, if you give me permission,” Maria said timidly.

“Maria, we know next to nothing about this lost magic, and we can’t tell what could happen. We can’t have you go there by yourself,” Larna replied, and Maria nodded sadly.

“But I get that you want to try out that magic as soon as possible. If it were me, I’d go right now. But I wasn’t able to get inside the rock by myself,” Larna continued.

“Larna, when did you even try that?” asked Cyrus, suspicious.

“As soon as I heard about the garden. How could I resist trying out a type of magic as rare as that? But unfortunately, it didn’t work. Judging from what Maria and Katarina said, and what was written in that fairy tale, I think that only Light Magic users can enter the rock.”

Cyrus put a hand on his forehead. The fact that Larna had tried to enter the secret dimension inside the rock wasn’t really surprising.

“So, as I said, I understand why you’d want to try it out as soon as possible. Tomorrow we have no work, and I’m free... So free, in fact, that I may just so happen to take a stroll through the Ministry to kill the time,” she said, grinning like a child, and Maria’s face instantly lit up with happiness.

“Thank you!” she said with a bow.

*What are they talking about? I think I’m missing something here,* I thought, and I looked at Sora, hoping for an explanation.

“What she means is that she can’t do it officially, but she can go with Maria to try out the covenant as long as they keep it a private thing,”

Sora, who had immediately realized what I wanted to ask him, whispered.

*So tomorrow Maria is going to go back to that dimension with the covenant?*

“I’m also free tomorrow! Please let me come,” I said. I’d been helping Maria in her search all along, so I wanted to see Maria as she got her new awesome Light Magic upgrade.

“Larna, if Maria and Miss Katarina are going then I’ll go too, just to be safe,” Cyrus said, and was soon followed by Dewey and Sora. Eventually, it was decided that, on the next day, we would all go to the lost magic garden together.

After we decided on a time to meet, the workday was finally over, and I went home.

“We finally found it,” I said to myself while stretching my tired body on my bed. “But I never thought it’d be in one of the Magical Tool Laboratory warehouses all along.”

After all the trouble we’d been through, it was inside a place owned by my department... It had been right under our noses the whole time.

I remembered what Jeord had said a few days ago, and realized that he was right. My fiancé was really incredible.

I took off my uniform and threw my bag onto the desk — if Anne were there, she would have scolded me for not walking to the desk and gently placing it there, but I was alone, so it didn’t matter.

The bag landed perfectly where I wanted it to, thanks to years of practicing the art of throwing toy snakes. Unfortunately, however, the bag opened and all of its contents spilled out.

*I should have walked to the desk like a good girl,* I thought while picking up my stuff from the floor, and... *Wait, what's this?*

It was the book I had tried to read in the warehouse. Larna had hurried us out of the place, so I had mindlessly put it in my bag and ended up bringing it home.

*Ah, why did I do that...?*

At least it was a book from the warehouse, so it wasn't like anyone was going to need it anytime soon. I could just put it in my bag and bring it back to the Ministry the next day.

I heard a light knock on the door, and when I asked who it was, Keith replied.

"Oh, you aren't sleeping yet today. May I talk to you for a while?"

"Of course. Come in," I said. He opened the door a crack and peeked his head inside, but he just shook his head while looking preoccupied.

"No, not this late at night. I see you still aren't heeding my warnings... not that it surprises me," he said sadly. "But anyway, you have work off tomorrow. Do you want to go out somewhere together?" As he asked me this, every trace of sadness on his face disappeared.

Unfortunately, I had to go to the Ministry tomorrow despite the fact that I had no work. I explained that to him, and he started looking slightly irritated.

"Weren't you supposed to only work a few days each week, and only a few hours each day? Father doesn't seem to care, but I think that you're working too much for a girl of your lineage."

Indeed, I'd meant to join the Ministry part-time at first, but since I was having trouble learning about everything I needed to do, I realized that I needed to work more hours if I didn't want to be left

behind. That was why I had personally asked to work as much as the other newcomers.

Mother agreed with me, saying, "*You would probably make less trouble working by yourself than by becoming someone's wife,*" so I was now working full-time. Furthermore, because of the search for the covenant, I'd been coming home late for the past few days.

I looked at Keith and his irritated face, with the cheeks slightly puffed up. He looked manlier than he had when we'd first met, but he still reminded me of his young, childish self.

"Big Sister, Prince Jeord will be here tomorrow. Let's leave before he does," he would tell me, puffing up his cheeks like he was doing now.

Now that I thought about it, I hadn't given Keith any attention lately. I stretched my hand and put it on his head as he was still standing right outside my room. I used to be able to stroke his flaxen hair so easily, but now he had become so tall that it took some effort.

"I'll be back home early tomorrow, so let's go out to play together when I get back," I said, running my hand over his head.

"...You're always so..." he murmured, but his voice was so feeble that I didn't hear.

"What?" I asked, stepping closer to him, but he stepped away from me.

"...Thank you. Goodnight," he said, practically running away and leaving me no chance to say him goodnight back.

As he was walking away, I heard him chant a sort of prayer:  
"Restraint! Restraint! Restraint!"

*I wonder what that's supposed to mean.*

It was also then that I remembered that Jeord had invited me for sweets on my next day off, and that I would need to tell Keith about

that. But as soon as he left, I immediately got sleepy and quickly departed for the wonderful world of dreams, forgetting all about it.

## **Chapter 6: A New Power**

When I reached the Ministry the next day, Larna greeted me with a shocked expression.

“Miss Katarina, why did you bring your brother with you?” she asked, looking at Keith, who was standing by my side.

“When I told him that it wouldn’t take me that long, he insisted on tagging along...”

I was planning to go out to spend time with him after coming back from the Ministry, but he said that if it wasn’t going to take me that long then he might as well come with me. I tried to talk him out of it, but I never stood a chance at winning against him in a debate, so he ended up coming to the Ministry. I was embarrassed at being accompanied by my brother, but he didn’t seem to either notice or care.

“I shall not bother you while you work — I will wait quietly by the side as you perform your tasks,” he said.

“In that case, please wait in the guest room until we’re done,” Larna said.

Eventually Cyrus, Maria, Dewey, and Sora showed up. Leaving Keith behind, we all went to the garden where we’d first found out about the lost magic.

“Your brother must be worried about you,” said Sora, who was walking alongside me as he always did during work.

“Worried about what?” I asked. Now that I was a working woman, I thought that I was able to handle myself just fine.

“Exactly,” he said mockingly, refusing to explain himself any further.

We then reached the garden and approached the magic stone, taking a path that didn't go through Cyrus's field so that nobody would notice it.

"Is this the one? It just looks like an ordinary stone to me," said Dewey, sounding confused. This was his first time seeing it.

"Good! Now, let's try activating it!" Larna said excitedly as soon as we were there.

"...Calm down. Shouldn't we check it more carefully before we do that?" Cyrus said, sporting the stern expression that he seemed to reserve exclusively for Larna.

"Don't worry, I've already checked it thoroughly," she said, implying that she'd already investigated the place when she was here without us.

"This white rock is probably a switch of sorts. The last time the stone was activated, Katarina was touching this rock while Maria used Light Magic on her, right?"

"Yes," Maria replied.

"I've been thinking about it, and, taking into consideration other magic-activation conditions, I've reached the conclusion that when Light Magic flows into the stone, the lost magic is activated, summoning the user into another dimension," Larna explained as she stretched her hand towards Maria. "Let's test my hypothesis. Maria, place a hand on that stone and use your Light Magic."

"Yes..." Maria said, taking Larna's hand and walking towards the stone.

"Wait a second, why are you holding Maria's hand?" Cyrus asked Larna.

"I just want to go to that other dimension together with Maria. Katarina was transported together with her, and I'm sure that this was because she was touching her at the time."

"I agree that that's probably the reason... but I'm not so sure Maria will be safe going together with you. I'll come along as well," Cyrus said.

However, since Maria already had one hand on the stone and the other hand inside Larna's, he stopped, unsure what to do.

"It probably doesn't matter what part of her body you're touching. Just grab her somewhere," Larna said.

"...Grab her... somewhere..." said Cyrus, blushing and freezing still.

He had become able to talk with Maria, but touching a young girl — and one he liked, at that — was probably still a bit too much for him.

*You still have so much to learn...* I thought, feeling like an old woman looking at her grandson, but apparently his hesitation was not as well received by Larna.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked, before releasing Maria's hand, grabbing her arm instead, and then pulling Cyrus's hand onto Maria's.

"Maria, do it," she ordered enthusiastically.

"Y-Yes," Maria replied, activating her magic.

Light started flowing out of the hand that she had placed onto the stone, and then Maria, together with an excited Larna and a blushing Cyrus, disappeared.

"...It really worked."

The three of us left were awed at what had just happened.

“I knew this was supposed to happen, but damn, they really disappeared. I gotta admit that I’m surprised,” Sora said, looking shocked.

“That can only be described as disappearing into nothingness...” said Dewey, who sounded thrilled about it.

“I was together with Maria last time, so I didn’t know how it’d look from the outside,” I murmured, impressed. Larna was talking about another dimension, but I wondered where they had gone to.

I walked closer to the stone and took a good look at it. Except for the white sparkly rock coming out of it, it had nothing out of the ordinary. That other dimension couldn’t be inside the stone itself, could it? It was a big stone, but not *that* big.

Curious, I tried going around it and knocking on it.

“Stay still and wait until Maria and the two directors return. It could be dangerous,” Sora said as I was circling the stone. Lately Sora was always scolding me, and he was starting to sound like Keith.

“Don’t worry, I’m just looking!” I said, but I knew that Sora would get mad at me if I spent too much time loitering near the stone.

Before leaving it alone, I tried to put my ear on it, exactly behind where the white rock was on the front, to see if I could hear any sound coming from the inside.

Out of nowhere, Pochi stuck his head out of my shadow and barked.

“Pochi! You know that you’re not supposed to leave my shad—” I started saying, when all of a sudden I couldn’t see anything anymore.

*What is going on?!* I thought, confused. I blinked repeatedly until I finally saw my body, but nothing else. I was inside a large empty space, with nothing but pitch-black darkness all around.

I got a feeling of déjà vu... Something just like this had happened to me recently.

*Oh, yeah. The other dimension that I was teleported to together with Maria.*

That other dimension was white and blindingly full of light, but this one was full of darkness.

*Light and dark, like two sides of the same coin...* I thought to myself, and my vision went completely dark once again. When I was able to see again, I noticed a black orb in front of me.

“Do you long for greater powers?” the orb asked with a chillingly cold voice.

That wasn’t the first time I’d heard that phrase. Maria had gone into the *light* dimension, which meant that I was probably in the *dark*, evil one. Not a good place to be in.

To be honest I liked Pochi as it was now, and I didn’t really want any more power. *The last thing I want happening is to get incredible dark powers and turn into a bona fide villainess headed for doom. I’ll just be honest with the orb guy!*

*I don’t long for power,* I meant to say, but before I could open my mouth, the orb spoke.

“If you want greater powers, find the covenant and... Oh, I see that you already have the covenant with you.”

*Excuse me? Covenant?*

“I don’t have that...”

“I found a truly worthy candidate this time around. You have the potential to engulf the whole world in darkness,” the orb said.

*Thank you, I guess, but I don’t really want to do that. What’s up with this orb anyway? It just keeps talking and doesn’t listen to a single thing I say. The light one was kind of condescending, but this one isn’t any better.*

“Really, I...”

“Very well. I shall impart all of my knowledge unto you.”

“Hey, I’m trying to say that...”

Before I could finish speaking, my bag, which was still hanging from my shoulder, started floating in mid-air. It then opened by itself, and a book came flying out of it. It was the same ancient script book that I’d accidentally brought back home with me the previous day from the warehouse.

A black mist started coming out of it, and I understood what that book was — the Covenant of Darkness.

And the most surprising thing was that it was all a coincidence: how I’d chosen that book, how I’d brought it back with me, and how I’d entered this dark dimension while it was still in my bag.

The dark orb, oblivious to my shock, spoke again. “Take it.”

As soon as I heard those words, I saw a shower of black arrows coming out of nowhere and aiming for the floating book.

Neverending coils of black letters were raining down in front of my eyes. I felt dizzy, as if I had motion sickness, but the letters kept on pouring down, one after the other.

*I can’t take this...*

I lost consciousness in the midst of that black storm.

Pink walls, a black table, a metal-framed bed with azure duvets and blue cushions.

*Oh, this is the familiar sight of Acchan’s bedroom. I must be having that dream again... This is a chance to take a look at FL2! Please, Acchan, play the game! I need as much information about it as possible!*

Maybe my prayer reached her, because the TV, where the game was already on, entered my vision. The screen showed Cyrus, who had a troubled expression.

*Yes! I'll be able to learn more! Thank you, Acchan, my friend!*

"There's no need for you to do anything that dangerous. Let me protect you," Cyrus said, sounding melancholic and looking handsome. It looked like Acchan had already succeeded in making him fall in love with the protagonist.

*What scene is this?* I wondered while focusing on the screen, where Cyrus's line was followed by the protagonist's.

"I do not want to endanger you either, Mister Cyrus. I will fight too... I want to do more than just be protected."

That really sounded like something that Maria would say. I could easily imagine her, the strong and kind friend who I was so proud of, saying that in reality.

"Fine. Let's go then," Cyrus said, stretching his hand out to her.

Since I hadn't been watching from the start, all I knew about this scene was that the two characters were in danger, and that they were going to fight against someone or something.

The screen faded into the next scene, showing a robed girl with a hood over her head... in other words, it was FL2's antagonist and villainess, Katarina Claes.

"Now that I have this new power, I'll finally be able to take my revenge on her!" Katarina said with an evil laugh. A mysterious shadow, looking like a wolf, was standing behind her, and she had a black book in her hand.

*The person that Maria and Cyrus are going to fight against is... Katarina?! No way!*

*And that thing behind her, is that Pochi?! And that book, the one in her hand, is it...?!*

I jumped up, and the first thing I saw as soon as I opened my eyes was the white curtains surrounding my bed.

*Where am I? Why was I sleeping in here? Why was I even sleeping in the first place?*

Struggling with the pain of the strong headache I'd woken up with, I was trying to figure out how I'd gotten here when the curtain in front of me opened slightly and I saw two beautiful ruby-colored eyes look at me.

"Oh, you're awake."

"Sophia? Where is... Why?"

"This is the Ministry's infirmary. I happened to be here to help with some work today, and you're here because you lost consciousness," she explained, having somehow understood my question.

I'd heard that Sophia mainly helped out at the infirmary on the days when she came to work at the Ministry. Today must have been one of those days.

Thanks to her answer, my memories started coming back little by little. I remembered that I'd gone to that garden together with Maria and the others so that she could find the lost magic, and then...

"Big Sister, how do you feel?"

"Miss Katarina, are you okay?"

"Lady Katarina, are you well?"

Keith, Larna, and Maria appeared one after the other through the curtains.

Behind them I could see Cyrus, Sora, and Dewey, all looking worried.

“Did you find the lost magic already?” I asked them, and Maria nodded with force.

“Yes. Thanks to the help of everyone here, I was able to obtain it. But when we came back, we found you lying unconscious on the other side of the stone... How are you feeling now?”

*Ah, they found it! That's great news. And then they found me unconscious... Unconscious? Why?*

“But why was I unconscious...?” I asked, struggling to remember, and Sora replied.

“When Miss Campbell and the two directors disappeared into the stone, you started walking around it to take a closer look. I tried stopping you, but you said not to worry. Then I could not hear your voice anymore, and when I went to check, you were not there anymore. I continued to look around, and eventually you reappeared behind the stone, unconscious,” he explained, speaking as politely as he could, but I got the feeling that what he ultimately meant was *Can't you learn to do as you're told just once in your life?*

Anyway, he said that I had disappeared and then reappeared... just like Maria.

It was then that I remembered a terrifying image: black letters pouring down from above, one after the other. Just thinking about it was enough to make my head spin, and I put both my palms against my temples. *Was that reality, or was it just a dream?*

“Lady Katarina, you are extremely pale. Do you need help?” Maria asked while looking at my face with concern in her eyes.

“I just felt weird for a second, but I'm fine now... Say, did I have a book with me?” I asked, wanting to make sure that what I had seen was real.

"Yes, it is right here. You were holding it when we found you," said Sophia, handing it to me.

There was no doubt — this was the very book that I'd brought back home with me the previous day.

So the book was really there... but that wasn't what mattered. What mattered was the book's content. If it was really full of those letters I'd seen back then...

I slowly and cautiously opened the book, but the only thing on its pages was the same ancient script that I'd unsuccessfully tried to read in the warehouse.

*So that was just a dream. I must have fallen unconscious because of how excited I was, or maybe I was a bit anemic,* I thought to myself, relieved, but Larna started speaking while staring at me.

"Miss Maria obtained the lost Light Magic in that white dimension, as is now written on the covenant that she found yesterday. However, just opening the book won't work... You need to use Light Magic on it. Miss Maria, show miss Katarina."

It seemed that they had had time to research these things while I was knocked out. It was good that they'd learned how to read the book, but why would they show that to me all of a sudden? I couldn't understand Larna's motives.

"Yes," Maria said while I was still thinking about it. She took the covenant out of her bag and used her Light Magic on it, at which point the book started glowing.

*Wow! So this is what the lost magic looks like,* I thought while peeking inside the book. *Hm? All I see is the usual ancient script. I imagined there would be magic light letters or something.*

"I can see characters of light appearing in the book, but nobody else seems able to," explained Maria, who had probably guessed what I was thinking.

That was probably something that only the people who had received the light orb's power could do.

"It really is a magic book!" I said, impressed.

"Well, Miss Katarina," Larna said, "could you get your dark familiar out now?"

"Huh? Why?" I asked, confused by her sudden request.

"You heard Miss Maria. You need to use magic to see the characters hidden in the book. Which is why you need to use Dark Magic to read your Dark Covenant," she said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"What, wait, why? This book...?" I said, shocked, stringing words together as they came to me.

"You mean to ask why we know that your book is the Dark Covenant? We took a look at it before you woke up, and we realized that it's very similar to Maria's. It's a book on basic magic written in ancient script, with a black stone on the cover in the same place as the white one on her book. I have no idea where you found that, but it's almost an opposite version of Maria's covenant. The logical conclusion is that while we found the lost Light Magic, you obtained lost Dark Magic. Am I right?" Larna was speaking so fast, without even stopping to breathe, that I was left astonished.

So they hadn't only examined Maria's book, but also the reason why I was unconscious. This would explain why none of the people around me were as surprised as I was.

I couldn't help but be impressed by Larna's reasoning. For as problematic of an employee as she was, her intelligence couldn't be denied.

"Did I get anything wrong?" she asked, cocking her head to one side as I took my time to reply.

“N-No, I think you are right...” I said, and I went on to describe how I had brought that book from the warehouse back with me by coincidence, the black letters pouring down in the black dimension, and how I’d felt dizzy.

“...But it all felt so distant, like a dream. I was just asking myself whether it really happened or not.”

“That’s what I imagined. You probably thought that it was all just a dream, so you could put the book back in the warehouse and stop thinking about it... right?” Larna said.

“Huh?!”

*Can she even read minds?!*

“You know, Miss Katarina, you’re the type who just shows everything she’s thinking on her face,” she said. “And if it really was a dream, then we can all stop thinking about it. But if it wasn’t, that book could be useful for the Ministry. Could you try out what I said?”

To be honest, the memory of what happened in that dark dimension was so scary that I didn’t feel like reliving it, but not knowing whether it really happened or not was unpleasant in itself.

“Okay, I will. Pochi, come out,” I said, mustering my courage and summoning Pochi as I opened the book.

“Woof!” he said, happy to come out of my shadow, and I saw a faint dark mist appear around the book.

Sure enough, the page I had opened the book to was full of those black letters. More than just being written on the paper, it looked as if they were floating on top of it.

“Judging from your face, you see the dark characters,” Larna said, looking at my shocked expression.

“...Yes,” I said without taking my eyes off the book. I remembered being scared by them when I saw them pouring down from above,

but now that they were neatly arranged on the pages, they only looked eerie and mysterious.

"Now that we've figured that out, that's enough for today," Larna said while forcefully closing the book in front of me. Now that I looked at it, Maria's book had been closed as well. "Cyrus and I are fine, but you two have directly received the lost magic, so we can't ignore the possible physical burden. Miss Katarina's frighteningly pale, and you, Miss Maria, aren't looking much better."

Looking at Maria's complexion, I had to agree with her. I couldn't see it, but my face probably looked the same.

"The covenant is not going anywhere, so we can look into it in a couple of days. You two just go home and rest."

We were dismissed by Larna, who said that it was probably better for Maria and I to keep our respective books. I put mine into my bag and prepared to go home.

Maria was heading to the dormitory with Cyrus and Dewey, and I was heading back to Claes Mansion with Keith and Sora. We all walked out of the infirmary together and split up in front of the meeting room. Larna said that she'd stay in the Ministry since she had to look into some things.

"Big Sister is always getting herself into trouble no matter how much people warn her," Keith, to my right, said with a sigh.

"She really is. If she had waited patiently in front of the stone, this would not have happened," replied Sora, to my left.

*Oh no! At this rate, I'm going to be scolded bilaterally!*

"But I found that lost magic, so it was worth it, wasn't it?" I said, while walking a couple of steps forward to strategically protect my flanks.

It was then that I felt something — a cold, intense stare going through my back.

*What is this?* I thought, turning back, but there was nobody in sight.  
*Did I just imagine that?*

I looked at my arm and saw that it was covered in goosebumps. I had sensed something evil...

“Big Sister? What’s wrong?”

“Are you feeling dizzy again?”

Keith and Sora were worried about me, but I couldn’t bring myself to explain what had just happened. I felt that if I told them, I wouldn’t be able shake it off as “just my imagination” anymore.

“Yes. I must be tired,” I said, and we left together.

*That must be it. I’m so tired that I’m imagining things,* I told myself while rubbing the goosebumps off my arm.

I reached the carriage, thanked Sora for seeing me off, and left the Ministry without any more hint of that weird feeling from before.

After reaching home and eating lunch, I went back to my room. When my stomach was full, I would usually fall asleep within seconds, whether in bed or in front of a desk. But I couldn’t seem to get any rest today.

This must have been because of the dream I just had. I had already seen FL2 in two dreams, one before joining the Ministry and one right after, so this made it the third time. I had gotten very little information out of it... but what little I learned was terrifying.

Based on the dreams and on the note I had found, I knew that Katarina Claes, after being exiled, had come back as FL2’s villainess to take her revenge on Maria. Now I also knew that she’d found the

Dark Covenant and had a Dark Familiar — that wolf-looking shadow — with her.

This last bit of information reflected what had happened to me today. Obtaining Dark Magic and finding Pochi, my Dark Familiar, were both coincidences. So was finding the Dark Covenant... or was it?

The events around me were starting to resemble the game's plot to a scary extent.

Back at the academy, I had been surprised when the other noble girls publicly shamed me in the dining hall despite how I'd never bullied Maria, and I thought that this was the game forcing one of its scenes to happen through its mysterious influence.

Could the same have happened just now? And if so, how strong would that influence be?

All of my friends had been there to help me at the dining hall, but I didn't know whether I could count on that again. I felt that the game's influence had gotten stronger ever since I had happened to find Dark Magic, a Dark Familiar, and the Dark Covenant. Maybe I would slowly turn into the game's Katarina and use the dark powers at my disposal to do evil, throwing myself into one of the routes leading to doom...

The more I thought about it, the more anxious I became, and I wasn't getting any sleepier. Rather than lay in bed doing nothing, I decided to go to the garden to get some fresh air.

I was sitting under a tree, enjoying the pleasant spring breeze and the sight of my vegetable field, when I heard a voice from behind me.

“Big Sister, didn’t you say you were going to take a nap?”

“Ah, Keith,” I said, noticing my brother standing there. “I tried to, but I couldn’t fall asleep.”

“You couldn’t fall asleep?” he repeated, surprised. “You, who always falls asleep minutes after eating?”

That was true, but maybe that wasn’t something you should say to your sister’s face.

“What’s wrong? Are you worried about something?” he asked, staring into my eyes.

“Well, it’s that...”

By sheer coincidence, I had followed the game’s script and got my hands on Dark Magic, so I was worried about becoming a real villainess, losing all my friends, and having to face doom. Keith wouldn’t be able to understand that, of course, since he didn’t know that we were living in the world of an otome game.

“...I obtained forbidden powers, and I’m worried that I could become evil and be hated by everyone, and eventually... be doomed,” I said, trying to explain my worries without mentioning the game. After all, all that mattered was what I was scared about: becoming evil, losing my friends, and winding up in a catastrophic scenario.

I lowered my gaze and waited for Keith’s answer.

“You becoming evil and losing all your friends? That’s something I have trouble even just imagining,” he said with a troubled expression before sitting next to me.

“B-But look at all this Dark Magic stuff I’ve been involved in... It’s still possible.”

Unfortunately, he didn’t understand why I was so bothered. “Maybe, but it’s unlikely.”

“Unlikely, yes, but not impossible.”

“Sure, but that could be said about most things.”

I wondered about whether Keith would end up fighting against me and defeating me in real life, just as in the game. Whether he ended up putting me in prison or killing me, I was sure that he would stare at me with cold, hateful eyes when he did it.

“Even if that happens, I’ll always be by your side,” he said, much to my surprise.

“Even if I become evil? Would you still say the same thing then?”

He narrowed his blue eyes before replying. “Whatever the case, unless you want me to, I’ll never leave you. You were the one to tell me that first, remember? You said you’d stay by my side even if I ended up hurting people because I couldn’t control my magic.”

Now that he mentioned it, I remembered saying something like that.

“Of course, I’d try to keep you from turning evil, though,” he said with a playful smile. The sight of it made the fear inside my heart shrink down by several sizes.

“Thank you, Keith. Please stay by my side, and make sure I don’t do anything evil,” I said, returning the smile.

*I really have a wonderful brother,* I was thinking to myself when I heard a rustling sound behind me.

“Keith told us that we could wait in the mansion while he went to check on Katarina, so we should keep waiting.”

“I am afraid that we should do as Big Brother says.”

“We have waited long enough. We cannot let them stay that cozy with each other. I will go.”

“Prince Jeord, please do not make such decisions on your own. And if anything, I should be the one to go, since I was the first one to reach the mansion.”

“By only a few minutes! I am her fiancé, and as such, I should be the one to go.”

“You may be her fiancé, but I am her friend. We even slept in the same room of the castle not that long ago.”

“Oh, you mean that time when you did all you could to get between Katarina and me?”

“You still think about that? I would have expected your skin to be tougher.”

“Mary, Jeord, give it a break. This is no place for disput— Ahhh!”

I turned to the direction that the scream had come from and saw Prince Alan, with his silver hair and blue eyes, tripping out of some bushes a short distance from me.

“Prince Alan?!”

“Oh... Hi,” he said awkwardly while still lying on the ground.

“Prince Alan! Why would you go first like that?!”

“Exactly! You should let your older brother go first!”

“This wouldn’t have happened if you two hadn’t been pulling at each other so much inside that tiny bush! Why am I the one being scolded here?!”

Mary and Jeord also came out of the bush, followed by Sophia and Nicol, who asked me how I was feeling.

Keith mumbled something like “I told you people to wait,” but I couldn’t quite catch what he said.

“Excuse me, why is everyone here?” I asked, surprised at seeing my friends there.

Keith was the one to explain, with a disappointed look on his face.

“Sophia told everyone that you were feeling unwell, and they all

came to visit. I thought that you were sleeping, so I told them to wait while I made sure..." he said. Then, whispering so feebly that I couldn't hear it, "If I knew they would bother us like this, I'd have sent them away at once."

In short, they'd all come to visit me.

"Thank you, everyone!"

"Since you are my fiancée, it is obvious that I would be worried about you. And, just so you know, I will be by your side whatever may happen — forever," Jeord said with a smile, grabbing my hand.

Realizing that he must have heard the conversation between Keith and me, I felt a bit embarrassed.

"Me too," said Mary, pushing Jeord aside. "I will never leave you. And I will be sure to scold you should you ever stray from the path of righteousness."

*So she also wouldn't leave me if I became evil...*

"I think that forbidding her from eating sweets would be more effective than scolding her," said Alan, grinning.

"If that happens, I will also stop lending you novels until you behave!" Sophia, visibly pained by her own words, said.

"Whatever you end up doing, none of us will ever leave you. We will always keep supporting you," Nicol said with his dangerously attractive smile.

*It's not just Keith... All of them will stay with me, letting me know if I'm doing something wrong.*

"Thank you, all of you," I said from the bottom of my heart.

The fear that had burdened me so much had now completely disappeared. I couldn't do anything by myself, but, with the support of all my friends, I was sure that everything would be fine.

Feeling better, I kept chatting with them and then, that night, I slept like a baby.



On the first day of the next week, I went to work with the covenant in my bag.

On the way to the Magical Tool Laboratory office, I met some employees from other departments. When I greeted them, they greeted me back.

When I had first started working, most people had either been too formal because of my rank as a duke's daughter, or they had talked with me as if they'd rather avoid me altogether, but lately, this had happened less and less. Even people who knew that I was Katarina Claes would talk normally with me, and this made me incredibly happy and motivated to work harder.

Larna and Sora were waiting for me in the office, and we walked together to the meeting room, where we met with Maria, Cyrus, and Dewey.

Once we were all sitting down, Larna took the two covenants from Maria and me.

"Thanks to your efforts," she said cheerfully, "we have obtained not one, but two lost magic books. Early this morning I made a report to my superiors and got permission to study them further. Hence, since you all helped in finding these books, I would like you to proceed with their analysis."

"All these people working on just two books? Did you forget how much the Ministry is understaffed right now?" Cyrus complained.

"Of course, of course. We will take turns and only do it in the free time between our official duties. However, I would like Maria and Katarina to have a more active role in this investigation, which could potentially become very useful for the Magical Ministry. Can I ask for your help?" she said, looking at us.

“Yes!” said Maria.

“Yes,” I agreed.

“We don’t have a lot of time to spend on this meeting today. Would you start reading the content of the books?” Larna asked.

Maria and I opened the respective books, after which she activated her Light Magic and I called out Pochi. The black letters appeared on the book.

*“Hence I put forth the whole of my knowledge of Light Magic,”* Maria shyly started reading, making Larna let out an enthusiastic “Ohhh!”

And then, everyone looked at me. Their stares were telling me to hurry up and read the book.

However, I looked at the black letters in front of me and sighed.

*I have to say it, don’t I? Just because they can’t see the book, I can’t lie and make something up on the spot. It’s going to be embarrassing, but... I made up my mind.*

“I am sorry! I cannot read a single word of ancient script!”

I felt the tension silently building up in the room. Had this been an anime, there would be a “crickets” sound effect.

Everyone had dropped their jaws, but Larna was the first one to get hers off the floor.

“Yes... I should have realized that. A book as ancient as this would be written in ancient script. And you wouldn’t be able to read it,” she said, disappointed, as I quietly nodded.

“Then,” she said, handing me paper and pen, “just write down the letters you see. You should be able to do that much.”

“I will!” I said.

For a second I was scared that they'd force me to learn ancient script, so I was very relieved that I could just write it down for them to read.

I took the pen in my hand, placed it on the paper, and... *uh?*

*“...I-I can’t write. Why?”*

My hand wouldn't move. I tried writing down some random modern letters, and I had no problem doing that.

What was going on?

*“When I try writing down the letters from this book, my hand just stops moving...”*

*“That figures...”*

*“What? It does?”*

*“There’s magic on that book that prevents anyone but those with the right powers from reading it. I expected that it wouldn’t let you copy its contents that easily.”*

*“Oh, I see...”*

*So, if I can’t copy down the letters, that means...*

*“Katarina,” Larna said with the friendliest, most pleasant smile I’d ever seen, as she put a hand on my shoulder. “This is for the good of the whole Ministry. Learn to read ancient script and analyze the contents of the book. Thank you in advance.”*

*“Whaaaat?!”*

Not only did I have to study ancient script, of which, at that point, I couldn't read a single letter, but I also had to analyze the book itself.  
*Have mercy!*

*“Hmmmmm...”*

*I want to refuse, but Larna wouldn’t allow me to anyway...*

“Let’s do our best together!” Maria, who was in the same boat as me (except for already being able to read ancient script), said with a smile that I could never say no to.

My response was a single, prolonged moan of pain aimed at no one in particular. I thought I had been lucky to be assigned to a department where most duties were simple manual labor, but now, because of this covenant...

I stared at the book in my hands with contempt.

“You could start by borrowing an ancient script dictionary,” Dewey promptly suggested, but I didn’t have enough energy left to reply.

“Losing time sitting here won’t make things any better,” Sora said, and I begrudgingly stood up from my chair.

The book still had the magic black letters on it — lots of them.

Thinking that I had to translate all of that was enough to give me a headache, even if for different reasons than the one I’d had inside the dark dimension.

*Rather than any Bad End, it’s probably this book that’ll be the death of me.*

And thus began my next mission at the Ministry: “~~Learning to read~~ Deciphering and analyzing the covenant.”

## **Afterword**

Hi everyone, Satoru Yamaguchi here. I remember, not long ago, rejoicing at *My Next Life as a Villainess* being published, and now here we are — already at Volume 7! I'm as surprised as anybody else.

I want to thank all of you for your support. Thank you from the bottom of my heart! This volume is set in the Magical Ministry, where *Fortune Lover II* is taking place, but all the characters are still up to their usual antics.

I want to thank Nami Hidaka once again for the beautiful illustrations adorning this book, as well as all the others who have helped make this book a reality.

Satoru Yamaguchi



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My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! Volume 7

by Satoru Yamaguchi

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