

*Author:*  
**SATORU YAMAGUCHI**  
*Illustrator:* NAMI HIDAKA



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

# ***Table of Contents***

Table of Contents.....	2
Chapter 1: Ocean Harbor Town .....	8
Chapter 2: A Meeting in the Alley .....	65
Chapter 3: The Secret Hideout and an Unexpected Reunion.....	112
Chapter 4: Escape .....	142
Chapter 5: Goodbye, See You Again.....	165
Afterword .....	180
Bonus Short Story .....	182

*Download all your fav Light  
Novels at*

*Just Light Novels*

*Author:*  
**SATORU YAMAGUCHI**  
*Illustrator:* NAMI HIDAKA



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

# FORTUNE·LOVER II

Katarina sees the sea for the first time since reincarnating!

- This harbor town is full of all kinds of foods she's never eaten before!
- Let's go to the beach!

I went  
shopping for food,  
ate along the way, had  
lunch after coming back,  
and then also ate all of  
Maria's homemade  
sweets...



# My Next Life as a VILLAINESS

## Katarina Claes

The only daughter of Duke Claes. Has a slightly menacing look (in her words: "villainess face"). Regained the memories of her past life and changed from a spoiled noble child into a wild, slightly problematic one. Simple-minded, forgetful, and easily carried away, but honest and loyal. Below average in both academics and magic. Earth Magic user.

### ★ Larna Smith

The director of the Magical Tool Laboratory and Katarina's superior. She is talented but weird.

### ★ Cyrus Lanchester

The serious and strict director of the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department. He is a romanceable character in FL2.

### ★ Raphael Wolt

A talented boy working at the Ministry. Has a very calm personality.

### ★ Dewey Percy

A child prodigy who skipped grades to end up working at the Magic Ministry. He is a romanceable character in FL2.

### ★ Pochi

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



### Nicol Ascart

Son of Count Ascart, counselor to the King. Beautiful like a doll. Very loving brother. Wind Magic user.



### Sora Smith

A Fire and Dark Magic user working at the Ministry. He is a romanceable character in FL2, and he likes Katarina.

### ★ Regina

Owner of the Harbor Restaurant. She is actually an undercover Ministry employee.

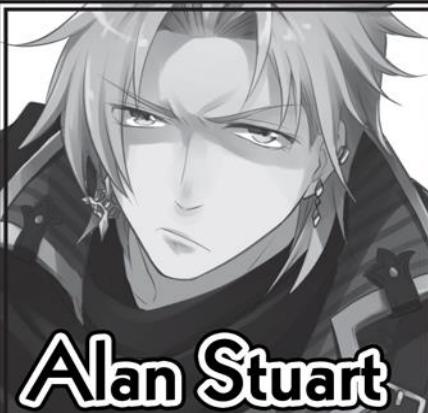
# ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!

## Characters



### Keith Claes

Katarina's younger brother, adopted by Duke Claes from a family branch because of his magic prowess. Sensual and handsome. Earth Magic user.



### Alan Stuart

Jeord's younger twin and fourth crown prince. Ruggedly handsome and self-centered. Talented musician. Water Magic user.



### Jeord Stuart

Third crown prince. Katarina's fiancée. Has the stereotypical good looks of a blonde, blue-eyed prince, but has a calculating, dark personality. Met Katarina when he had lost interest in everything else. Fire Magic user.



### Maria Campbell

A chosen girl who wields Light Magic despite being born a commoner. Hard worker and protagonist of the otome game. A very good baker.



### Mary Hunt

Fourth daughter of a marquis and Alan's fiancée. Sweet and beautiful. Known as a paragon of ladylikeness among noble society.



### Sophia Ascarrt

Daughter of Count Ascarrt, and Nicol's younger sister. Insulted by those around her because of her white hair and red eyes since childhood. Calm and collected.

#### ★ Cezar Dahl

Ethenell's prince. He is young, tan, and handsome.

#### ★ Anne Shelly

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

## ***Chapter 1: Ocean Harbor Town***

The girl's sigh echoed through the dark room.

She wouldn't stop, so I faked a smile and told her, "Don't worry. There's nothing to be scared of," and her crying quieted slightly.

I was trying my best to be gentle with her, so as not to frighten her.

I wasn't doing it out of kindness, and I definitely hadn't suddenly started feeling pity for this kidnapped girl. I just thought that her crying would make my job more difficult.

My job: bringing this very valuable girl to her buyer without damaging her.

I was only a disposable pawn. I didn't know any of the details, but I was still going to be paid handsomely.

Now that the girl was almost done crying, I heard her stomach growl.

"I'll go buy you something to eat," I said, then asked one of my partners to look after her as I went outside. My fake smile vanished instantly.

The salty breeze from the harbor hit my expressionless face.

I reached the road, which was bustling with people. The people here were always calm and peaceful, possibly because of the warm southern climate. In general, the people in this country were oblivious and sheltered.

In the kingdom of Sorcié, the largest in the region, slavery and human trafficking were forbidden, and the rights of the citizens were carefully protected. Even commoners received an education, and most people were literate. It was a wealthy, peaceful country.

Seeing the happy faces of the people walking by made me wonder about something... If I were born here, maybe I wouldn't have needed to resort to crime to make a living.

But wondering about that was useless.

I wasn't born in Sorcié. I was born and raised in the slums of a poor country, and I was an orphan who couldn't even read properly.

I shook the thoughts out of my head, put on my usual fake smile, and went to a shop to buy something to eat.

★★★★★

"Oh, everything looks so different here!"

I, Katarina Claes, looked out of the carriage's window and couldn't help but express my surprise at the change in scenery.

Larna Smith, my superior and fellow passenger, explained why: "This city is located south of the capital, so the plants around us are completely different."

I took a better look, and sure enough, the greenery looked much more tropical than what I was used to. We hadn't traveled that far, so a change this radical was surprising. I thought that, maybe, this was because this world belonged to an otome game.

I have a secret I've never shared with anyone: I have memories of my previous life. When I was still eight years old, I'd fallen down and hit my head and remembered that I used to be an otaku high school student from a country called Japan.

I died because of an unfortunate accident and was reborn as the daughter of a duke. I soon realized that I was now living in the world of *Fortune Lover*, the otome game that I was playing in my previous life right before dying! And if that weren't enough, I was playing the part of Katarina Claes, the villainess who was destined for doom no matter what she did.

I was obviously shocked when I found that out. Fortunately, I still had seven years before I'd enroll in the Academy of Magic and experience the game's events. I spent that time preparing countermeasures for all the ways in which my doom could happen, and my efforts were repaid. I successfully avoided all of the Catastrophic Bad Ends that the game had in store for me, finally earning peace. Or so I thought...

I became friends with the game's protagonist, Maria, and after graduating, we started working together at the Magical Ministry, one of the kingdom's most important organizations. But once there, I found out that the Ministry was actually the setting for *Fortune Lover II*, the game's sequel!

And, according to the game's story, Katarina Claes, after being exiled during the events of the first game, was back in the kingdom for more evil antics which all resulted in her doom.

After all that effort to escape doom, here was a fresh new batch of bad ends! I needed to do something! But unfortunately, I'd never played FL2, the sequel, in my previous life. All the hints I had about it came from a mysterious note I found and from some dreams which I sometimes had, where a friend from my past life was playing it. Armed with nothing but that, I was currently looking for ways to avoid my impending doom.

Maybe because the game's influence was forcing me to follow its script, I happened to get my hands on Dark Magic, an evil and forbidden type of magic whose very existence was kept secret. Specifically, I found a Dark Familiar and something known as the Dark Covenant. So, between thinking of the bad ends and my work at the Ministry, I was very busy.

Right now I was headed toward Ocean Harbor, the port in southern Sorcié which was used to trade with Ethenell, and this was also part of my job.

A young, magic-wielding noble lady disappeared not too long ago. While the Ministry was looking for her, I (accidentally) found that she had probably been kidnapped and was going to be used for human trafficking. We also found out that, in all likelihood, a Dark Magic user from Sorcié was involved in the kidnapping.

Larna, the head of my department at the Ministry, chose three people to accompany her on this mission based on their ability to fight Dark Magic: me and my colleague Sora, since we wielded that same type of magic, and Maria, who wielded Light Magic. The four of us were now close to Ocean Harbor, the town where human trafficking was likely taking place.

A few days had already passed since that young lady was kidnapped, and we therefore had no time to lose. As soon as the International Assembly was over, we had to rush here for our new mission.

Despite the tight schedule, however, my friends had found the time to come to see me off.

“Katarina, remember to keep away from things which do not concern you. Stay clear of danger,” Jeord said, furrowing his brow.

Keith, with a similar expression, said, “Big sister, don’t follow strangers, even if they promise to give you snacks.”

“...I’m an adult, you know? I’m eighteen years old,” I replied, slightly offended at being treated like a child, but then my friend Mary joined in, staring deep into my eyes.

“That’s what makes it all the more dangerous! Take these, they could come in handy. This will turn any assailant temporarily blind, and this one will paralyze—”

“What? Where’d you even find those things? Quit it, anyway. Giving someone as clumsy as her things like those would make it all even more dangerous,” Alan said, stopping Mary as she was getting a series of little bottles out of her bag.

To be honest, I agreed with him. Hearing the way she spoke about their contents, I was scared to think of what would happen if I accidentally broke one of them.

“Lady Katarina, should you be bored during the ride...” Sophia said with a smile as she handed me a series of books which were probably romance novels. I appreciated the thought, but those were probably too many for me to ever finish reading.

“Sophia, Katarina isn’t going there to play. She’ll be working and will have no time to read those things. Bring them back home,” her brother Nicol said. *I actually wanted to borrow a couple...*

I couldn’t bring myself to contradict someone as strict and serious about work as Nicol, so I gave up.

I eventually left the capital with some snacks to eat along the way, as well as a lot of warnings not to do anything dangerous and to be very careful.

“We’re going to leave soon,” Sora announced through the carriage’s window.

“Please take care of Katarina,” Jeord addressed him with a dark smile, “and make sure that nothing weird happens.”

Sora was slightly taken aback, but he silently nodded.

Everyone was seeing me off as if I were going to a far away country, but I wasn’t even leaving Sorcié at all...

I was now excited at the southern scenery around me. The greenery was different, with palm trees and luscious flowers I’d never seen before, and the people were different as well. They were tan, unlike the pale people who lived in the capital.

It was just like one of the islands in southern Japan from my previous life...or at least I assumed it was, since I’d never visited them.

"We're almost there," Larna said while I was still busy excitedly taking in the scenery around me.

"You all know about your identities, right?" she then asked.

"Yes," all the three of us replied.

She was talking about the fake identities that we were supposed to take on during the mission.

Unlike the time when that village had asked the Ministry to help them with their tanuki infestation, this was an undercover operation, just like Sora and Maria's mission at the Castle during the Assembly.

If people found out about our ranks or about the fact that we worked for the Ministry, they would probably feel wary of us, and looking for information would become much more difficult.

Therefore, as long as I was here, I was no longer a Ministry employee or the daughter of a duke. I was supposed to be just a normal girl.

There was a restaurant in the area which had secret connections with the Magical Ministry. We would pretend to be relatives of the owners who had come there from the countryside to help with work. We would then use that cover story to snoop around without raising suspicion.

However, when Larna prepared our cover stories, mine was a bit different. The higher-ups at the Ministry insisted that, as the daughter of a duke, I couldn't be asked to do the lowly job of a commoner, and so I could pretend to be a slightly higher-ranking tourist, just lazily goofing around while my friends worked. I refused, and asked to help Sora and Maria.

I couldn't stand doing nothing while my colleagues were working and collecting information. I was doing my fair share of manual labor back at the Ministry, and in my previous life, I worked part time at a

restaurant to finance my otaku hobbies, so I was positive that I'd have no problem here.

In the end, it was decided that Maria and I would work at the restaurant while Sora would help load ships during the day and act as a sort of bouncer during the night.

Larna, who was a master of disguise, would change her looks to investigate here and there, but she didn't tell us any of the details.

"Here we are," Larna said, and we hopped off of the carriage.

There was a slight breeze coming toward us.

"It smells salty!" I said, happy to experience that telltale fragrance for the first time in this life.

"That's because we're so close to the sea," Larna explained.

"The sea?!" I said, overjoyed.

"Lady Katarina, have you never been to the sea?"

"No, never."

In my previous life I'd gone to the beach to swim every summer, but since being reborn as Katarina Claes, I'd never even seen the ocean. The word itself was enough to get me excited.

"If that's the case, you should go and take a look at it if you find some free time," Larna kindly said. I definitely wanted to do that.

"I have also never seen it, so, if you go, I would like to come along," Maria said, so we promised to go together.

I was looking forward to discovering what the sea looked like in this world.

Leaving the carriage, we walked through a street smelling like salt and full of people, until we finally reached a building with a red roof

and a simple sign on it that read “Harbor Restaurant.” While it didn’t look particularly old, it obviously wasn’t very new either.

A sign on the door showed that it wasn’t open yet, but Larna casually walked inside, making the shopkeeper’s bell ring.

Inside we found a few dozen tables, each with two or three seats, and just to the right of the entrance, what looked like a counter. Just like the building itself, its contents were neither ancient nor brand new, but the whole place was very clean.

“We’re here!” Larna said as soon as she entered, addressing someone inside.

“Oh, already?” a voice from behind the counter replied.

It belonged to a woman who was probably in her late twenties. She was crouching behind the counter doing something, but stood up when she heard Larna.

“It’s been so long, Larna. I haven’t had much time since you contacted me, so I’m not done with the preparations yet. Sorry.”

The woman, whose words indicated that she obviously knew Larna, had brown eyes and hair of the same color, long enough to reach her waist and tied in a messy ponytail. She wasn’t extraordinarily beautiful or anything, but she had an attractive *je ne sais quoi* about her.

“Don’t worry, it’s my bad for calling you all of a sudden. We’ll take up the preparations from here,” Larna said before introducing us to the woman.

“From right to left, these are Katarina Claes, Maria Campbell, and Sora Smith,” she said.

Introducing people with nothing but their names—no titles—was weird, but this woman must have been used to how weird Larna usually was, since she didn’t bat an eye.

"I see," she said. "I already read about all of you in the files that were sent to me. However, as long as you are here, we'll all be on a first-name basis. I'm Regina, by the way. I know this is very sudden, but time is of the essence, so I'll show you your rooms."

We followed her to a hallway opposite to the entrance. It was darker than the hall, but just as clean.

Regina opened one of several doors.

"This, the next room, and the one at the end of the hallway are the employees' rooms. They all look the same, and, since they haven't been used in a while, they could be a bit dusty."

She showed us a simple room with a bed, a wardrobe, a desk, and a chair. It only had the bare essentials, but the sunlight coming in from the window made it look like a pleasant, comfortable place to stay in.

"Lady Katarina, Maria, Sora. Clean these rooms and then move into them, one for each," Larna ordered after checking inside the door.

"What about you, Miss Larna?" I asked, wondering where she was going to stay if we used up all three of the rooms.

"Don't worry, I won't be staying in this building. And don't call me *Miss* while we're here."

"Y-Yes..."

She was going to investigate in disguise, so she wasn't going to stay with us.

"Regina, I won't be able to stop by so often, so please take care of these three."

"Even after going up in rank, you're still as freewheeling as always," Regina said, putting a hand to her cheek and sighing. She looked toward the rest of us. "It can't be easy working with her as your boss, huh? Anyway, as long as you stay here, I'll take care of all of you, so

just tell me if anything happens,” she then added, showing us a voluptuous smile. I nodded, but I found myself blushing.

Larna, however, had raised an eyebrow.

“I want you to take care of them, but don’t teach them anything weird, all right?” she said.

“What do you mean *weird*!?” Regina replied, pouting.

“I mean things like how to charm men, which I know is one of your fortés. These two girls, in particular, are young and naive, so try not to tease them too much.”

“I would never! And I don’t try to charm men. They just come to me of their own accord.”

“Don’t think I’d forget how many men you were keeping around yourself and how much trouble that caused at your last workplace.”

“If we’re talking about that, shouldn’t we also mention how much trouble you caused me by thinking of nothing but your research on magic, without ever stopping to consider the consequences of what you were doing?”

By the quick remarks that they were exchanging, one could see that Larna and Regina were very close to each other.

“Excuse me, how do you two know each other?” I finally asked, unable to contain my curiosity.

“We worked together at the Ministry,” both of them replied in perfect unison.

“Regina is a bit older than me, but we started working at the same time and were assigned to the same department,” Larna explained.

“So you used to work at the Ministry?”

We knew that our organization had some connection to this restaurant, but we didn't know that a Ministry employee was working here, and finding this out surprised all three of us.

Seeing our reaction, Regina put her hand to her cheek and sighed once again.

"Why are you always so half-hearted, Larna? You haven't even explained the details to your subordinates? Be more diligent!" she said, and then looked back at us.

"Most Ministry employees are open about their work, but there are some, like me, who hide their position and pretend to be common citizens. We do that to collect information and report it to the higher-ups, or even solve small problems on our own. In other words, we do all of this undercover," she said.

I knew that Larna had been on some undercover missions, and that Maria and Sora had recently done the same at the Castle, but I didn't know that there were people who were always undercover!

"Regina looks...like that, but she's actually strong both with her arms and with magic. You can rely on her," Larna said.

"What do you mean *like that*? I really don't want to hear that coming from the Ministry's problem child..." Regina replied, pouting again.

"Problem child? That'd be you."

"No way. You were the problem child."

Most likely, both of them were the problem child.

In any case, the Ministry was hiding more secrets than I thought. I used to think that Ministry employees were like government officials in Japan, but now they looked more like an intelligence agency. I really didn't understand the scope of this organization, despite being an employee myself. There was so much I didn't know.

Now that we had reached Ocean Harbor, we went from answering to one Ministry problem child to another.

I didn't know how glad I should feel about that.

We started by deciding who would stay in which room, but since we were two women and one man, Sora would stay in the room at the end of the hallway, and Maria and I only had to choose which one of the two adjacent rooms to use, and then we all cleaned them.

Just as Regina had told us, the rooms were a bit dusty and looked like they hadn't been used in a while. We opened the windows and swept the floors. Since there was only the bare minimum furniture, cleaning took very little time, and soon we were ready to put our belongings into our wardrobes.

Anne, my maid, used to do everything for me, but while working at the Ministry, I had experienced doing a variety of menial tasks, and now I could easily take care of this kind of thing.

However, according to Anne, I was "*too careless about personal appearance*," and she had even asked Maria to look after me in that regard. She obviously didn't trust my skills yet, but I personally thought that I'd improved a little bit since my past life. Now, for example, I fixed my hair *before* leaving the house.

I thought of this while taking things out of my luggage and stuffing them inside the wardrobe. I put in my clothes and other daily necessities, leaving my bag almost empty, except for a book.

*I didn't take Sophia's romance novels with me, did I?* I thought but, taking a better look, I realized that it was actually the Dark Covenant.

*Oh, that's right.* I'd been told to always keep it with me, so I'd put it in my bag before going to the Castle for the Assembly.

I often forgot about the covenant, mainly because reading it was so difficult that I wanted to think about it as little as I could.

When I looked at this book, by far the most villainesque thing I owned, I remembered the Catastrophic Bad Ends that were waiting for me.

I had avoided doom throughout my time at the Academy, but after I started working at the Ministry, I realized that I wasn't quite done yet. However, even after a while, I hadn't noticed any particular event that looked like it could lead me to a bad end.

It was also possible that I just hadn't noticed—after all, I hadn't played FL2, so I wasn't very familiar with its script.

Despite everything, I had accidentally found a lot of Dark Magic-related items that were probably used by the villainess in the game. Furthermore, because of my job, I spent a lot of time with Maria, meaning that maybe I was inadvertently interfering with her romantic events.

I had to be really careful about that, since, from what I knew, doom for Katarina in FL2 was related to interfering with the love between Maria and the three new love interests: Cyrus, Dewey, and Sora.

As for Cyrus, Maria's gynophobic superior, I'd actually helped him get closer to her, and I was always rooting for Dewey, the child prodigy, so I didn't think I'd have any problems with those two...

But then there was Sora, who worked in the same department as me. We spent a lot of time together, but I could never tell what he was really thinking under that aloof expression of his. I decided that, if I found some free time during this mission, I'd ask him again what he thought of Maria.

I put the Dark Covenant in the wardrobe with my other belongings and, since I was finished, I went to see how Maria was doing.

"I'm done!" I said, and I noticed that she was still putting her clothes away. Unlike me, who just threw them in haphazardly, she was neatly folding each one of them.

"That was fast, Lady Katarina," she said, before quickly realizing what she'd done and covering her mouth with her hands.

"You can't call me *Lady* while we're here, remember?" I answered with a grin.

"...Miss Katarina," she said while blushing.

I wouldn't have minded being called just Katarina, without even the *Miss*. Actually, I would have preferred that, considering that Larna had also told me not to use it with her. However Maria refused, saying that she could never disrespect me like that.

I thought that in this world, where rank was so important, that gap was too large to bridge, but I still hoped that one day we could just call each other by name like two friends.

"Ah, I ended up bringing Alexander's towel..." Maria muttered to herself as she continued putting her things away.

"You mean that teddy bear?" I asked, and her expression got slightly darker.

"Yes. He was supposed to come with us, so I had also packed his things."

"A shame, really," I said.

Alexander was a magical tool, an uncool teddy bear with a cool name that Larna had created, and it was supposed to come with us on this mission. It was very attached to Maria and followed her everywhere.

Its main function was finding people, and it had helped us find Keith in the past, which is why we thought it could be helpful this time too. We tried to borrow something from the kidnapped young lady to activate it, but we then found out about a major problem...

Alexander was actually looking for people by detecting traces of their magic, so it didn't work properly with people who only had weak magic powers.

Keith, Maria, and the other test subjects we had used when experimenting with Alexander all had very strong magic powers, so we only recently found out that it couldn't help us in finding the not-so-powerful young lady.

This also meant that it probably couldn't find not-so-powerful me.

We were obviously all disappointed, but the most disappointed person (bear?) was Alexander, who thought it could save the day.

To be honest, I didn't really like Alexander (because it teased me all the time), but seeing how depressed it looked back then made me feel for it.

After all, Alexander had to stay in the capital.

"I think it'd want us to do our best," I told Maria, in an attempt to cheer her up, since she was Alexander's...owner, in a sense.

After Maria was done with her luggage as well, we walked out into the hallway, where we found Sora. He'd already finished with his room and was waiting for us.

"Now that we're all done, we should go back to the restaurant. Regina said she'll tell us what we're supposed to do next," he said, and so we all went back to the hall that we'd seen earlier.

We found Regina behind the counter, and Larna sitting in front of it.

"You're done? Sit here, then. I'll make you something to drink," Regina said, inviting us to the seats near Larna's.

As we sat down, I thought that the atmosphere was too relaxing for us to actually be going to work.

"There you go," Larna said after pointing at the glasses on the counter in front of us. They were full of an orange liquid and decorated with a slice of some kind of citrus on the rim.

*It's a tropical drink!* I thought, a bit excited, as I took a sip.

“...Hmfg!”

I did my best not to spit it out.

*Wh-What is this?!* It looked like orange juice, but it tasted sour, bitter, and spicy... In a word, it tasted disgusting.

I considered that maybe it just didn't match my palate, but I looked at Maria and Sora and, sure enough, their faces had turned blue with disgust too.

The person behind the drinks, however, didn't seem to notice.

“So, how does it taste? Did you like it?” Regina asked.

Having no idea how to reply, the three of us silently looked at each other.

“Have you seen their faces?” Larna asked coolly. “Do you think that's a face that people make when they drink something they like? You still couldn't throw together something half palatable to save your life, it seems.”

Now that I looked at it, I noticed that the glass in front of Larna only contained water. She probably knew that Regina's drinks were terrible.

I stared at my superior as if to blame her for not telling me before I drank that, and my thoughts reached her.

“I just thought that making you taste it for yourself was the easiest way to do it. And these drinks are no exception. Everything that Regina makes is awful. Food, beverages, you name it. Her sense of taste is awful too, so she doesn't even understand just how bad the things she makes are,” Larna explained with a shrug.

Regina then took a sip of the drink she had made for us before asking, “Is it really *that* bad?” thus proving Larna's point.

"If so...who is cooking at the restaurant?" asked Maria, who had finally recovered from the attack on her taste buds.

I was actually wondering the same thing, since I'd seen no one else but Regina in the restaurant.

I seriously hoped that she wasn't serving customers things that tasted like this drink.

"There are people who help me with that. I mostly manage the restaurant by myself, but they come around to give me a hand."

"So you have employees," said Maria. "Do they also work at the Ministry?"

"No, but they know what's going on. I've performed background checks on them, and they're trustworthy. They're an old couple living near here."

"Is it only that old couple?" I asked Regina, surprised.

"Yes. So what?" she replied.

We were all surprised by this reaction. The restaurant was quite big, and it had a lot of seats. How could three people, two of them elderly at that, be enough to manage it?

I explained my doubts to Regina, who then casually replied.

"Oh, that's not a problem. This place is never full. Even during lunch time, the most we ever get is maybe ten people at once."

"And is that enough to keep the restaurant going?" Maria questioned, her eyes wide with curiosity.

"No way," Regina simply replied.

*Huh?* We all looked at her in confusion.

“This place exists to gather useful information for the Ministry, so they give me enough money to keep the place running. Getting a few customers is more than enough!”

“So this restaurant does not make enough of a profit to cover expenses?” responded an even more confused Maria. Her eyes looked grimmer than usual.

“Exactly. We just buy food and beverages and resell them as is, after all.”

“You are not cooking the food you serve?” Maria attempted to clarify. She was surprisingly forward with her questions today.

“Yes. That couple told me that cooking would be too taxing for them, and that they couldn’t cook anything worth selling anyway. I’d cook the food myself, but my dishes aren’t very popular,” Regina explained as she cocked her head to one side.

If the drink she had served us was anything to go by, I could see why that was.

“So, long story short, this restaurant just sells the same food and drinks you could buy everywhere and isn’t even popular at all, right?” Larna mercilessly summarized the conversation so far.

“Hm, yes, I guess that’s about it,” Regina replied without looking very concerned.

“But wouldn’t it be weird to get two new employees, Katarina and Maria, if the restaurant is doing so badly?” Larna asked, raising an eyebrow.

Indeed, that did sound a bit unnatural.

“No need to worry about that. This restaurant still hasn’t closed despite drawing in so few customers, right? So everyone around here thinks that I have a rich lover who gives me money to keep the place afloat and that I only do this as a pastime. People will simply assume

that the two new girls are just other lovers of the same guy,” Regina said with a smile as she slightly moved her head to one side.

That elegant, womanly smile definitely made her look like a rich guy’s lover.

“...I see. Fine then,” Larna said, still looking somewhat unconvinced. Personally, being thought of as someone’s new lover was anything but fine...

“There’s not much to do around here, so you just need to stand there and kill time!” Regina said while looking at Maria and me.

I was ready to give my best as a waitress, so I was actually disappointed.

“If we have the time...may we try to cook something?” Maria asked.

As always, she was such a diligent girl that she couldn’t forgive the idea of just standing there doing nothing.

“You can cook?” Regina asked.

“Maria’s a wonderful cook! Especially when it comes to baking, she’s even better than your average pâtissier!” I replied before Maria had a chance to respond.

“N-No, that is not true...”

“It *is* true! The things you cook are delicious!”

Maria was being humble, but as the daughter of a duke, I’d eaten my fair share of delicious cuisine. I knew a good cook when I saw one. Every time she made something for me, it was always delicious.

She was beautiful, cute, kind, and even good at cooking... I wished I could marry her.

“Really?” Regina answered with a grin. “In that case, come to the kitchen with me.”

Fearing for Maria's life, Sora and I followed her and Regina.

Despite its only regular use being for plating food bought somewhere else, the kitchen looked impressive. Regina mentioned that when they first built the place, they actually planned to use it to do real cooking.

"So there used to be someone able to cook?" I asked her.

"Yes. We hired a cook back then," she answered.

"And did that person leave?"

"Yes," she explained, "but there were many more after him. But they all left one after the other."

"What? Why did they do that?"

"You see, all of them ended up proposing to me. And when I declined, they'd up and leave."

The three of us looked at each other, not sure how we should comment on that.

I remembered what Larna had said earlier about Regina keeping several men around her. Most cooks were men, so they probably left after some romantic disappointment...

"I even tried hiring married cooks, thinking that that'd solve the problem, but then their wives would come in to complain to me... Eventually, I couldn't find anyone willing to work here."

And so, the only people left for her to employ were that elderly married couple.

After hearing this incredible story, I started feeling anxious about working for this woman.

Anyway, the restaurant's kitchen was well furnished; it was just missing a cook. At first, Maria was just as taken aback as Sora and I, but after taking a good look at the kitchen, her eyes started

sparkling. I never cooked, and I was even forbidden from entering the kitchen in the Claes manor, so I couldn't be sure, but it turned out that the equipment in this kitchen was state of the art.

"Not using this kitchen is such a waste!" Maria declared, clenching her fists.

"I agree. So, why don't you try to cook us something?" Regina said as she did her usual gesture of cocking her head to one side.

"Yes. But...about the ingredients..." Moments after replying, Maria realized that the kitchen didn't seem to have anything other than herbs and spices stocked in it.

"Oh, that's right. Wait a second," Regina said, noticing Maria's worried expression. She then left the kitchen through the service entrance.

"She's always freewheeling..." commented Larna, who had come to check on us.

She was right, but that also equally applied to herself.

After a while, Regina came back with a basket containing vegetables, eggs, meat, flour, and other ingredients.

"Did you go to buy them?" Maria asked, shocked by the short time it took her to gather so many ingredients.

"No, I just got them from some kind neighbors!" she replied.

We were surprised by how kind the people living here were, but Larna quickly dispelled the illusion.

"You asked men for those, didn't you?" she said, and Regina laughed like a child whose prank had been found out.

Larna was probably right. Now I was even more anxious about working for this woman.

"So, let's try this. Maria will cook something with these ingredients, and Katarina and Sora will go get the food I've ordered for today," Regina told us while sitting in a corner of the kitchen, probably planning to watch Maria while she cooked.

We all began our first actual task since starting to "work" at the restaurant. Sora and I left Maria with Regina (not without worrying) and then departed the Harbor Restaurant. Regina had drawn us a map to show us where we needed to go and had told us what we had to get. Since her map was extremely crude, we had to ask for directions several times but eventually made it.

We arrived at an eatery much bigger than Harbor Restaurant. This place also seemed to do takeout, and despite it still being a bit too early for dinner, there already were quite a few customers.

Regina had told us that she bought food from here, plated it, and served it at her restaurant. I wondered if she actually had permission to do that.

With this and other doubts in my mind, I approached a girl, probably a waitress, who was walking between tables with dishes in one of her hands.

"We're here from the Harbor Restaurant..." I told her, and the girl blinked a few times in surprise.

"Regina's place? Are you new hires?" she asked.

"Yes. We just started working there today."

"I see. I'll go check, so just wait here for a second," she said before disappearing into what was probably the kitchen, still carrying the dishes.

Sora told me to come to the edge of the dining room and quietly lean against a wall, so I did. Despite it being so early, there were already many customers, as well as numerous waiters weaving through the

tables bearing dishes and glasses. They looked like what I'd pictured in my mind when I was told I was supposed to work as a waitress. I was expecting to do something very similar...but according to Regina, reality would be much different.

The girl from earlier eventually returned, and reported, "The owner said she's heard from Regina. She's waiting for you in the kitchen," before pointing us toward a door on the other side of the dining area. We thanked her and quickly headed for the kitchen.

When we opened the door at the back of the restaurant, a gust of steam came out accompanied by a delicious smell. In front of us there was a small counter, probably a place to put dishes that were ready to be served, and behind it, the kitchen proper. There was another door in the far wall. We didn't know whether it was okay to open it ourselves, so we asked one of the people who was cooking.

"Excuse me, we're here from the Harbor Restaurant and we were wondering where the owner—"

"Oh, you're from Regina's place?" Before I could even finish my question, a stout old woman approached us from the back of the kitchen, pushing a cart with a metallic gray box on it.

"Yes, we are," I replied.

"I see. When I heard that Regina hired new people, I thought that it'd be young men, as usual, but I see that this time there's a girl too. I'm the owner you're looking for. Nice to meet you," she said with a big laugh. She was a really pleasant woman.

"Nice to meet you too," I replied as another person walked up behind the owner, pushing another cart bearing another box.

"Here you go, these are the dishes that Regina ordered," the owner said, pointing to the two boxes, gesturing as if she wanted us to confirm their contents.

The big metallic boxes reminded me of those we used in my previous life for school lunches. We opened them and found lots of delicious-looking food. You could tell how freshly cooked it was by the fact that it was still steaming.

After checking both of the boxes, we paid the owner with the money that Regina had given us. We thanked the owner with a bow, then received the carts with the boxes on them.

“Are you two going to be cooks?” the owner asked while she was counting the money with a charming smile.

“No, we are going to work in the dining room,” I replied, and she was taken aback.

“Mm...” she said to herself as she took a good look at us. “Are you sponsored by the same guy as Regina?” she asked.

*Sponsored? What does she mean? Oh! I remember! Regina said that people think she has a rich lover sponsoring her restaurant...which means that this woman thinks that I'm also one of that guy's lovers!*

I was being mistaken for a playboy's lover...

“N-No! We're relatives of hers, which is why we're going to be working at the restaurant,” I hastily explained.

“I see, I see,” she responded, laughing dryly, “I only thought that because you're a young lady, and that boy there is very handsome himself.”

Without any doubt, Sora *was* very handsome, and he had a sexy aura around him that totally made him look like someone's lover. The reason why she thought the same about me despite my villainess-face was probably because I was standing next to him.

“But even if you're relatives, it seems like a waste to hire two people to wait on a restaurant that gets so few customers,” she continued

while looking intently at Sora. “Say, young man, why don’t you work at my place? I can pay you better than Regina!” she told him.

She scouted him to work at her restaurant! This businesswoman wasn’t playing around.

Smiling, Sora replied, “I’m also going to work for Regina, but not as a waiter. I’ll just be carrying crates around at the harbor.”

Exactly. Maria and I would be working as waitresses, and Sora would be working at the harbor. This was so that we could gather information from a wider variety of sources. The owner, however, didn’t know that.

“Working at the harbor?! With looks like those?! What a waste! You’d be able to make much more as a waiter! Come and work here!” she said, trying to scout him again.

I also agreed that waiting tables fit him better than harsh manual labor.

“I’m sorry, but I’m really bad with people. I wouldn’t be able to work a room,” he replied, making the owner’s face darken.

After knowing Sora for a while, one thing I knew for sure about him was that he was certainly not bad with people. When I first met him, he was working as a butler in a huge mansion, overseeing the other servants. If anything, he was good with people. He was obviously lying, but his troubled facial expression made one feel sorry for him.

The owner blushed and smiled, saying, “That’s too bad. But if you ever want to give it a try, just let me know.”

“Thank you very much. I certainly will,” he replied.

The owner had completely fallen for him.

“Take this, it’s on me,” she said, offering us some sweets.

As I looked at Sora, smiling and waving his hand as he normally never did, he reminded me of the handsome boys in host clubs who make it their job to gratify women.

The owner then showed us to the kitchen's back door, which led us outside behind the restaurant.

Sora was pushing the heavier of the two carts, and I the lighter one. After walking for a bit, we felt the wind's salty smell get stronger and heard a big splashing sound.

"Could this be the sound of waves?!" I exclaimed, so excited that my voice crackled.

"Yes. We're close to the sea," he answered, sounding uninterested.

"I thought so! Are we, like, *very* close? Why don't we go and take a little look?" I asked him enthusiastically.

"Hey, we're working right now," he coldly replied.

"Th-that's right..."

I'd almost forgotten about that. But now that we were so close, I really wanted to take a peek at the sea for the first time in my (current) life. My shoulders drooped with disappointment, and I heard Sora sigh.

"Fine. It looks like we're really close anyway. But just a short look and then we're going back, got it?" he said bluntly.

Deep down, he was a really kind guy.

"Yes. I'll just take a peek and then get back to work. Thank you, Sora," I rejoiced.

I was so happy that I left my cart and went to hug him, but he quickly pushed me away.

"Stay with your cart!" he snapped.

We followed the sound of the waves and left the street to find a white beach leading to a blue sea that seemed to have no end. The sight was so stunning that I was at a loss for words. The water was clear and sparkly, nothing like the muddy sea I was used to in my previous life. I'd only seen water like this in TV programs about tropical islands.

"It's so beautiful..." I finally managed to say.

"This place is famous for its beautiful beaches," Sora explained. He had lived in several different cities and countries, and thus was very knowledgeable. The first time I met him, back in that mansion, he also told me a lot of things about foreign countries. *Now that I think of it...*

"You've kept your promise," I said.

"What promise?" he wondered, confused.

"The first time we met, you promised me that you'd show me the sea one day," I said, and he gave me a surprised look. I guess he'd forgotten about it. "Thank you, Sora."

Even if he'd forgotten, he'd still kept his promise. His blue eyes remained wide open. *Was he really that surprised?* Looking at him, I recalled something else.

"Do you remember the brooch I gave you as a sign of our promise?" The stone in the brooch changed color depending on how the light hit it. I'd bought it during the School Festival and then given it to Sora.

"Oh, that thing? I forgot where I put it," he said.

"But it was such a beautiful brooch, with the colors of our eyes!" I cried, puffing my cheeks in outrage over the way he'd forgotten about the brooch too.

Out of nowhere, he put a hand on my head and started ruffling my hair. He kept doing it even longer than usual.

“Wh-Why are you doing this?”

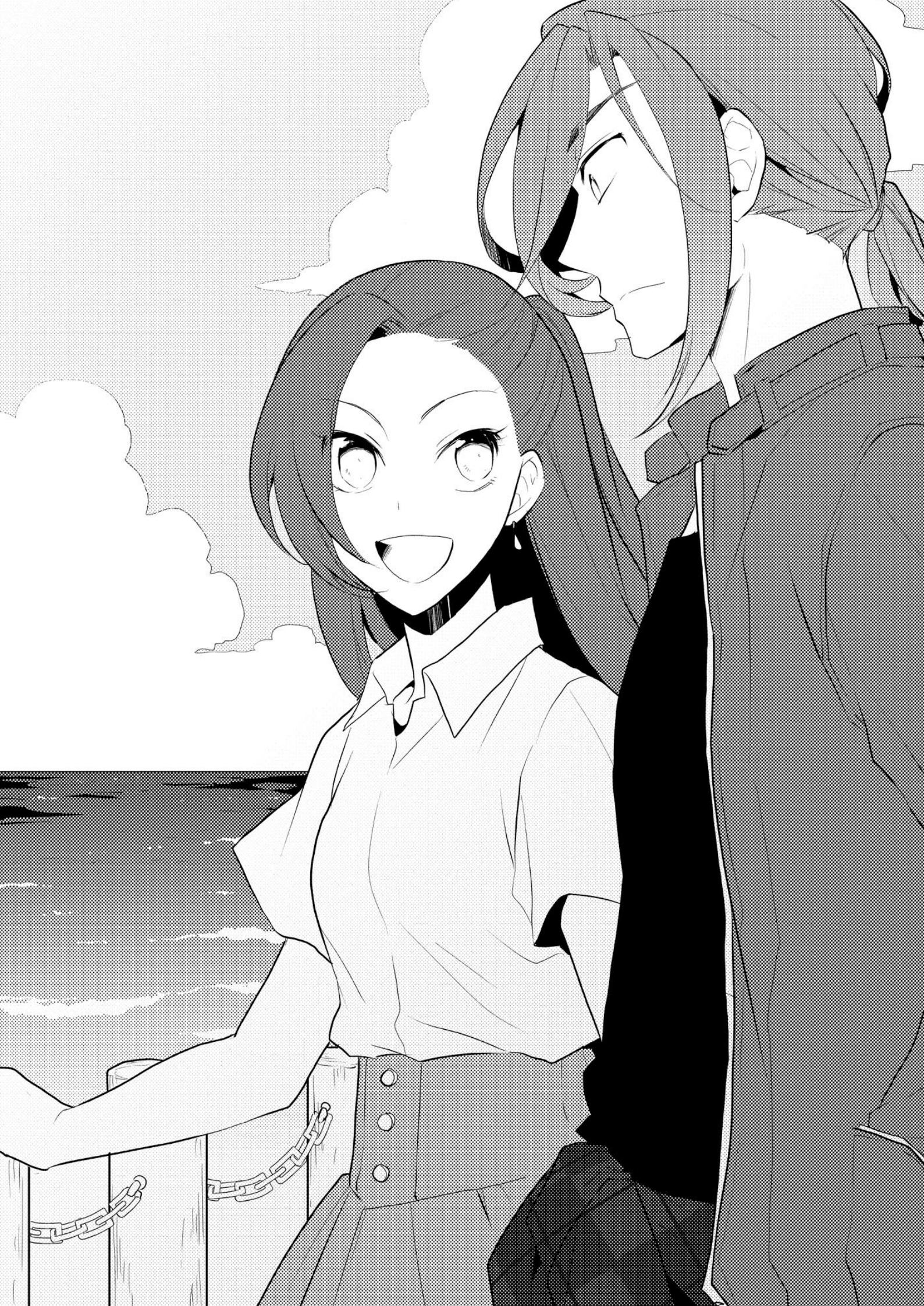
I told him that, if anything, I should have been the one mussing up his hair, but he looked away from me, saying, “As dense as always. You’ve seen the sea, so now let’s go back to the restaurant.”

He then started pushing his cart, and I hurried to do the same.

I didn’t get why, but Sora had probably taken offense at something I’d done or said. He just kept walking and pushing the cart without looking at me. Sora was a really mysterious guy. At this rate, I didn’t know whether I had any chance of finding out what he really thought about Maria.

We silently walked all the way back to the Harbor Restaurant, and, when we finally reached its kitchen, we were greeted by a row of tasty-looking dishes laid out on the table. Those definitely weren’t there when we left.

“I tried cooking something with Regina’s ingredients. What do you think?” Maria asked.



“She was so fast!” Regina exclaimed in shock.

“Yeah. Incredible, huh?” Larna agreed.

*What did I tell you? Maria is the best.*

“Now that we’re all here, we should taste them,” Regina said, giving each of us a small plate and a fork.

“Yay! Finally!” I said. After pushing around that cart full of food, I was starving. I took the first bite without waiting even a second.

“Th-this is...”

“I-Is it bad?” Maria asked, worried.

“Not at all! It’s delicious. I knew that you were a good cook, but this is the first time I got to eat something just as soon as you cooked it. And it’s great!” I explained, and Maria’s face broke into a smile.

“She’s right. This is really good,” Regina said, putting a hand to her cheek.

“As if *you* can tell? I mean, it *is* good though,” Larna said as she moved her fork to take another bite.

Even Sora was murmuring, “Delicious...” as he kept eating, looking impressed.

“I know, right? Maria’s a great cook. She wouldn’t even lose to a pro,” I declared, proud of my friend.

“Lady Katarina, you are exaggerating...” she said, shaking her head as she blushed.

Regina, after complimenting the taste once, had just kept on eating silently. She eventually stood up.

“This is good! You’re on par with the professional cooks I’ve hired before! Maria, get back to cooking! We’re going to serve your dishes!”

“Do you mean...right away?!”

Maria was the one who had offered to cook in the first place but, now that she was suddenly told to do it, she looked taken aback.

“Exactly! Right away!” Regina smiled and ignored Maria’s shock. “It’s almost time for dinner, and I want to serve the things you make. Let’s start preparing!”

She sounded so convinced of what she was saying that we, as her employees, could only do as she had said, and so we started preparing for dinner according to her orders.

The Harbor Restaurant was now open for dinner.

I changed into the waitress uniform I’d received and went to the dining room.

Maria was supposed to wait tables with me but now she was working in the kitchen, and Sora was standing in a corner as a bouncer.

The old woman who normally worked here and I were the only two waitresses. Regina was standing behind the counter to serve drinks, so she wouldn’t come out among the customers.

The old couple came in about one hour before opening. They were calm, kind people who had been working here since the start of the restaurant, making them almost more knowledgeable about it than Regina herself. The old woman gave me a detailed explanation on what I was supposed to do and then told me to come and tell her if I had any problems. Those words gave me strength, but as I was standing there waiting for the store to open, I felt anxious.

I hadn't worked as a waitress since my previous life, after all. Back then, I'd gotten to the point that the restaurant manager would even praise me for my work, but things were probably different in this world. I wondered whether I would be able to do it...but then again, no point in worrying. I just had to do it!

Right when I'd found the motivation not to give up, I heard the shopkeeper's bell ring and saw the first customer walk in.

"Welcome!" I said with a smile.

The shopkeeper's bell rang as the last customer for the night walked out.

"Thank you! Please come again!" I said before letting out a sigh of relief.

All the anxiety I had at first quickly disappeared as the training and experience from my previous life kicked in, and I somehow managed to finish my first shift as a waitress in this world.

If anything, this was much easier than working at a Japanese family restaurant. There were only a few items on the menu, I could jot down the orders on paper instead of inputting them at a computer terminal, and as Regina had told us before, there weren't that many customers.

"You did well, girl," the old woman who was working with me said with a smile.

"Thank you!" I answered, blushing at her compliment. Just then, Regina also walked out from behind the counter to approach me.

"I was surprised. When I read about your experience, I thought you wouldn't be able to do much at all, but you proved me wrong. The customers praised you as well."

"Th-thank you!" I stammered, blushing even more. I wasn't used to being praised.

"We had more customers than usual today, so I'm glad you were here helping me out," the old woman said.

"You usually get fewer people?" I asked, confused. It wasn't as completely deserted as Regina had said, but I thought that she was just being humble.

"Yes. Usually most of the seats are empty," Regina admitted without batting an eye, "but the news that we're serving Maria's cooking instead of just warming up stuff like usual spread throughout the neighborhood. The customers liked her dishes, so tomorrow could be just as busy as today."

Her eyes were already sparkling at the idea.

When she first explained to us about the restaurant, she sounded so detached, but maybe that was just because she'd lost motivation thanks to the lack of customers.

"Maybe we could even fill the whole place up, like when the restaurant had just opened," the old woman mused as she looked at Regina warmly.

I was looking at the women, feeling happy for them, when Sora came back. He'd been checking outside the store and putting out the "Closed" sign.

"Well done. Nobody seeing you work like that could guess that you're a noblewoman," he told me.

"Hehe, thank you!"

I'd never received so much praise in a single day since I was reborn.

"So, how did things go?" he asked me.

“Very well! A lot of customers came in to try Maria’s cooking, and maybe tomorrow will be just as busy too. We’ll have to give our best!” I proclaimed, shaking my fists with enthusiasm, but Sora sighed.

“I meant, how did *our mission* go? Did you get any information on the kidnapping?”

“Ah!”

*I was so busy waiting tables that I’d completely forgotten about our mission!*

“You forgot about it, didn’t you? Just as I thought. You probably had your hands full though, it being your first day as a waitress,” he said with scary accuracy.

“S-Sorry...”

“But if there are even more customers tomorrow, gathering information will also be even more difficult,” he said.

I thought that the restaurant being busy was a good thing, but that also meant that I couldn’t concentrate on my mission.

“You’re right... What can we do?” I said, concerned.

“Don’t worry,” Regina, who was listening to our conversation, intervened.

“Huh?” I looked at her in confusion as she smiled.

“I’ll be the one gathering information.” she said.

“You? How?” I asked, remembering that, the entire time the restaurant had been open today, she never left her counter in the corner, making drinks. That is, pouring already made drinks from bottles into glasses.

She was only listening to the chitchat of the customers sitting close to her, probably trying to hit on her, and she didn’t even seem

particularly interested in that. She certainly didn't look like she was gathering any information.

"I'm actually a Wind Magic user, you see. And by using that magic, I can control the vibrations in the air to pick up on distant sounds. I can hear pretty much everything that goes on inside this restaurant," she said, explaining her unbelievable trick.

"And you're gathering information like this all the time while the store is open?"

"Yes. I'm always listening to people talking."

*That's incredible! She looked like she was just half-heartedly listening to the customer in front of her but she was actually working! She's a respectable Ministry employee after all, I thought, but...*

"Well, to be honest I'm mostly listening to local rumors and such because standing there doing nothing is too boring. I get to learn a lot about this town," she said, making me unsure of what I was supposed to think about her. Was she a respectable worker or not?

"And did you hear anything about the kidnapping?" Sora asked.

"Uhm..." she replied, "I didn't hear anything about that today. But the more customers we get, the more likely we are to find something." She then looked at me and said with a smile, "If you all work hard, I'm sure we'll find the information you need!"

So we basically had to bring in even more customers.

"Anyway, I'll worry about the intel, so you can focus on waiting tables," she concluded before disappearing to the back of the restaurant.

Knowing that I could focus on just one thing was a relief, at least.

When most of the cleaning up was done, the old couple went home, and Sora and I finished tidying the dining area.

Maria was still in the kitchen, preparing for the next day. She looked tired after having to cook that much on such short notice, but when we told her about the many customers her cooking had brought in, she got even more motivated and happily promised to do her best the next day too.

I mopped the floor while I thought of how much I had to learn from her.

This wasn't a high-class restaurant for nobles, and the clientele's manners weren't exactly high-class either. The floor wasn't very dirty, and thankfully I was used to this kind of labor from my job at the Ministry. The restaurant's dining space was actually smaller than the huge surfaces I sometimes had to clean there.

As we were almost done, I started a conversation with Sora.

"Since we also serve alcohol here, I was worried that I'd get harassed by drunk guys, but thankfully nothing of the sort happened," I told him.

"I think that's because most of the men that come here to drink just want an excuse to speak with Regina. She's good with those kinds of guys, so there wasn't any problem."

"So you don't really have much to do as a bouncer, right?"

I heard that, around here, a lot of the places that serve alcohol hire a bouncer just in case. Regina said that one from another restaurant came by every once in a while, but now we had Sora taking care of that role. In the end, though, I didn't get to see Sora doing anything.

"...Right. Anyway, I think we're done here. Let's go to bed already," he said, taking my mop and walking off to the back of the restaurant.

It still wasn't that late, but he was probably tired from the new, unfamiliar job. I followed after him and found Regina, who I thought had left behind, giggling to herself in a corner.

"The reason you weren't harassed by drunks," she revealed, "is that he was constantly on the lookout. As soon as someone even thought about bothering you, he'd give them a stare so harsh that they could feel it stabbing them. And then he'd also escort those people out of the building. But he was so smooth in doing it that you didn't even notice."

"...I didn't know." Just as she said, I hadn't noticed at all. Why didn't he tell me, anyway?

"He's always looking out for you," she observed, and I agreed.

As a colleague and fellow newcomer at the Ministry, he was always helping me out.

"Thank you for telling me what was happening," I told Regina, before going back to chasing Sora.

He was waiting for me in the hallway that connected the restaurant to the employees' rooms.

Sora always waited for me, now that I thought of it. He never left me behind.

"Sora, I heard from Regina that you were actually keeping the drunks from bothering me. I'm sorry I didn't notice! Thank you," I told him as he was facing away from me.

"...It's what I was hired to do. You don't have to thank me," he said bluntly.

"But you're always saving me in one way or another. Thank you, really," I said, pulling his arm to turn around, and he ruffled my hair again.

"What?! Again?!" I puffed my cheeks in frustration, and he blushed and looked away.

He was probably embarrassed about being thanked. Seeing him blush like that was so cute that I stopped complaining about the hair-

ruffling. I was planning to ask him about Maria, but instead I witnessed this unexpected side of him.

“...Go back to your room already.”

“I will. Goodnight, Sora,” I told him and went to my room.

Working as a waitress for the first time in this world had really tired me out. “I’m spent...” I murmured as I got into bed, and seconds later, I was asleep.

★★★★★

I, Sora Smith, was once again on a mission with my colleague Katarina Claes.

After meeting her through some unconventional circumstances, I thought that I’d never see her again...but then she started working at the Ministry alongside me. We ended up in the same department and often worked together. Given how reckless she was, I always had to look after her. But Katarina was the daughter of a duke and the fiancée of a prince. I had to be careful not to forget that normally someone of her rank wouldn’t even speak to me... No matter how I felt toward her.

Regina asked Katarina and me to go to the restaurant that always prepared food for the Harbor Restaurant. Not ingredients, just food. Already cooked food. The so-called “Harbor Restaurant” secretly funded by the Magical Ministry didn’t even prepare anything; it just served stuff that it bought elsewhere.

As I imagined, this meant that it didn’t draw in enough customers to be profitable and only stayed afloat thanks to the Ministry’s money. As a citizen (though I wasn’t born in Sorcié, to be honest), I didn’t know how to feel about that.

Maria Campbell, another Ministry employee who I often worked with, probably felt the same as I did and tried to do what she could to get more people coming to the restaurant.

We left Maria with Regina and went to the restaurant we were told to go to. I looked at Regina's hand-drawn map and sighed. It was the roughest, most barebones map I'd ever seen. She confidently told me that we'd be fine with that, and I'd believed her...but we obviously weren't going to be fine at this rate. It didn't take long to understand that the map wasn't going to do us any good.

I shouldn't have believed her, especially since she reminded me of Larna, our boss who also couldn't really be trusted with this sort of thing. At that point I didn't feel like going back and having her draw another map. Even if I did, I knew that the second map would be just as lousy as the first. We decided we'd just ask for directions.

It took us a while to reach the place we'd been sent to, but at least I had more time to enjoy the sight of Katarina looking around with sparkling eyes at the unfamiliar surroundings.

We eventually got to a restaurant much larger and busier than the Harbor Restaurant. We told one of the staff about our errand, and she let us know that the owner was waiting for us in the kitchen. Katarina thanked her and we set off.

All the nobles I'd met before always looked down on commoners and took their help for granted. They'd never thank one of them for doing something. Katarina, however, was different. I was impressed by how grateful she always was to anyone who helped her, but at the same time, I asked myself what kind of education she had received to become like that.

When we walked into the kitchen, full of its delicious smells, Katarina asked one of the cooks for the owner, but before she was even done asking, the owner herself had started walking toward us, pushing a

cart. She had known that Regina's new hires would come, and she had already prepared boxes full of food for us.

While we were paying for the food, she asked us whether we were cooks. When Katarina replied that she was a waitress, the owner looked surprised and then turned her gaze on me.

I already knew what she'd say next, so I wasn't surprised in the least when she asked Katarina whether she was being sponsored by the same guy as Regina.

It was weird for an establishment with as few customers as the Harbor Restaurant to hire new waiters, so it was obvious what people would think about them, especially because Regina had the same rumors going around about her. Katarina, however, wasn't expecting it, and she nervously explained that she was just a relative of Regina's.

The owner laughed and said that she only thought that because there was a young girl and a handsome boy. She then said that it was a waste to hire two new waiters and looked at me. I could see her eyes sparkle.

As expected, she asked me to come work for her. What a bother. I told her that I wasn't even going to be a waiter, with a smile that always worked on older women.

However, she looked surprised and told me that it was a waste not having me working in the dining area. To be honest, I agreed, so I just came up with an excuse on the spot, saying that I was bad with people. I made my best sad face, knowing that this was usually enough to make this kind of woman step back. She blushed, smiled, and gave up. Again, all as expected.

I finished her off by smiling and telling her that I would certainly love to work for her one day, and she completely lost it.

Getting on good terms with the people around me was also part of the job. I used to make a living out of getting women to like me, so this was no hard thing to do. It just never worked with the girl who was standing right next to me...

Anyway, the owner even gave us some sweets free of charge.

As we were going back to the Harbor Restaurant while pushing the carts with the food on it, the salty smell from the sea became stronger, and we could even hear the sound of the waves. Katarina excitedly asked whether she was hearing the sound of waves, and when I confirmed that she was, she insisted that she wanted to go and look at the sea. I reminded her that we were working, and she gave up. But she looked so disappointed, with her drooping shoulders and darkened eyes, that I just had to let her see it.

She immediately cheered up and hugged me. Why is she so extreme in everything? I told her not to forget about her cart as an excuse to get her off of me. I felt pitiful doing that. Since when am I so uncomfortable with women?

It had been a long time since I last saw a sea this lovely. The water was clear and the sand was white.

Katarina was looking at it in awe. The first words she finally managed to say were, "It's so beautiful." I told her that this place was known for its picturesque beaches, and she looked at me.

"You've kept your promise," she told me.

I had no idea what she was talking about, but she then explained, and I remembered about the time when I first met her.

*Back when I still didn't know much about you, you kept asking me to tell you stories. And then I made you that promise...but I just said that without thinking. I never meant to keep it. I'd already forgotten about it, since I thought that someone like me couldn't meet a noblewoman like her ever again.*

*The blue brooch you gave me, and your words... “We’re in the same world.” I thought that having those two things to remember you by would be enough...but you also remembered that promise.*

I felt as if she had clutched my heart with her bare hands, and I couldn’t speak anymore.

“Thank you, Sora,” she told me with a smile. I could feel my heart beating faster and my face getting hotter. I made dozens of women fall for me for work, and to be honest, I thought I’d had enough... Why am I reacting to this like someone who has no experience with women at all?

I was already nervous enough, but then Katarina made it worse by asking me if I remembered about the brooch. Remember? I was *wearing* it at that very moment... But I lied and told her that I didn’t know where I’d put it.

“But it was such a beautiful brooch, with the colors of our eyes!” she protested. How can she be this romantic without noticing it?! I’m at my limit here!

I was so frustrated by how oblivious she was that I grabbed her head and started ruffling her hair. She asked why I was doing it, and since I didn’t want her to see my (probably red) face, I turned around. I told her that we had to go back to the restaurant and started walking. My face still hadn’t cooled back down. If someone as experienced with women as I was reacted like that, I couldn’t imagine how hard it was for the prince or her brother.

By the time I’d finally stopped blushing, we’d already arrived at the restaurant, where we found some dishes waiting on the kitchen counter.

As it turned out, Maria had made them in the short time we were away. I was really impressed. She was beautiful, diligent, a Light Magic user, and even a good cook. She was fit to be the protagonist

of a novel. If she'd been born in high society, Katarina's brother and her fiancée would probably have fallen for her...but everyone was too busy being in love with Katarina and her antics, and that included Maria herself—she was crazy about Katarina.

When we later tried the dishes she had cooked, Maria seemed to be the most concerned about Katarina's opinion. But the food she'd prepared tasted even better than I expected, and Regina liked it so much that she asked Maria to cook more of it to serve at the restaurant.

Everyone was shocked at that absurd order, and I was reminded of a certain someone in charge of the Magical Tool Laboratory. In the end, Maria ended up working in the kitchen while Katarina and an old employee waited tables. I'd be standing in a corner, acting as a bouncer if anything happened, as we had previously discussed.

Eventually it was time for dinner, and the Harbor Restaurant opened.

Katarina looked nervous. She had put on her waitress uniform and received some explanations from the old woman who had been working here for a long time. To be honest, I thought that for a noble lady—even one as weird as her—working in a restaurant like this would be too much. I was surprised when she said that she'd do it, but I thought that she only said that because of her usual curiosity. I expected her to give up as soon as she actually had to work.

Back at the Ministry she was always doing stuff like cleaning the floors and delivering packages, but everyone there was well behaved (except my own department, unfortunately) and knew about her being a noble lady. They'd always treat her with the respect that her rank commanded. But here, she wasn't a noble. She had to work as a normal girl, and I knew how difficult that could be.

What's more, employees must always respect customers, and someone who's never had that kind of experience would find it hard

to extend such courtesy. I had my fair share of experience with that kind of job, so I was prepared to jump in and replace her as a waiter when she gave up.

Regina probably had me stand in the corner because she was expecting the exact same thing to happen, but Katarina defied all our expectations by being a perfect waitress. She was so good that you'd think she'd already done it before, like me. She was even good at interacting with customers. You'd never guess she was the daughter of a duke. I was so surprised by this that, at first, I just stared at her in silence.

The one problem with the way she was working was that she was so pleasant to customers that people started approaching her. There were already a lot of men coming to the Harbor Restaurant just to see Regina, but a girl as cute as Katarina couldn't help but draw unwanted attention. They'd ask her things like, "Do you want to go eat somewhere else?" or, "Are you free after work?" but, Katarina being Katarina, she didn't even notice that they were trying to pick her up.

"I'm sorry, I'm busy right now!" she'd say with a smile, or she'd reply, "Is there anything you need help with?" which didn't even make sense in this situation.

Some of the customers were drunk or too forward with their advances, so I approached them and *kindly* asked them to leave. More than a bouncer for the restaurant, I was Katarina's personal bouncer.

Regina, who noticed, grinned and told me, "You don't need to scare away all the men who try to get close to Katarina, you know?"



I was just thankful that Katarina herself, being as dense as she was, didn't notice what I was doing.

The shopkeeper's bell rang, and the last customer left. The restaurant was closed for the night. Regina told me to go outside and put up the "closed" sign, and when I came back, I found her talking with Katarina and the old woman working at the restaurant. The three seemed to be having fun.

"Well done. Nobody seeing you work like that could guess that you're a noblewoman," I told her, and she thanked me and smiled. It was kind of a back-handed compliment, but she was so happy nonetheless. Her innocent joy was really a sight to behold.

I then asked about how things had gone, and she started giving me details about waiting tables at the restaurant. That wasn't what I'd meant. She had obviously forgotten about her mission. I sighed and explained what I was talking about, and her eyes widened.

"Ah!" she gasped, looking shocked. She really had forgotten. Katarina always tried her hardest, but when she focused on one thing, she tended to forget everything else.

"You forgot about it, didn't you? Just as I thought. You probably had your hands full though, it being your first day as a waitress," I told her, and she apologized.

"But if there are even more customers tomorrow, gathering information will also be even more difficult," I added.

"You're right... What can we do?" she asked.

Things weren't looking good. I wished I could help more, but since I was standing in a corner, I could only hear the conversations going

on close to me. Also, as a bouncer, it'd be weird if I just started prowling around the restaurant.

"Don't worry," Regina chimed in.

She explained that she used her Wind Magic to listen to all the conversations that were going on in the restaurant at all times. I thought that, when she was being hit on at the counter, she seemed very uninterested, and this explained it. She wasn't just bored... She was actually busy listening to all the other customers.

My opinion of her changed now that I knew that she was actually working surprisingly hard. Unfortunately, she also said that she hadn't heard anything about the kidnapping. It wasn't going to be so easy.

"But the more customers we get, the more likely we are to find something. If you all work hard, I'm sure we'll find the information you need! Anyway, I'll worry about the intel, so you can focus on waiting tables," Regina finally said before disappearing to the back of the restaurant.

Katarina looked relieved that she could just focus on one thing. I then joined her and the old woman in cleaning the floor.

Katarina was used to cleaning from doing it at the Ministry, and she was actually so good with a mop that, yet again, she really didn't look like a noblewoman. When we were almost finished, Katarina started talking with me.

"Since we also serve alcohol here, I was worried that I'd get harassed by drunk guys, but thankfully nothing of the sort happened," she told me.

Just as I thought, she didn't notice what I was doing. To be honest, I thought that I overdid it, but as long as she didn't notice it, that was fine. I went along with the misconception she had formed of how

things had gone, and she commented that I must have had little to do as a bouncer. She easily accepted my agreement.

I thought that the more we talked about this, the more likely it was for me to slip up and say something that I shouldn't, so I decided to go straight to bed.

However, I was worried about whether Katarina could make it to her room. I was so used to waiting for her that I did it here too. When she finally came out, I told her that we should go to our respective rooms, but all of a sudden, she said, "Sora, I heard from Regina that you were actually keeping the drunks from bothering me. I'm sorry I didn't notice! Thank you."

I didn't know how to reply. That woman and her big mouth.

"...It's what I was hired to do. You don't have to thank me," I said. Being thanked after pretending not to have done anything was embarrassing, and I couldn't manage to say anything more than that.

"But you're always saving me in one way or another. Thank you, really," Katarina added while tugging on my back to turn me around. My heart rate immediately rose and my face went red.

I was frustrated, and I showed that by ruffling her hair. She complained, but when I told her to go back to her room, she said goodnight and thankfully did as I ordered. After seeing her enter her room, I went into mine.

It took a while for my heart and face to go back to normal.

Being around Katarina always messed me up, and maybe because of that, that night I had a dream about something I hadn't thought about in a while. It was a memory of when I lived in the slums and I got on the wrong side of some thugs. I thought I was going to die, but a friend came to help me at the last moment. Everyone had their hands full trying to survive, so being saved like that stood out even more. I clearly remembered that being the only time such a thing

ever happened. I wondered how that friend was doing right now.

Just after I woke up the next morning, I heard a loud noise nearby. It sounded like it came from the hallway, but we were supposed to be the only ones using this employee space. I walked out of my room to check but I saw no one. That didn't make sense though, so I went down the hallway toward the restaurant and glimpsed someone in the kitchen. I took a better look and saw that it was Maria Campbell, working on something.

"What are you doing?" I asked her, and she looked surprised.

"Sora? Why are you here?"

"I heard a noise and came to check."

"Did I wake you up? I'm sorry..." She bowed her head apologetically.

"Don't worry, I was already up," I told her, "and anyway, what are you doing so early in the morning?"

"I wanted to prepare some things before having to cook for the restaurant..." she said, blushing.

"Isn't this way too early?"

The restaurant served lunch as well as dinner, but there was still a lot of time until it opened. I didn't understand why one would need to already start preparing.

"I talked with Regina, and we decided that, starting from today, we'll be serving different dishes, as well as dessert at lunchtime. So I wanted to be ready," she explained.

Maria was a really diligent girl, and Regina was taking advantage of that to make her work. I'd already noticed it during our undercover mission at the castle, but this girl never spared any effort. And, unlike someone else, Maria was actually talented enough that her efforts

usually bore fruit, making people's expectations grow, and in turn, making her work even harder. One really had to worry about her.

"Listen, Campbell, I agree that getting more customers to the restaurant could help us gather information, but you don't have to do it all by yourself. If there's anything that I can help with, just tell me, okay?"

She looked shocked for a moment. "You talk just like Lady Katarina..." she said with a smile.

"Lady Katarina?" I repeated after her, confused.

"Yes. She always tells me not to shoulder everything alone and to rely on her more," she explained, looking delighted as she did so.

Her face practically had "I love you, Lady Katarina!" printed on it.

"You really like her, don't you?" I asked her.

"Yes!" she said, looking even happier, "Lady Katarina is..."

She started rambling about the noble lady she loved so much. She told me about how Katarina had stood up for her at the Academy, how cool she'd looked while doing so, and so on and so forth. Her stories, which made Katarina sound like anything but the daughter of a duke, were really interesting.

"Oh, sorry... I got heated up and talked so much..." she concluded after a fair bit of time.

"No, I had fun listening," I told her, and she smiled again.

"I want to become more like Lady Katarina, and I want her to rely on me too. This is why I am here in the kitchen so early... I want to improve myself," she said. Her eyes were so passionate that you could tell at a glance how strong of a girl she was. Maria wasn't your stereotypical damsel in distress.

"I see. Let me help though. What should I do?"

“Oh, th-thank you. In that case...”

I started helping her, just a little bit, as she gave me directions. I couldn't help but feel that while Katarina's fiancée, her brother, and all the other men around her were vying for her affections, Maria could actually be the strongest candidate to win that race.

★★★★★

I got up because I needed to use the toilet, and the sun was already up.

As I sluggishly returned from the bathroom, I heard voices coming from the restaurant and went to check. I spotted Maria and Sora speaking enthusiastically in the kitchen.

I wanted to ask them what they were doing up so early, but I also didn't want to bother them, since they seemed to be having fun, so I just went back to my room to sleep again. The restaurant wouldn't be open until lunchtime anyway. The blankets weren't warm anymore, and I couldn't fall asleep straight away, so I thought of Sora and Maria, together in the kitchen.

Those two, a beautiful girl and a handsome boy, looked so good together. They were just like protagonists in a story. Well, in *Fortune Lover II* one of them was the protagonist and the other one of the main characters, so, in a sense, they *were* protagonists in a story. That also explained why they looked so good together. They seemed to be enjoying each other's company, and I didn't want to turn it into a crowd and stifle their romance.

In the world of that otome game, I was a villainess, so I couldn't really help it... *Hm?!* I remembered that, indeed, I was still the villainess even in the sequel! Stifling the romance between Maria and her love interests... That was exactly my role in the game. Katarina Claes was, after all, the heroine's main antagonist.

The previous day, while I was going through my belongings, I remembered this fact after I saw the Dark Covenant and I thought I had to ask Sora about his feelings... But I'd already forgotten about it again. *What's wrong with me?*

Even in my previous life, I never noticed danger and forgot about everything else the moment I started focusing on something. Teachers even wrote that on my record. But this kind of careless behavior wasn't going to cut it now that I was threatened with doom. *I have to try harder!* I got out of bed and started rummaging through my stuff.

*Not this one... Not this one either... Here it is!*

I threw things here and there on the floor until I found what I was looking for: the *Bad End Avoidance Notebook II*. I had actually happily disposed of the first one as soon as I graduated from the Academy without any Bad Ends actually happening, thinking that I didn't need it anymore. So I had to make a new one for the sequel.

This notebook also contained the mysterious note that I'd found in one of the books that Sophia had lent me. This note, *written in Japanese*, explained some details of *Fortune Lover II*, which I'd never played myself. Since nobody knew Japanese in this world, it was probably written by someone who, much like me, was reincarnated here after playing the game. I tried finding out who was behind it, but it was all in vain. Still, for me, who hadn't played the sequel at all, this note was worth its weight in gold. I unfolded the note and started reading it.

“A new tale of love at the Magical Ministry!” it announced, listing all the new romanceable options, including Sora.

“The old love interests are back along with the old rival characters, and befriending them or gaining their approval will be vital to

progress through the game. The main hurdle in finding success with the new love interests will be fighting a mysterious girl who has come to hinder the protagonist,” it then said before disclosing that girl’s identity.

“It is later revealed that this girl is Katarina Claes, who was exiled from the kingdom in the previous game. Katarina holds a grudge against the protagonist for having caused her exile, and she becomes a Dark Magic user to sneak back into the country and into the Ministry, looking for revenge against Maria. In order to obtain the Happy End, the protagonist, together with the love interests, must overcome the threat of Katarina and reveal her identity to the authorities, resulting in the villainess being thrown in jail. Should the protagonist fail, Katarina and Maria will kill each other in a duel and the love interests will fall prey to Dark Magic.”

The truth was too much for me to handle. Every time I read it, I ended up depressed and asking myself why Katarina would want to go back to the kingdom. If it were me, I’d just live the rest of my life peacefully as a farmer...

And this time, my options were either jail or death, making it even worse than in FL1. At least back then I could angle for being exiled and then go work on a farm somewhere abroad...but I’d have no such option in the sequel.

The most important thing, however, was that I risked interfering with Maria and Sora’s romance. The three of us were on missions together so often that I’d forgotten about it. And I also wanted to ask Sora how he felt about Maria, but his expression when talking with her earlier told me that he probably liked her.

I had the Dark Covenant, I had a Dark Familiar (Pochi), and now I even risked hindering the protagonist’s love... Could I ever be set up to be more of a villainess?!

*I really have to do something! If I don't...*

Meeting chairwoman: Katarina Claes.

Meeting representative: Katarina Claes.

Meeting secretary: Katarina Claes.

“In consideration of both the treacherous situation we find ourselves in and the need to avoid any Catastrophic Bad End, let us commence a strategy meeting.”

“This is bad. Why are we getting closer and closer to really being the game’s antagonist?”

“We’re just living peacefully, without bothering anyone...”

“Are we though?”

“What? You mean we aren’t?”

“I don’t think we’re actively bothering anyone, but are we really, like...peaceful?”

“I think we’ve always been. Right?”

“Ahem. Let’s focus here. We should talk about the current situation.”

“So, the fact that Katarina risks being an obstacle to the development of Sora and Maria’s love?”

“Precisely. In the sequel, Katarina begets her doom by hindering the protagonist in her romance. Our standing as an unwanted third wheel is precisely what the game expects and, therefore, it is very bad.”

“So we’re doomed?!”

“We still aren’t done practicing lock-picking! How are we going to escape from jail?!”

“Jail is the best-case scenario! What if we’re killed?!”

“Ahhh! This is awfull! Terrible! What can we do?!”

“Please, everyone, calm down. Doom may be a threat, but not a close one yet. It will only fall upon us if we fail to act swiftly.”

“I see... So we’re only going to be doomed later. *Whew.*”

“Oh, then why don’t we go and check on Maria? Yesterday she said she’d make sweets!”

“That’s nice! I wonder what she’ll bake. I’m already looking forward to it!”

“Don’t calm down *that much!* How can you be so relaxed all of a sudden?! Going near Maria right now is the last thing we want to do! We’d intrude on her and Sora while they’re having so much fun talking together!”

“...Indeed.”

“...You have a point.”

“If we keep acting like that, without thinking of the people around us, we’re definitely going to be doomed!”

“So...what *should* we do?”

“Isn’t finding that out the reason why we gathered here in the first place?”

“...That’s true.”

“Now, does anyone have any suggestions?”

“Yes.”

“Go ahead, Miss Katarina Claes.”

“Let’s root for Sora as he tries to woo Maria just as we did for Cyrus and Dewey!”

“That sounds good! Let’s root for him!”

“But wait, does he even like Maria? We should make sure of that first.”

“Didn’t you see how happy he looked while chatting with her? He never looks that relaxed while talking with people he doesn’t trust. Which means he trusts her, and if he trusts her, he probably likes her!”

“Well, yes...but even so, what would *rooting for him* entail?”

“What about creating chances for the two of them to be alone?”

“Interesting. But how?”

“Like, not walking in on them.”

“Yes. We’d just be a nuisance.”

“I agree, but saying it like that makes me a bit sad...”

“But it’s the truth...”

“D-Don’t make that face! Let’s think about how not to be a nuisance for those two.”

“Y-Yes... The problem is that we’re always relying on Sora and Maria for help, which means that we’re always close to them. Maybe we should be more independent.”

“Great point!”

“Great point indeed!”

“If we were more independent and acted on our own, those two would have more time to be alone!”

“I-Indeed!”

“Well, that was easy!”

“Good. Henceforth, we shall strive to be more independent and act on our own. Any objections?”

“No, ma’am!”

“No, ma’am!”

“Let’s do our best and act alone!”

And thus, yet another meeting of the Katarinas came to an end. Relaxed, I got into bed and managed to fall back asleep. I slept until Maria, worried that I wasn’t showing up, came to wake me because there was little time left to prepare. Later on, Sora got mad at me and said that I should learn to be more independent.

## ***Chapter 2: A Meeting in the Alley***

While taking a break from looking after the girl, I walked into an alley, and in a corner, I found a dirty kitten. He reminded me of myself. Coming to a country as wealthy as this one had made me reflect on my past.

My first memory was of sleeping curled up in a mountain of trash. I didn't know my parents. I had nothing to my name. The other poor children and I needed to steal just to live another day. My sleep was always restless, because I often would have to wake and run away at a moment's notice. I was a bony, dirty kid who had never enjoyed a warm meal or a warm bed.

The kitten was pawing through the trash littering that alley, and I just couldn't ignore him. I walked closer to him, keeping the sandwich I'd bought for lunch in my hand. When he noticed me, his hair stood up. Such fearful body language reminded me of my past even more. I took a piece of ham from the sandwich and tossed it toward the kitten. He looked at me warily, but slowly approached the ham. He took a bite, realized that it was food, and quickly ate all of it.

I kept throwing him pieces of ham to eat. Before I knew it, I'd given the kitten almost all of the meat in the sandwich, but I felt good about it. The kitten walked away—maybe he was satisfied. I looked at him and decided that I'd have to stop by this alley again.

★★★★★

"The dessert was delicious!" one of the girls said with a smile.

"Thank you," I replied. "Tomorrow we plan on serving a different one, so if you'd like, please come check it out."

The girls started chatting among themselves, saying things like, "Really?!" and "We must come again!" and "I hope my allowance will be enough."

The Harbor Restaurant was full of customers for lunch. Regina had told me that normally, even fewer people came to eat lunch than came for dinner, but today was a different story. We served one of Maria's desserts and even offered free samples to passersby outside the restaurant, and some girls who loved checking out all things new and trendy walked in. Those girls must have had one impressive information network, because very soon more and more young women started streaming in, saying that they had heard about the place from their friends.

The old couple that Regina employed usually didn't come for lunch, since there were so few customers, and Sora was busy loading cargo into ships at the harbor. When the restaurant was close to being full, Regina had to leave the counter to help me wait tables.

"I've never seen these kinds of customers come here to eat..." she remarked, impressed.

The Harbor Restaurant usually had grumpy old men as its main clientele, but now it looked like a fashionable café for students. And since all the girls mostly just ordered desserts, it pretty much was one. Regina usually only opened the restaurant briefly for lunch, since there was no one eating anyway, but this time we kept it open all the way into the early afternoon.

"Thank you!" I called to the departing girl, our last customer before we finally closed.

I went outside to put up the "closed" sign as instructed by Regina. The Harbor Restaurant was on a busy thoroughfare, so one would expect it to always have tons of customers. It probably kept steadily losing them after people realized that they just served food from other restaurants. The fact that the town's girls talking about our desserts was enough to fill the Harbor Restaurant so much was proof of this. At this pace, it was on its way to become a popular restaurant. I proudly put up the sign and went back inside.

When I returned, I found that Maria, the one who worked the hardest that day, had left the kitchen to join Regina in the dining room.

“You’ve done great, Maria! Thanks to the sweets you cooked, the restaurant was full of customers today,” I congratulated her, but she started shaking her head, looking concerned.

“Thank you,” she began, “but it was all thanks to you that we had so many customers.”

“Huh? Me? Why?”

“Because you promoted what I cooked to the people outside!”

“I did do that for a little bit at the start, but people only came in because the sweets were delicious!”

It was true that I went outside the restaurant to let people try them. If I didn’t, how could anyone know that they taste good? We were on a wide street with lots of people passing by, so I figured I’d stand next to the entrance with samples in hand, praising Maria’s creations. The first girls who came into the restaurant did so only because they’d liked those samples, so I couldn’t take any credit for that.

“But giving out samples was a wonderful idea. Had it not been for that, those girls would never have walked in at all. I truly believe that the credit goes to you,” Maria insisted, inflexible on this point.

Maybe for this world giving out free food samples was a wonderful innovation, but I just did what I was used to seeing in my previous life.

“But—”

“You two,” Regina chimed in, “this discussion is going nowhere, and you should take a break after working for so long. We’ll have to start preparing to open for dinner later on, so rest while you can.”

She then chased us out of the dining room.

“Where should we even rest? In our rooms?” I asked Maria as we looked at each other.

There wasn’t much to do in those empty little rooms other than nap.

“I still have not seen much of the town, so I would like to take a walk. Would you join me, Lady Katarina?”

“Of course!” I instantly replied.

We let Regina know that we’d be outside, and she told us, “This part of town is safe, in general, but be back before sunset. And don’t go near back alleys and other desolate places.”

Being born and raised in the capital, which didn’t really have any dangerous areas, I was surprised by her warning, but she explained that, for other towns, having a few shadier areas was perfectly normal. Even so, people from other countries were apparently still impressed by how safe Sorcié was.

“Understood.” We nodded with serious looks on our faces, and started our walk through town, making sure not to wander into anywhere risky.

Maria had mentioned that she hadn’t seen the town, but I hadn’t seen that much of it either—I’d just been out on an errand to get food for the Harbor Restaurant. I was very excited to explore further. Maybe because of it being a harbor town, there were a lot of people who didn’t look native to our country, and there were a lot of things for sale which you wouldn’t find back in the capital. Fruit I’d never seen before, plenty of fish, little stalls selling food... Everything looked new and interesting.

“Doesn’t this look tasty? Oh, I want to try that too! But I can’t pass up the other one either!” I commented enthusiastically, unable to decide what I wanted to eat.

“We will be here for a while, so you could well eat all of them one at a time,” Maria responded, giggling.

Indeed, we wouldn’t be going back to the capital straight away, so there was no reason to hurry.

“You’re right. Then, I’ll start with—”

Since I still couldn’t decide, I ended up buying a bunch of stuff which I would then split with Maria. We sat on a bench nearby and ate the things I’d bought from the stalls.

“Here’s your half, Maria.”

“Thank you.”

“Looks delicious!” I exclaimed moments before stuffing a pancake into my mouth. The fluffy, airy cake was full of juicy fruit, giving the perfect combination of sweetness and acidity. “It *is* delicious!” I announced ecstatically, putting a hand to my cheek.

“Indeed! I especially love the fruit.” Maria smiled in agreement.

“I’ve never seen this fruit before though.” I was curious about the colorful tropical-looking fruit that I’d never eaten back home.

“Me too. Maybe it is a specialty from this town.”

If Maria said so, it was probably true.

“I wish I could use it for desserts at the restaurant...” she mused while staring intently at the fruit.

“That sounds good! I saw a greengrocer earlier, so let’s go there and buy some more before we go back.”

“Yes!”

After we ate, it was time for window shopping. The clothes on display here were more colorful and flashy than those that we were used to.

“This is so cute. It’d look great on you. Try putting it on, Maria!”

“Th-Thank you. Oh, look here, Lady Katarina! This one is wonderful too! Would you not try it?”

We also visited a souvenir shop.

“Look, Maria, there’s a little statue in the shape of a weird animal. I wonder if it’s one of those they keep in the Ministry.”

“That does not seem to be the case—there is an explanation written under here. It appears that this is the deity which is said to guard these lands.”

“A deity, I see... Look! It’s star-shaped sand!”

“It is so pretty!”

“Oh, that’s right! Let’s go to the beach!” The sand had reminded me that Maria hadn’t seen the sea yet and the day before, she’d said that she wanted to.

“I would love to do so!” she cried, looking enthusiastic about the idea.

“Let’s go then!”

I asked the shopkeeper for directions, then took Maria by the hand and made for the beach. Just as I’d been told, going along the main street led us to the harbor, which was full of all kinds of people. The sea in front of us was clear and beautiful. Maria’s expression upon seeing it for the first time was just as stunned as mine was a day earlier.

“Gorgeous, isn’t it?”

“Yes...” Maria showed her agreement by nodding vigorously.

“Even if it’s still Sorcié, this place is so different from the capital. Other countries are probably even more different...” I reflected while looking at the sea and the ships floating on it.

“Surely so. The world out there must be so big.”

I wondered if Cezar had safely reached his country. Cezar was a foreign prince I’d met through some unique circumstances at the recent International Assembly. I was reminiscing about that when Maria, all of a sudden, pulled on my arm.

“Hm?”

“I just felt like you were going to go someplace far away... Do you want to go abroad, Lady Katarina?” she asked me, probably because I had been staring at the sea for so long.

Before entering the Academy, I was considering the possibility of living outside of Sorcié, in case I was exiled, but not anymore. Besides, this time the game didn’t even have an exile end for me. A jail end—that it did have. My only concern right now was finding a way to escape from my cell.

I also wanted to see other countries, yes, but, “If I ever go abroad, I’d rather go with my friends. Going by myself doesn’t sound like fun. Maria,” I added, stretching my hand toward her, “do you want to come with me?”

“Yes! I will follow you anywhere,” she answered, blushing. If I were one of the game’s love interests, getting a reply as beautiful as that would be enough to make me fall in love with Maria.

I looked at the sky and noticed that the sun had slowly started going down.

“Let’s get going. Hehe, this was so fun. It was my first time shopping and eating out with a friend like this,” I remarked. As a noble lady, browsing food stalls with friends was usually out of the question.

"Thank you for coming with me, Maria... Maria? What's wrong?" Tears were welling up in her eyes. "A-Are you okay? Does it hurt somewhere? Do you want to sit down?" I fired off one question after another, unsure what to do.

"N-No, this is just... I am only...moved, you see... I am fine," she said, trying to convince me that there was nothing wrong.

"You moved? To where?" I wondered. I was so nervous that I couldn't even hear her properly. What?

She looked at me, who was still visibly confused, and showed me an embarrassed smile. "I just mean that I love you so dearly, Lady Katarina."

She had kind of lost me there, but having a beautiful girl tell me that she loved me while blushing felt really good regardless.

"Th-thank you," I replied, and I couldn't help but blush too. I still didn't understand why she was crying, but now she looked okay and was actually smiling. I reminded her that she shouldn't call me "Lady" here and she blushed again.

On our way back, we stopped to buy some fruit to use to make desserts. At the restaurant, Regina and her usual lukewarm attitude greeted us.

When we told her that we went to the harbor, she asked us if we saw Sora. Now that I thought of it, Sora was supposed to be working there. I'd completely forgotten about it and hadn't seen him, but Maria said that, right before going to the sea, she'd spotted him.

"Didn't you say hello to him?"

"I did not manage to do so," she said, and then we went to our rooms to start preparing to open for dinner.

That's when I remembered that when we were going to the sea, I was dragging Maria by her hand and walking pretty fast. That was

probably why she didn't manage to greet Sora despite seeing him. Did I interfere with their romance again?

Ugh. I'd just made up my mind to be more independent and try not to interfere with those two and then, on the same day, I ended up keeping Maria to myself so much that she couldn't even talk with Sora... That's the very definition of interfering. I felt terrible about having made another mistake. I'll have to be more careful from now on! I'll make sure I don't get between Maria and Sora anymore!

After reflecting on my wrongdoing, I left my room ready to prepare for dinnertime. Sora was back from his work at the harbor and he told us about what he'd learned there.

"The cargo is inspected carefully, but it's still impossible to police every last nook of every single ship. I heard that that's how contraband can sometimes slip through."

So it was possible that the harbor was being used for human trafficking.

"But could that really be happening in a town like this one?" I pondered. Today, during my walk with Maria, I was impressed by how lively the area looked. It was nothing like the place where Keith had been kidnapped. There, everything was in decay and there were people laying down in the streets. But here? It doesn't seem like a place to commit crimes.

"Our town is lively, I'll give you that," Regina answered, "but we're close to a harbor where a lot of foreigners come to trade. It's those people who tend to get involved in shady stuff. But the people who come to the area near this restaurant are mostly locals. That's why it's so safe."

So that was why I saw so many people that looked like foreigners near the harbor. I also remembered when, at the Assembly, those

entitled foreign nobles who didn't know about Sorcié's rules tried to take Maria.

"Sorcié may be safe, but not all countries are the same as this one." I'd heard that from Cezar, Sora, and many others. The world across the sea suddenly didn't sound as fascinating anymore.

After reporting on what he'd heard, Sora was ready to go to his room and prepare for opening the restaurant. Before that, though, he asked us if we'd been near the harbor.

"Yes," Maria responded honestly, "Lady Katarina and I took a walk through the town during our break."

"Oh, that sounds fun. Anyway, this area is relatively safe, but don't go to any weird places," Sora warned us.

"Phew... Sora wasn't mad..." I mumbled to myself as he left.

"What?" Maria asked, surprised. She obviously didn't understand what I meant. As an otome game protagonist, Maria could be kind of dull when it came to understanding men's feelings. She hadn't noticed that Sora liked her.

"I just thought that, you know, he'd get mad at us for not inviting him." Actually, what I really thought was that he'd get mad at me for keeping Maria all to myself.

"I see. Maybe he wanted to come along too. We shall invite him next time, and go again! All three of us!"

"Th-Three?!" Why don't the two of you go?! You wouldn't be able to enjoy each other if I were there!

"Yes! It sounds lovely," Maria replied with the cutest smile ever.

"It does, yeah..." I nodded along.

This was one protagonist to be reckoned with. If I wasn't careful, I was going to be the one falling in love with her. She was too cute. In

my heart, though, I knew that I had to refuse that prospect. If I didn't, I'd end up interfering and become a villainess and... I kept struggling with my thoughts while preparing the restaurant, until it finally opened for the evening.

Just as Regina had expected, there were even more customers than on the previous day. She explained that there were so many people living there close to each other that rumors spread incredibly fast. And apparently, along with the rumors about Maria's cuisine, rumors about me had been spreading as well.

"So you're a relative of Regina's? Do your best!" some customers would tell me.

One of the customers came with his daughter. They'd wanted to come for lunch to try Maria's dessert but didn't make it in time, so we gave the daughter one to take home after she was done with dinner.

Now that I'd gotten more used to the job, I had enough mental resources left to interact with customers more. Most people were probably familiar with one another to begin with, being from the same town, and the atmosphere was friendly and relaxed throughout the restaurant. Some of the customers even remembered my name and promised that they'd come again. Both Regina and the old waitress praised me for getting so used to the job in a single day. I was happy about receiving compliments again. Maybe I made for a better waitress than a noble lady, I thought.

"Thank you!" I saw off the last group of customers. There were even more people than the day before, and at times, the restaurant was almost completely full.

"At this rate, we might even turn a profit..." Regina mumbled to herself.

After we were done cleaning and the old couple had gone home, Regina started reporting on what she'd managed to hear that day. "With all these customers coming in, I was able to hear a lot of interesting things! It's all because of you guys! Thank you! Of course," she continued, "I didn't hear anyone talk specifically about the kidnapping or human trafficking. However, I heard that some foreigners at the harbor were doing something suspicious. That isn't a rare occurrence, though, so I'll have to look into it a bit more."

She explained that foreigners behaving in a shady way around the harbor was common and that people would usually just report it to the harbor guards and call it a day. Most of the people caught were smugglers of illegal items.

"And this time we aren't even talking about illegal things, but people. We can't let that go unpunished. I'll check on the source of that rumor and tell you what I find," Regina concluded, and then we went back to our rooms to rest before the next day of work.

While we were walking back, Maria approached Sora. "Next time, we should all go around town together, the three of us," she invited him.

"You're right," he answered, sounding happy at the prospect, though I suspected that he actually wanted to go out with Maria alone.

I looked at him as if to say *Don't worry, I'll leave you two alone when the time comes*, but my message probably didn't get through, because he just looked at me weirdly and that was it. I really wanted to support the romance between Maria and Sora, but things just wouldn't go my way.

I reached my room, and being just as tired as the previous day, I went straight to bed once again. I was starting to get used to this job, and the restaurant was getting a lot more customers. Now all we needed was a useful lead. If the baron's kidnapped daughter was here, we had to save her as soon as possible. On top of that, I also

had to worry about Maria and Sora and how not to interfere with their relationship.

*I have a lot to do, a lot to think about. But I'm so tired I can't even think straight... I'll worry about stuff tomorrow.*

I sank my face into the pillow, which was harder than I was used to, and before I knew it I was already snoring.

★★★★★

I, Maria Campbell, was once again assigned to a mission together with Lady Katarina Claes. She had saved me, both during our time at the Academy and also at the Ministry, on countless occasions. She was always saving me. I didn't want to be a weight. I wanted to be the one saving her...

It was our second day since arriving at Ocean Harbor. Our lunch shift was over, and I left the kitchen for the dining area. Katarina was not there.

“Good job. The people loved your desserts,” Regina, coming out from behind the counter, told me.

“Thank you,” I answered, just before seeing Lady Katarina walk in through the restaurant’s entrance. She had been changing the sign to the “closed” one.

Lady Katarina also praised my cooking, going so far as to say that all those customers had come because of me. She smiled at me, but I shook my head. I believed that the credit belonged to her. I explained that, had it not been for her promoting my sweets outside the restaurant, nobody would have walked in. She humbly claimed that she had barely done anything, but I knew that that was not the case. After all, I had done nothing but cook.

I knew from my childhood that, no matter how delicious a dessert was, it was pointless as long as nobody ate it. Before, nobody would eat what I, a lonely child with Light Magic powers, cooked.

This had all changed because of Lady Katarina. I cooked, because that was what I was told to do, but I did not know how we could show potential customers our offerings. Lady Katarina, however, promptly asked Regina for permission and went out into the street, showing off the desserts to the people passing by, and even offering them free samples.

“Starting today, the Harbor Restaurant has desserts too! Come try them!” she would declare.

After the first few people, interested by this peculiar sight, actually walked inside, one customer started following another. I explained my reasoning to Lady Katarina, but she did not seem to agree.

Regina, however, interrupted us to say that it was time we rested, driving us away from the dining area.

As we turned to look at each other, Lady Katarina asked me what I thought we should do in our free time, and I nervously told her that I wanted to see the town, adding that it would be a great pleasure if she agreed to come with me. I thought that inviting her like that was rather impertinent of me, but thankfully, she smiled at me and agreed.

We told Regina about what we were planning to do, and she cautioned us about avoiding potentially dangerous places. Heeding her warning, we decided not to stray too far away from the restaurant.

The town was thriving with activity as the salty breeze from the sea blew through it. Many of the people around us looked like foreigners, and I felt as if I was briefly transported to another

country. What's more, there were lines of shops and stalls selling all kinds of goods which were not available in the capital.

Lady Katarina kept shifting her gaze enthusiastically from one place to the next, unable to decide what she should eat. She was endearing in her childishness, and I could not help but smile. I suggested that she simply try all the stalls that interested her, since we had enough time to do so, and she started thinking about where to start. Despite having stared at the various offerings with a serious face for quite a long time, she still seemed to be having trouble choosing.

"I would also like to try different treats, so why do we not buy several and split them between us?"

"Really?! Thank you, Maria!" she replied ecstatically.

Soon after, we sat on a bench and started eating together. She split one of the sweets she had bought in half, handing me my share. I really respected her for how nonchalantly she could do something like that despite her noble upbringing.

As soon as I'd thanked her, she was already stabbing a pancake with a fork. Moments later she had already eaten it and was rejoicing at how good it tasted. She looked delighted.

I ate it too, and found that the soft sponge was filled with plenty of delicious fruit.

Lady Katarina noticed that we had never seen fruit like that in the capital, and I thought that using a local specialty in the restaurant could make it even more popular. I mentioned the idea to her, and she quickly agreed with me, saying that we should buy some of that fruit before going back. I was more than happy to do so, mostly because I wanted to bake something that Lady Katarina would like.

After eating, we went to see the shops near the harbor. I had never shopped with a friend and I was very excited to be able to do so for the first time.

While we were looking at souvenirs, Lady Katarina suggested that we go to the sea. I had never actually seen the sea myself but really wanted to do so. I replied to that effect, and she grabbed my hand and started walking. The last time I had walked while someone held my hand was probably when I was but a toddler, and so it felt somewhat embarrassing, but in a pleasant way.

On our way to the harbor, I noticed Sora working, but I thought that if I stopped to say hello to him, Lady Katarina would let go of my hand. I did not want that to end. I pretended not to see him, deciding that I would later say, as an excuse, that I did not find the appropriate time to approach him.

Once we reached the harbor, we were greeted by a seemingly infinite expanse of blue. The water, as clear as the sky above it, reached all the way to the horizon.

This is...the sea. I expected it to be large, but...how could it be this magnificent? I was so moved by the view that I remained silent.

“Gorgeous, isn’t it?” Lady Katarina asked me.

I could only agree and nod. It was, indeed, very beautiful. I knew that I would never forget the sight in front of me.

“Even if it’s still Sorcié, this place is so different from the capital. Other countries are probably even more different...” she mused, looking at the ships on the water.

The world over the horizon... The countries over there were probably beyond what we could ever imagine.

I looked at Lady Katarina, her gaze pointed toward far away lands that she could not see, and I felt scared. I felt that she was going to

leave me and go where I could not reach her ever again. I grabbed her arm.

She looked at me, surprised, and asked what I was doing.

“I just felt like you were going to go someplace far away... Do you want to go abroad, Lady Katarina?”

In my heart, the true question was slightly different. Do you want to go abroad and leave us all behind? But I resisted saying that.

“If I ever go abroad, I’d rather go with my friends. Going by myself doesn’t sound like fun,” she answered, and my fear suddenly vanished.

She then extended her hand toward me and asked whether I would accompany her. She would never leave me behind.

“Yes! I will follow you anywhere.” As long as she allowed me to, I would stay by her side. Always.

Back when I was shunned and lonely, I could never have imagined that one day, somebody would so naturally ask me to accompany them somewhere. The world was a warmer place than I had thought, and I could feel that warmth in my chest.

“Let’s get going. Hehe, this was so fun. It was my first time shopping and eating out with a friend like this,” Lady Katarina remarked, but the same was true for me as well. Honestly, I thought that such a day would never come.

“Thank you for coming with me, Maria... Maria? What’s wrong?” she asked me. As her voice made me come back to my senses, I realized that my face was wet. I had started crying without even noticing it.

Clearly concerned for me, she asked me if I was hurt. Imagining how worried she would be by seeing me start crying all of a sudden, I told her that I was just deeply moved. She did not understand me, but through no fault of her own—my sudden outburst would have

confused anyone. Fighting the embarrassment, I simply told her how I felt.

"I just mean that I love you so dearly, Lady Katarina."

"Th-thank you," she answered with a smile.

Seeing that made me feel warm in my chest once more, and I had to exert all of my willpower not to start crying again. I did not want to bother her with my tears.



Lady Katarina, today was a special day for me. I saw the sea for the first time and did so together with the person I love the most.

We went back to the restaurant, stopping to buy the fruit we had talked about, and along the way, Lady Katarina reminded me that I should not call her “Lady” here.

Regina was waiting for us at the restaurant, and she asked us if we had seen Sora at the harbor.

I had pretended not to see him but I did not want to lie, so I admitted that I had.

Lady Katarina asked me why I did not say so earlier, and I gave the excuse that I had thought of earlier.

“I did not manage to do so.”

Just saying that made me feel embarrassed, since the real reason was that I wanted to enjoy my time together with her for as long as possible.

Sora, who had come back to help us prepare for the evening, reported to us about what he had seen that day. He found that it was possible to hide something within the cargo of a ship, which meant there was a possibility of human trafficking taking place.

“But could that really be happening in a town like this one?” Lady Katarina asked, and I felt the same.

The town I had just visited was bright and lively, certainly not the place one would imagine when hearing about such heinous crimes.

However, Regina explained to us that there were many foreigners passing through the port and that they often caused trouble. Fortunately, they did not tend to visit this part of town, so it was relatively safe.

I had almost never interacted with foreigners, except during my undercover mission at the International Assembly in the Castle. I remembered some of them, nobles who treated commoners as nothing more than objects. I immediately felt uncomfortable. If people like them were at Ocean Harbor, it was very possible that they were trafficking humans. And if the kidnapped girl was one of them...

I clenched my fists.

We had to do our best to get as much information as possible and ascertain whether the girl was in this town.

After he had finished reporting to us, Sora made for his room, but before leaving, he asked us whether we had been near the harbor. He had probably noticed us too, and I felt bad about it.

“Yes, Lady Katarina and I took a walk through the town during our break,” I confirmed.

“Oh, that sounds fun. Anyway, this area is relatively safe, but don’t go to any weird places,” he concluded, worried for us. Sora was a really kind person, and I felt sorry for pretending not to see him just so I could spend more time alone with Lady Katarina.

After he had left, I heard Katarina let out a sigh of relief.

“Sora wasn’t mad...” she muttered.

Why would he be mad?! Had Lady Katarina figured out the true reason I hadn’t talked to him earlier?! I panicked, but she quickly explained what she meant.

“I just thought that, you know, he’d get mad at us for not inviting him,” she said.

I thought that she made a valid point, so I suggested that the next time we go for a walk, we all do so together. Sora, as I understood it, also liked Lady Katarina very much, so I had no doubt that he would

like that idea. I had kept her all for myself today by ignoring him, and not inviting him next time would be very unfair.

After that, I went to my room to start preparing, and before long, it was time to open the restaurant for dinner.

Lady Katarina performed even better at her job than she had on the previous day, gracefully moving between the tables carrying dishes and taking orders. As expected of her, she was very popular with the customers.

Afterward, we learned that Regina had heard a piece of information regarding suspicious actions by some foreigners and said that she would investigate it further.

While we were walking back to our respective rooms at the end of the day, I told Sora, “Next time, we should all go around town together, the three of us.”

“You’re right,” he replied, looking pleased. He probably wanted to go out walking with Lady Katarina as well.

Back in my room, I looked back at the good memories I had made during that day and prepared for the next day’s work. I had so much fun...but maybe, in this very town, a kidnapped girl was suffering. Maybe she was as scared as I was when those foreign nobles kidnapped me. If that was the case, we needed to rescue her as soon as possible. I will do my best to bring her home safely, I swore to myself before falling asleep.

★★★★★

Unlike the previous day, I managed to wake up without any problem before it was too late. ...With Maria’s help, that is.

Today, too, Sora was out working at the docks while Maria looked busy preparing the desserts to serve at lunchtime.

Yesterday I hadn't really done much of anything, but today I decided I wanted to help, so I asked Regina what ingredients we needed and went to shop for the groceries. I was getting used to the town, and I could go to the closest shop by myself.

Regina ordered me to immediately call a guard if anything happened, but it was barely more than a ten-minute trip, and I didn't even get lost on the way. I also encountered some of the restaurant's patrons from the previous day, who recognized me and asked me if I was out shopping for the restaurant. That made me feel even safer.

I bought the things that Regina told me to and was ready to go back when I heard someone calling out to me.

"Oh, you're the Harbor's new waitress, aren't you?"

I looked up and saw a man in front of the store across the street smiling at me.

"Thank you for that dessert yesterday!" he said, and I remembered who he was.

He was the customer who had come to the restaurant with his daughter who wanted to try our dessert. We ended up making one just for her so that they could eat it after they left.

"Not at all! Did your daughter like it?" I asked.

"She sure did! She scarfed down the whole thing while going on about how good it tasted. Oh, right, take this. As thanks for yesterday," he said, tossing me one of the apples on display at the store.

"Thank you! Please come visit us again sometime!" I said before leaving.

The apple he'd given me was shiny and smelled good. I could tell how delicious it was going to be just by looking at it.

I'm going to share this with Maria later. If we have any whipped cream, it'd go great with this. And I wonder if we also have honey. Honey would be awesome.

I was so busy thinking about how to eat the apple that I got distracted and stumbled on a rock.

Wah!

I tried my best not to fall down and to protect the ingredients I'd bought at the same time...but unfortunately, the apple fell down. It was so smooth and round that it rolled all the way into an alley.

My apple! I thought, dashing after it. After walking a short way down the dark alley, I finally found the apple laying next to some other small object which I couldn't quite make out.

The object jumped up, and as I got a better look, I realized that it was a dirty, underweight kitten. He didn't have a collar around his neck, so he was probably a stray. He started hissing at me while keeping an eye on the apple. He really looked malnourished. I took the apple and, crouching down, I tried to imitate a cat's purr. The kitten, however, just started hissing louder and backed away slowly.

I knew that dogs hate me, but I thought cats tolerated me... Maybe strays are just easily scared.

I looked at the apple and noticed that there were no bite marks on it. Do cats even eat apples? They don't, right? I tried to think of something that I could feed the kitten and remembered that the shop owner, earlier, had given me some extra sausages free of charge. Maybe the kitten likes meat?

I took the sausage out of the bag, tore off a little bit, and threw it in the kitten's direction. The kitten looked surprised at first, but then slowly started moving toward it. When he reached the sausage, he started nibbling. The poor guy must have been really hungry. I threw

another piece of sausage, and then another, and then another, until I heard a voice behind me.

“Little one? Where are you?”

I saw a young man entering the alley with a slice of ham in his hands.

“Oh, there you are. Wait, who are you?” the man, who probably was around my age, asked.

He had deep brown hair and eyes, and tan skin. He didn’t look like someone from this town. His face lit up when he saw the kitten but then darkened when he saw me crouching next to him.

“I found this kitten and was just giving him some sausage. Is this your cat?” I asked. I thought he was a stray cat, but this young man seemed to be his owner.

“No, he’s just a stray,” he answered, looking away from me. “I just found him here, so I come by to give him something to eat when I have free time.”

That explained the ham in his hand, and it also meant that, as I thought at first, the kitten had no owner.

“I see. But he looks so small. I wonder where his parents are.” The kitten was so tiny that he could have fit in my hands, and he looked too young to live without parents.

“He was already alone the first time I saw him. His parents are either dead or they abandoned him,” the young man spat out coldly.

“But will he be able to make it on his own?” I wondered. The kitten looked so thin that his bones showed. I couldn’t come to feed him every day, and apparently the young man only came here sporadically.

He’s definitely too small to hunt well enough to survive... I’m getting worried about this kitten.

"If he can't, he'll die. Simple as that," the man replied, aloof.

His response sounded so cruel that I felt irritated and I turned toward him, ready to reprimand him for being heartless. But when I looked into his face, I found that he seemed genuinely worried for the kitten. My rage subsided, and I thought that maybe this man had the same tsundere tendencies as Alan.

"Excuse me...wouldn't you be able to take him home?" I asked.

"...I'm not from around here, so I can't. What about you?" he countered. As I suspected, he wasn't from this town.

"I'm only staying here temporarily too, so I can't..." I replied.

Of course, if I could bring him back to the Claes manor, he could probably stay in our garden, but... Easier said than done. I was here on a mission and I didn't even know when we'd be back home.

"Oh..." he said, visibly disappointed.

He's been feeding this cat since before I ever did, so he must have grown really attached... Wait, I have an idea!

"I work at a restaurant right now, so I could ask the customers if any of them wants to take him home!"

"Sure. It's not my problem anyway," came a stereotypical tsundere answer, but I could tell from his expression that he was happy about my idea.

"I can't bring him back with me right now, however. Do you think he'll be fine?"

"Yeah, he's always in this alley. It should be fine even if you come by later."

"I'm so glad. I'll look for an owner and, when I find one, I'll come back to pick up the kitten."

“Whatever... I’ll come by to check on him too,” the young man said, mumbling the last part under his breath. I started to understand how he felt about the kitten.

“Oh, I work at the Harbor Restaurant down this road, so do come in if you have the chance. See you, young man!”

“Young man...? Just call me Arneau,” he said, before starting to walk away.

“Okay, Arneau. I’m Katarina, by the way!”

I saw Arneau put the ham down for the kitten as he left. He looked aloof but he was probably kind deep down.

“I’ll find you a good owner, so wait just a bit longer, okay?” I told the cat.

Arneau wasn’t there anymore, and I went back to the restaurant, for real this time.

I promptly asked Regina if I could look for an owner among the customers.

“Yes. I can’t take the cat myself, but feel free to ask around.”

I decided to do so as soon as we were open. I imagined that, just as on the previous day, we would get lots of young girls coming to eat sweets. I had to make sure to tell them about Maria’s new desserts too!

Soon after we opened, as I had predicted, the restaurant was full of girls. We had almost no empty seats left. Expecting a busy lunchtime, Regina had called her other two employees, who were now almost crying with joy at seeing how popular the restaurant had become.

“I’m going to turn a profit...” Regina gasped, grinning.

One smiling customer gushed, “This is so good! It’s so full of fruit!” as she proceeded to quickly finish her dessert. She was the daughter of

the man who'd given me the apple earlier. After being too late for lunchtime on the previous day, she tried Maria's sweets at home and liked them so much that she came again.

"I wish I could actually try all of them," said the sugar-loving girl as she looked at the menu, "but I'm almost out of pocket money..."

After long and careful consideration, she had ordered three desserts which she was now happily devouring. The way she was attacking those plates made me think that we'd make good friends.

"Ughh... I ate too much... I'll save my allowance and come again!" she announced, gazing enviously at the other girls who were still eating.

"These are small ones we made to give away as samples, but...here. Have this," I told her, wrapping up some sweets and giving them to her without anyone noticing.

"Th-Thank you so much!" she said with a huge smile. Nodding vigorously, she added, "I'll tell all my friends about this restaurant!"

"Oh, by the way, do you know anyone who would like to keep a cat? He's still a kitten, but he's living without his parents. I'm trying to find him an owner," I said.

I had already asked a few customers, but most of the people around here were running businesses and couldn't keep pets. This girl's father gave me an apple earlier, so her family probably ran a fruit shop. I thought that, even if she couldn't keep the kitten herself, maybe she knew someone who could.

"Hm... I can't tell for sure, but I know someone who might. I'll try to ask."

"Really?!"

This was the first positive answer I'd received that day.

"I'll come back to tell you what they said after I've asked!" she promised, with a smile on her face that looked just like her father's.

"Thank you," I bowed as she left.

I hope we'll be able to find this kitten a home...

Another lunchtime made busy by tons of young women came to a close.

Maria said that she'd prepare new dishes for dinner, and I wanted to make myself useful too, so I said I'd go to buy the ingredients again. We had more customers than we expected, and many ingredients were already starting to run out. I wrote them down on a list and went to the same shop I'd been to earlier. Once again, I reached it without getting lost.

"Oh? Here again?" the shopkeeper asked me.

"Yes. We need ingredients again. I'll buy more this time around."

Walking out, I looked at the store whose owner had given me an apple earlier today. Maybe he was taking a break, because there was a woman standing there instead. Probably his wife.

With my groceries in hand, I started walking back and reached the alley where I met the kitten. It had been a few hours since I met him, and I wondered if he really was still here. I was so worried that I just had to check, and walked closer.

"Oh!"

Just as Arneau said, the kitten was still there...together with Arneau himself. He said he'd only come by when he had the time, but there he was, again giving some kind of meat to the kitten. I hadn't noticed earlier, but the cat looked really comfortable around Arneau. He'd eat straight from his hand and was nowhere near as tense as when I was feeding him.

When he saw me, Arneau's expression turned awkward.

I walked toward him and said, “He looks really used to you. Do you come by often?”

“Not that much. Not that much at all,” Arneau replied indifferently.

“But you were here earlier too...”

“It’s just a coincidence. I had something to do nearby.”

I decided not to press that topic further, since he just kept stubbornly denying that he cared about the kitten anyway. Instead, I told him about the results of my search for an owner.

“...She is going to ask, and when she has an answer, she’ll come back to tell me.”

“I see...”

His reply was terse, but his eyes were full of joy. He really was the type who’s never honest about his feelings.

“And also,” I continued, “tomorrow morning, there’s something I’d like to do for this kitten. Would you help me?”

I wanted to do this even if we couldn’t find the kitten an owner, but at first I thought it’d be impossible, given how tense he was around me. But seeing how relaxed he was around Arneau gave me hope. And Arneau obviously cared a lot about the kitten, so he’d probably help me.

“And what would that be?”

“Well...”

After getting Arneau to promise that he’d meet me the next day, I went back to the restaurant.

I found Maria in the kitchen preparing to open for dinner, and Sora was there with her. The two seemed to be having fun talking. I was ready to walk inside and greet them, but I remembered just in time that I didn’t want to intrude on Maria and Sora when they were

together. I don't want to get myself doomed. I must root for their love. No interfering, I thought, and quickly moved away from the kitchen and into the restaurant's main dining room.

Regina, as usual, was behind the counter and seemed to be skimming through a notebook.

"I'm back. Here are the groceries."

"Thank you," she answered, looking up at me.

"What are you reading?" I asked, curious.

"Oh, Maria neatly wrote down the figures of the restaurant's sales," she replied.

"She did what?!"

I asked why Maria would go to the trouble of doing something like that, and Regina explained that Maria overheard her complain about how difficult accounting was and offered to help. Maria turned out to be so good at it that Regina eventually just turned the whole task over to her.

I was surprised both by Maria having yet another skill and by Regina lacking yet another skill.

"Maria's really incredible, isn't she?" I remarked.

"She sure is," declared Regina. "She can cook, she can keep the books, and she even gave me various suggestions on how to cut operating costs."

Just how much does Regina plan to rely on a single temporary employee? I thought to myself. Still, no matter how much she was entrusted with, Maria was able to do it. I'd always known that she was smart, but she still managed to impress me.

"I wonder if she would stay to work here even after the mission is over..." Regina trailed off.

"Maria easily ends up working too hard without realizing it, so try not to ask too much of her, please," I replied, knowing about her tendency to comply whenever people relied on her.

"You're probably right... She looks like the type. I'll try to be careful," Regina replied, but then she followed it up with, "If only she wasn't a Light Magic user..." and I wasn't really sure I could trust her.

I went back to take a look at the kitchen and noticed that Sora wasn't there anymore. He'd probably gone back to his room. Since now I could go in without interfering with their budding romance, I approached Maria, and she let me try her new dishes for the day. They were delicious. I took the opportunity to ask her about the fact that she was keeping the restaurant's books for Regina and whether she was overworking herself.

"Not at all. If anything, now that those messy books are all nice and tidy and I have been able to think about how to reduce all that wasteful spending, I feel much better. I enjoy this kind of thing," she said with eyes full of delight.

Now that I thought back on it, she seemed to be enjoying herself when I saw her counting the sales and profits at the end of the day. It was a bit unexpected, but maybe she liked working with money.

After I discovered this new side of my friend's personality, it was time to open the restaurant for dinner for the third day in a row.

Just as Regina expected, Maria's cuisine drew in even more customers than on the previous days, and there were few empty seats. I'd also already gotten so used to being a waitress that I managed to do my job without any major mishaps.

Earlier, Regina had informed me that most of the customers stopped by here after work. They'd have a meal or a drink after they were done selling goods or loading cargo at the harbor and then they'd head home. It was easy to imagine that they weren't really

interested in fancy dishes. They wanted the kind of simple but tasty meal that they could eat in their own homes, which was exactly what Maria was making.

“Excuse me, Miss. I’ll take today’s special,” one late customer called out to me. He was the man who’d given me the apple earlier that day.

I thanked him for that while I took his order.

“Ha ha, it’s just an apple, don’t mention it. By the way, my daughter said that she was here today and mentioned how good you were to her. Thanks, Miss,” he added with a laugh.

“Not at all! I was happy to see how much she liked our menu. And she also said she’d help me in my search for an owner.”

“Oh, you mean about the kitten? She told me about it, and I asked someone who said they could take it. They’ll come by tomorrow evening to pick it up.”

“Really?! Thank you very much!”

Yeah! That must be the person she was talking about earlier! I didn’t think we’d find the kitten an owner this fast. I thanked the man and his daughter again and then (with permission from Regina and Maria) I gave him some small sweets to take back home.

And so another evening at the restaurant came to a finish. The old employees left once we were almost done with the cleanup, and Regina reported on what she’d heard on that day.

“With all these customers, I was able to listen to a lot of talk. And I even heard about a rumor of a kidnapped girl being sold to someone from another country,” she said.

“So there really was human trafficking going on!” We finally obtained a valuable piece of information.

"That seems to be the case, but it's only a rumor. The man who talked about it sounded like he was just trying to warn his daughter against playing outside at night. I'll need to look into it further."

Regina shrugged.

"I see..."

After all, it wasn't going to be that easy.

"And I'm also still investigating those foreigners at the harbor. They look suspicious, but nobody has witnessed them committing any actual crime," Regina continued.

All in all, after three days, we still didn't know anything new. It was so frustrating.

"Hm..." Regina furrowed her brow. "If we're having this much trouble finding information, it means that someone with a lot of power in our country is involved."

I didn't really understand what she meant, so I asked her to elaborate.

"Foreigners usually don't know that much about Sorcié, so when they break the law, they usually get quickly found out by someone, and the rumors start spreading. But if they had an insider helping them, they'd be able to cover their tracks better, leaving everyone in the dark. And the more powerful that insider is, the better. I may not look it, but I know about pretty much everything that happens around these parts. My information network is quite a bit wider than just this restaurant. To be honest, I thought that I'd be able to find the girl you're looking for much faster..." She paused for a while, then continued, "I don't know who's behind this, but they're going to be a lot of trouble for us."

That would explain why we were having such a hard time finding any leads, but I wasn't expecting it... I wondered who the powerful Sorcié insider was. Could it be a noble? The nobles who had caused us

those problems at the Assembly were foreigners though. I couldn't get the idea of one of our nobles helping them out of my head, but thinking about it by myself wouldn't be of any help.

Sora was the next to report, but he said that he hadn't found any leads at the harbor either. Our end-of-day meeting closed quite grimly.

"Oh, by the way," Regina added, "Larna stopped by earlier. She asked how you were doing, and I told her that you were working hard and doing great."

"Larna was here?! When? Where is she now?" I asked.

We hadn't seen her since the first day when she had said that she'd be investigating on her own, and I wondered what she was up to.

"I'm not so sure because I didn't ask for details, but she seemed busy."

Regina's answer was as useless as I'd come to expect from her. We were all disappointed, but we concluded that at least knowing that she was safe was better than nothing. We all went back to our rooms.

Before parting for the night, Sora and Maria, who knew that I'd been out on errands on my own during the day, both told me to be very careful. Sora especially warned me not to go to any weird places and not to follow any strangers. He must have been really worried about me.

"Don't worry!" I assured both of them.

I'm not a kid—I'm not going to walk into any weird place or follow any stranger. From Jeord just before leaving for the mission to my colleagues here on the job... Why does everyone always worry so much?

Anyway, on the following day, as soon as I was done with my errands, I was planning to go into that alley to meet with Arneau. Would he be happy to know that I found the kitten an owner?

Now that I think of it... Would Arneau count as a stranger? Well, I spoke with him for quite a while and he looks kind, even if a bit cold, so I guess he isn't a stranger anymore.

I went straight to sleep, because I wanted to wake up early on the following day. I jumped right into the bed which I'd already gotten used to.

The next day, I did just as planned. I finished my errands early, brought the groceries back to the restaurant, and went to the alley. Arneau was already there with the kitten.

"I'm sorry, was I late?" I asked.

"No, I just arrived too," he replied, but I saw the meat he was feeding to the kitten, and almost all of it was gone. He'd probably been here for a while and said that not to bother me. He always replied coldly, but I could tell how kind he was.

"I found an owner for the kitten."

"I see." He smiled.

"Oh!" I gasped, surprised by seeing him do so for the first time since I first met him.

"What?" He immediately went back to his usual annoyed face. Why is he like this?

"No, it's nothing. Anyway, so, would you...?"

"Sure," he replied, and then easily lured the kitten over with the meat and gently picked him up.

At first, the kitten twitched a little bit, but he went back to looking comfortable when Arneau started patting his head. No hissing or anything. If I tried to do the same, I was pretty sure he'd just scratch me and run away.

"There's a garden near here, and the people living there have given me permission to put him there for the time being. Let's go," I said, guiding Arneau to a small house nearby.

The home belonged to the fruit shop owner who'd given me the apple on the previous day. Both he and his daughter were out, working or helping with the shop, but I'd gotten permission beforehand.

I stood in front of the bucket full of water and the bottle of shampoo that I'd prepared, rolled up my sleeves, and looked at Arneau.

"Let's do it," I said.

The kitten, probably understanding what was going to happen, started shaking.

"Please, Arneau..."

"Okay," he said, slowly lowering the kitten into the bucket.

The cat, who'd probably never had a bath before in his life, was struggling to get away.

Arneau gently stroked his head, repeating, "It's all right, it's all right..."

The kitten was so filthy that I was worried that he'd get sick. I was planning to wash him clean with Arneau's help, since the kitten was obviously very attached to him. I also thought that looking clean would help him find an owner sooner. Of course, we'd already found one, thanks to the fruit shop owner's daughter, but I figured that it'd be better to wash him anyway.

“Okay, I’ll start,” I announced, grabbing the shampoo and walking closer to the kitten, who promptly started hissing at me.

He still didn’t like me that much. But he did eat the sausage I gave him... I sighed.

“Arneau, say... Do you think you could do it?” I suggested, thinking that it’d probably be better if he were the one to actually do the washing.

“...Okay.” He took the shampoo in one hand and slowly moved it toward the kitten, who looked scared but didn’t hiss.

He probably didn’t like the water but he could trust Arneau. The kitten obviously liked him a lot.

That made me a bit envious. But after all I had Pochi, a pet who liked me a lot too. Well, maybe not a “pet.” A Dark Familiar.

Arneau started scrubbing down the kitten, who looked scared like a cute little baby.

“...Will this do?”

“Yes. He looks much better now. Thank you, Arneau.”

He was very thorough with the shampoo, and the kitten was now perfectly clean.

“Could you wipe him dry?” I requested, handing him a towel. He did so, very gently, until the kitten was dry and shiny.

“Look at how shiny he is! So he used to be dark brown...” I said, before looking at Arnaeu and adding, “He has the same color of hair as you, now that I think of it.”

He pulled at his hair and then looked at the kitten, as if he’d only realized it just now.

“By the way, I was planning to hand over the kitten to the new owner today at the Harbor Restaurant. Could you bring him there later on?”

“Why does it have to be me?”

“I don’t think he likes me... I don’t know whether I’d be able to carry him. Please!”

“...Fine,” he agreed with a sour face.

Since he seemed very attached to the kitten, he’d probably feel better seeing what kind of person was going to keep him. When Arnaeu realized that his hair was the same color as the kitten’s, he looked so happy.

I put back the borrowed bucket, towel, and shampoo, and returned to the restaurant. We were going to have to open for lunch soon, and then it’d be time to meet the kitten’s new owner. I hoped they were going to be kind.

★★★★★

It had been a while since I had first found the kitten in the alley. Lately, he had even started eating straight out of my hand. Before I noticed, I was going to that alley to feed him whenever I could. He was very small, but he probably understood that leaving that place was too dangerous for him. Or maybe he knew that I’d come to bring him food. Whatever the case, he was always there.

I was on my way to give him some ham, as usual, when I found someone crouching in the alley next to the kitten. The alley was so dim that I didn’t notice until I was very close.

“I found this kitten and was just giving him some sausage. Is this your cat?” asked a girl with brown hair and blue eyes.

I was coming to see him every day, but I wasn't his owner. I told her that he was probably a stray. Telling her that I was feeding him often was kind of embarrassing, so I ended up sounding a bit cold.

She was unfazed by my icy response, and asked me whether I knew about his parents. I told her that his parents were either dead or they had abandoned him. That happened a lot, even with people.

"But will he be able to make it on his own?" she questioned. She was obviously raised in this wealthy country, never having to worry about surviving another day.

But if the kitten wasn't able to survive by himself, he'd just die. That's how the world worked, and it applied the same to me, the other kids in the slums, and this kitten too. I told her as harshly as I could, so that she'd realize that I didn't want to keep the conversation going any longer... But she didn't seem to get it. She was either very strong-willed or very dumb.

She asked me whether I was planning to keep the cat. I told her that I couldn't, because I didn't live here. I asked her the same thing, so that I wouldn't have to worry about feeding him myself.

Unfortunately, she said that she didn't live here either. I'd have to leave eventually, and if this kitten found a home, I wouldn't have to worry about him. The girl said she'd ask around about finding an owner, and I was honestly grateful. I was starting to get attached to this little one. Just a bit.

"I can't bring him back with me right now, however. Do you think he'll be fine?" she asked.

"Yeah, he's always in this alley. It should be fine even if you come by later."

"I'm so glad. I'll look for an owner and, when I find one, I'll come back to pick up the kitten."

"Whatever... I'll come by to check on him too," I said. Actually, I was stopping by whenever I could, but I didn't have to tell her that.

She told me the name of the restaurant where she was working and smiled at me. I really couldn't tell what she was thinking. She called me "young man," which just sounded weird, so I told her my name instead. As I was leaving, she introduced herself as Katarina. I felt weird. It was like a tingling sensation in my chest.

When I got back to work, the girl was crying again. The others looked annoyed and they asked me to do something about it. I sighed and put on a smile and my gentlest voice.

"Is everything all right?" I asked her. I didn't have any special talent and I'd never even been to school. This farce was all I could do.

That tingling in my chest was all gone.

In the evening, since I had some free time, I went to check on the little one. He was in the alley, in his usual spot, and as soon as he saw me, he pattered toward me. He'd started doing that lately. Honestly, I was starting to grow attached. If I had a normal life, I'd even consider keeping him myself. I stroked his head, and he purred at me. He was so small and weak that I felt I had to protect him. I fed him some meat, piece by piece.

"Oh!" I heard a voice behind me all of a sudden. It was that girl, Katarina.

After I told her that I only came here every once in a while, she saw me in the alley again after just a few hours. Well that was awkward.

"Do you come by often?" she asked sweetly.

Is she doing this on purpose?

"Not that much. Not that much at all."

"But you were here earlier too..."

Can't you take a hint?!

I made up an excuse about having some other reason to be around here, and she finally stopped badgering me about it. But her innocent grin was annoying me so much.

At least what she told me afterward made up for it. She reported that she'd found someone who, maybe, could give the kitten a home. We just had to wait for the answer. If he found a home, he wouldn't have to worry about starving. He wouldn't have to worry about dying. I looked at the kitten, who'd been hiding behind me ever since Katarina had stepped into the alley. I let out a sigh of relief.

She then told me that she wanted my help with something. I asked what it was, suspicious, and she started elaborating with a smile.

"Well..."

The next day, I met her in the alley like we'd agreed to. It was still early, so I was feeding the kitten. He was cute when he ate from my hand.

After a while, she arrived, looking like she rushed here. She asked me if I'd been waiting, but I told her I hadn't. After all, I just came early because I wanted to.

Then she said that she found someone who wanted to keep the kitten. He'd be okay... And a girl as nosy as this one was bound to find someone that'd be nice to him. From now on, he wouldn't have to worry about being hungry, cold, or threatened. I was so happy for him that the corners of my mouth curled up in a smile.

"Oh!" she exclaimed in surprise, staring at me.

She saw me smiling... I smiled a lot for work, but it was always fake. This was probably the first time since I was a child that someone had

seen me smile for real, and I felt so embarrassed. Or maybe it was the first time I smiled for real since being a child, regardless of whether anyone saw it or not.

“What?” I grumbled, sounding annoyed because of how awkward I felt.

“No, it’s nothing,” she replied. She finally showed that she could get a hint...sometimes.

We then decided that it was time to go wash the kitten. I lured him closer to me with a piece of meat and then carefully picked him up. I had stroked his head before, but I’d never actually taken him in my arms. He was so light. I thought he’d try to get away, but he just sat there in my arms. I felt warm... Was that something special about small kittens? Or were other living things like this too?

Katarina showed me to the garden where we were going to give him his bath. She prepared a bucket full of water and a bottle of shampoo.

When he saw her roll up her sleeves, the kitten started shaking.

I carefully lowered him into the full bucket. He looked scared, probably because this was his first time taking a bath. I stroked his head and told him that it was all right, and he calmed down.

We were washing him because Katarina said that being so dirty could end up making him sick, and even if it didn’t, it’d make it more difficult for him to find a home. I promised to help her, in part because what she said made sense, and in part because the kitten just hissed at her whenever she tried to get too close.

When she took the bottle of shampoo in her hand, he hissed even louder than usual. I thought she wouldn’t be able to wash him, and she must have realized the same thing.

“Arneau, say... Do you think you could do it?” she asked as she handed me the shampoo.

I’d never washed an animal this small but I couldn’t step back after getting so far. I started scrubbing him, making sure not to hurt him. Once I was done, I asked her what she thought.

She said that he looked all nice and clean, and that we could wipe him dry now.

“Look at how shiny he is! So he used to be dark brown...” she remarked after I was done with the drying. She was right. He almost looked like a different cat. Now he can find happiness...

Out of the blue, Katarina said that the kitten and I had the same hair color.

I pulled my hair toward my face and checked it. I never really looked at my hair, so I hadn’t noticed, but she was right. It was just a coincidence, of course. But then...why did I feel so happy about it? Why did my chest feel so warm?

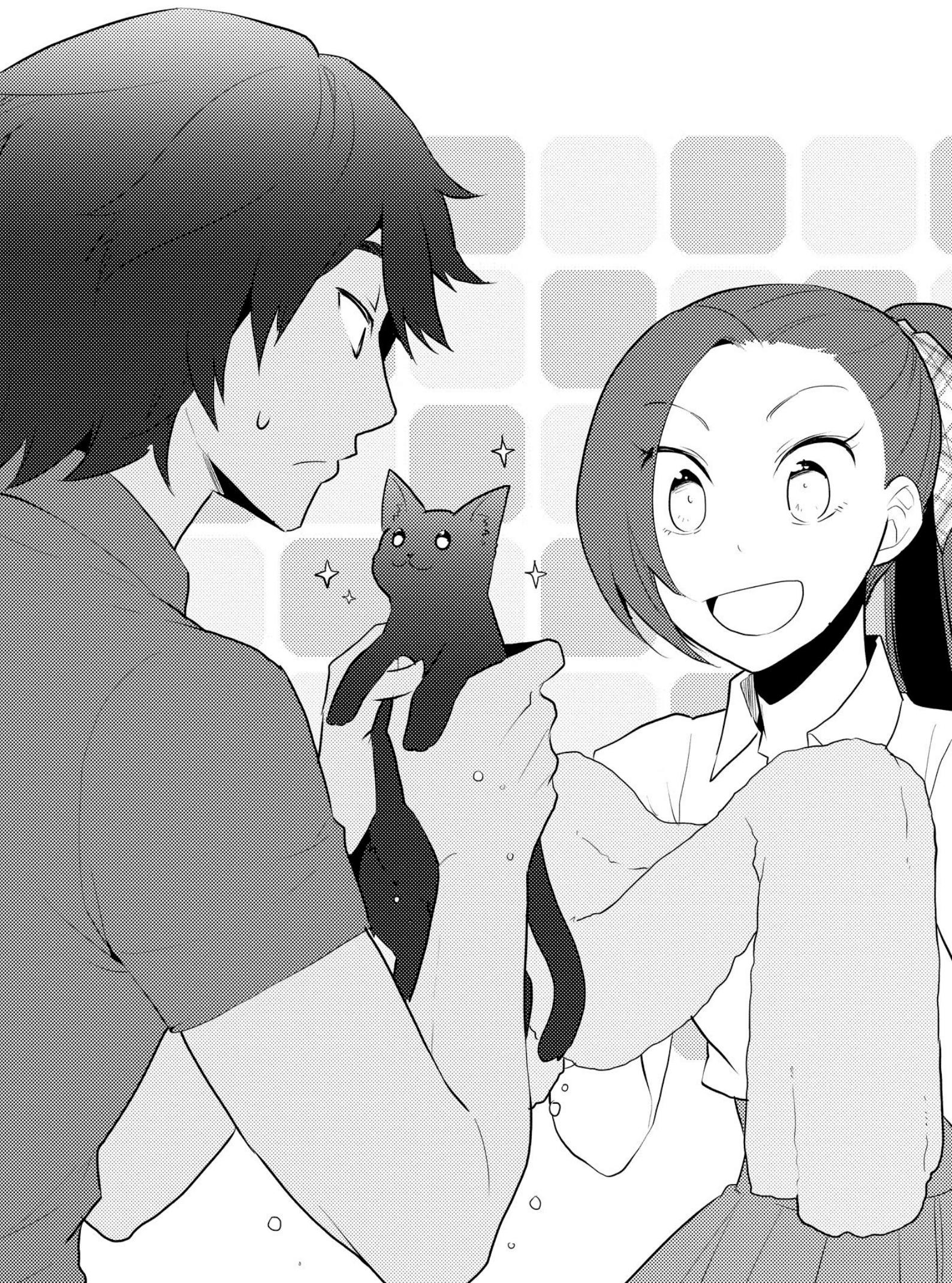
“By the way, I was planning to hand the kitten to the new owner today at the Harbor Restaurant. Could you bring him there later on?” she requested.

I asked her why I’d need to do that, but she was almost begging me, so I eventually gave in. I wanted to see who was going to keep him, and whether it was someone who could make him happy.

Even after parting with Katarina, I still felt warm inside. The kitten was so cute... He reminded me of something. Something from my childhood in the slums.

One day, a grown-up had walked into the slums. He wasn’t like the other grown-ups around us. He started teaching us kids lots of stuff. And when I was around him, I felt warm in my chest—just like with the kitten.

I didn't know why I felt like that, and it felt awkward, so I tried to avoid him. One of the kids closest to me, however, really liked that man and was always around him. I remember how happy he sounded when that man had given him a name.



One day, the kid came to talk to me. He was going to go to look for medicine because the man had gotten sick. I never saw that boy again.

I later heard a rumor that he was caught stealing and was then sold off as a slave. *What an idiot*, I thought. *There's nothing we can do to help other people. We can barely do enough to help ourselves.*

I wondered how that kid was doing right now.

Was he even still alive?

## ***Chapter 3: The Secret Hideout and an Unexpected Reunion***

After washing the cat, I came back to the restaurant and found Maria already hard at work preparing for business. She cooked, she baked, and, as of yesterday, she also kept the books and tried to reduce costs wherever she could. Thanks to her, the Harbor Restaurant had almost turned its huge losses into a profit. However, she was so busy that, just like on the previous day, she probably wouldn't be free to go outside at all.

I had worried about her working too hard, but as she clutched the accounting books, she insisted that she enjoyed contributing to the restaurant and increasing sales. Now I just felt happy that she'd found a new hobby.

*But what if she enjoys this so much that she never comes back to the Ministry?* I thought to myself, slightly scared.

Regina was actually hoping for something like that to happen, but there were a lot of people who were waiting for Maria to come back home. Dewey, the child prodigy (and love interest from the game), would probably cry, and Cyrus, the superior who was scared of most women except for Maria (and was another love interest from the game), would also be sad.

But if Maria isn't working at the Ministry, then the events of the game can't take place, right? Which means that I can't run into any bad ends, right?! Maybe this isn't so bad after all!

On the other hand, I really didn't want to live so far away from Maria. Maybe I should just stay here and be a waitress. That probably fits me better than being a noble lady anyway.

I helped with the restaurant's preparations while thinking of the future, and soon it was time to open for lunch.

Up until a few days ago, the only people coming to have lunch at the Harbor Restaurant were a few middle-aged men on break from work, but now the place looked like a fancy cafe swarming with young women. There wasn't a single middle-aged man to be seen. Not a single man at all, in fact. At first there were only girls, but as the restaurant became more popular, some older women had started joining them too. All the customers were enjoying Maria's sweets as they happily chatted.

I found one of them whose face looked familiar.

"Oh, welcome! I'm glad to see you coming here today too," I greeted her. It was the daughter of the fruit shop's owner.

"I wanted to eat more of the desserts, so I asked my dad to let me help at the shop in exchange for some pocket money..." she confessed, sounding a bit embarrassed.

"Hehe, thank you! It's nice to know you like our sweets that much. And thank you about the kitten too. Both for helping me to find him an owner and for letting me use your garden."

"Not at all! We never use the garden anyway. And as for the owner, it was just a coincidence. An older relative of mine recently lost his cat and he was very sad about it, so I just talked to him about it."

"His cat passed away?"

"Yes. He'd been keeping it for years, and it passed away a few weeks ago. It was old and weak, but he loved it so much... It must have been such a shock. He looked so distraught. I'm sure he'll shower the kitten with love. You have nothing to worry about!"

"I'm so glad to hear that. Thank you!"

This girl was very pleasant, and you could feel how kind she was just by looking at her face. If she said that her relative would be a good owner, then that was probably true, and hearing it was a relief.

"He'll be done with work around the time that the restaurant closes after lunch, so he said he'll stop by then," she continued.

She also said that she would have liked to be there too, but she had to go back to work to earn that pocket money she had asked for. I told her not to worry about it, took her order, and brought her the dessert she'd been waiting for. Once again, she looked absolutely delighted as she ate. When I gave her some more small samples to bring back home, she gave me a huge smile.

Actually, we closed the restaurant slightly earlier than the scheduled time, because we sold out of all the sweets.

"Who'd have thought we'd sell them so fast? Maybe tomorrow we should make more," Regina chattered excitedly, and Maria, who'd been making them in the first place, looked very pleased as well.

I finished cleaning up the place and waited for Arneau to show up with the kitten. Maria was busy writing down the sales figures, but when I told her that we'd have the kitten brought in, she told me that she wanted to see it. I made a note to call her when Arneau arrived.

And arrive he did, right at the promised time. I just described to him where the restaurant was, without giving him a map or anything, so I was glad that he managed to make it. He was giving off mixed signals: his expression was as frigid as usual, but he was holding the kitten in his arms with all the love and care in the world.

"Thank you for bringing him here!"

"Sure," he replied, looking aloof but also a bit nervous. He was probably worried about what kind of person the owner was going to be.

"The new owner isn't here yet but he'll arrive soon. Can you wait a little longer?"

“Okay,” he agreed, proving once more that he really cared about that cat and wanted to make sure he’d find a good home.

“Oh, right, one of my friends who works here also wanted to see the kitten. Can I show her?” I asked.

“It’s not like I’m his owner or anything. You don’t need to ask me permission,” he answered, squinting slightly. After all he’d done for that kitten, and with all the love he was giving him, I thought he was as close to an owner as could be... He just was too shy with his feelings.

“Okay, I’ll go call her then. Maria! The kitten’s here!” I shouted into the kitchen, and Maria immediately came running.

“Hello, my name is Maria,” she introduced herself to Arneau.

He stared at her, clearly taken aback, probably because of how beautiful she was. *He he he, my friend’s just the prettiest, isn’t she? But she isn’t just cute! She’s also kind! And a good cook!* I felt somewhat proud of being Maria’s friend.

“...I’m Arneau. Here,” he stated, moving his arms to get the kitten closer to Maria.

“Aww! He’s so cute!” she exclaimed, looking at the small animal who, instead of hissing like he did with me, was just calmly looking back at her. “He’s such a good boy. May I pet him?”

“That’s up to him,” Arneau answered.

Maria, this time addressing the kitten, asked, “Would you mind if I pet you?” while slowly moving her hands toward him.

The cat just twitched a bit at first and then let Maria stroke his head.

“What a good boy!” She smiled at him.

*This morning he was so upset when I tried to wash him... Maybe he’s calmed down now, I thought, getting closer to him.*

“Can I pet you too?” I asked, and he immediately started hissing. “B- But why?! I thought he was used to people by now!” I was heartbroken.

“...Guess it depends on the person,” Arneau spoke with brutal honesty, making me even sadder.

So in this world not only dogs, but cats hate me too...

“I am sure that was just a coincidence,” Maria attempted to comfort me.

Moved by her kindness, I tried approaching the kitten again, but with the same result. *I'm so sad.*

Eventually it was time, and the fruit shop owner’s relative, an old man, walked into the restaurant.

“Oh! He’s so cute!” Noticing the kitten between Arneau’s arms, the man’s face broke into a huge smile. “My wife and I don’t have any children,” the man explained, just as that girl had told me before, “but we loved our cat as if he was one. Now that he’s gone, the house is so silent... We were so sad about it. And then I heard that you were looking for an owner for this kitten. Hey, kitty,” the man said, looking at the cat, “do you want to come live with me?”

“Meow!” the kitten cried, as if in reply, and the man’s eyes started welling up with tears.

Arneau moved closer and handed over the kitten, who happily balled up inside his new owner’s arms, making the man smile happily once again. The man thanked us again and again before walking out of the restaurant, lovingly holding his new pet.

“That man looks like he will take good care of him,” Maria observed.

“Yes. I’m so glad we found him a good owner,” I agreed.

“Yeah...” Arneau chimed in. As he looked at the departing man, his face showed relief, but with a hint of sadness. “I’ll be going then,” he declared abruptly.

“What? You came all the way here to bring the kitten! Let us treat you to a cup of tea at least!” I insisted. I’d even asked Regina for permission to do so beforehand.

“...No, thanks.” He started to walk away.

“But I want to thank you somehow—” I called, running after him, when I heard a voice behind me.

“What’s going on?” It was Sora, who was coming back from his work at the harbor.

“Welcome back, Sora!” I greeted him, then noticed that Arneau had also turned around to look at him.

“Sora?” he murmured, seemingly confused.

“Are you...Arneau?” Sora blurted out, taking a good look at him.

Silent and unmoving, the two of them stared at each other.

*What’s happening here?*

“Do the two of you know each other?” I interjected, and they both looked at me as if they’d just snapped out of a trance.

“Yeah, from when we were kids,” Sora answered, “but I didn’t expect to see him again, and here of all places. How are you doing?”

“All right, I guess. I’m glad to see you’re still kicking too.”

“Hahaha, thanks. Who’d have thought we’d meet again in another country? Do you live here now?” Sora asked him.

“No, I’m just here for work. What about you?”

“I’m only in this town for a few days, for work. But I do live in Sorcié.”

“...You have a home?”

“Yes. My workplace gave me a place to stay.”

“Workplace? So you even have a proper job?”

“Finally, huh?”

“...I’m glad.”

I didn’t know any details, but if they had known each other since childhood, they probably had a lot to talk about.

“You can come inside to talk, if you want,” I offered.

“No, thank you. I have to go back to work,” Arneau declined, then left.

“Hey, Arneau, you—” Sora started saying something in his direction, but he was already gone.

He continued staring in the direction that Arneau had gone for a while.

“Sora...” I called out to him.

“Let’s go back inside,” he said, and quickly walked through the door.

Maria and I looked at each other, surprised by seeing Sora act in this unusual way.

However, he quickly went back to normal and started reporting on what he’d learned at the harbor. During the evening, since we were both busy working, I didn’t get the chance to ask him more about Arneau.

And then another day at the now-popular Harbor Restaurant was over.

I finally managed to approach Sora while we were cleaning up.

“Where did you and Arneau meet?”

“We lived together back in the slums. I was surprised to see him here.”

Sora was born and raised abroad, in a poor country, and then moved from one place to the next for a while before ending up in Sorcié.

“Anyway, where did you meet Arneau?” Sora inquired.

“He was there when I found the kitten.”

“Oh, the one you were trying to find a home for?” I’d already told Sora about that.

“Yes. When I found the kitten, Arneau was already looking after him. That’s why we know each other,” I explained, and Sora first looked surprised, then started laughing.

“He was looking after a cat? I guess he always was the caring type, despite his looks,” he smiled as he remembered his childhood.

“Were you two close?” I queried him.

“...Yes,” he confirmed. “Back then we had our hands full just trying to live another day...but I guess we got along well.”

I wasn’t so sure what he meant by that.

“Do you know where he’s working now, by the way?” Sora asked.

“We mostly just talked about the kitten, so I never thought to ask him about that. But he came by to feed him during breaks, so his workplace must be close to here.”

I suddenly noticed that I knew almost nothing about Arneau, other than his name and the fact that he had a cold demeanor and a warm heart.

“Do you want help looking around?” I proposed, thinking that Sora wanted to meet his childhood friend again.

“No, never mind. Just focus on your own work,” he immediately refused. “The more you move around, the more likely you are to run into trouble. You don’t need to do anything unless you’re told to.”

I thought about how much trouble I'd caused all my friends as of late. I could do nothing but nod in agreement.

"Good night. You go get some sleep too," he said, going back to his room as soon as we were finished cleaning up.

Sora mostly sounded like his usual self, but something was off. I just couldn't place my finger on what.

★★★★★

I, Sora Smith, told Katarina goodnight and went back to my room. I laid on my bed but I felt too stirred up to sleep. Of course, I knew the reason. I'd just met with Arneau, my childhood friend, for the first time in over a decade.

Back when we lived in the slums, we couldn't protect ourselves from adults on our own, so we had to form groups. I was part of one too, along with Arneau. Being close in age helped, but I really liked him to begin with and spent a lot of time with him. Unlike the other stupid show-offs, he didn't bully those younger or weaker than him. He tried to act uncaring, but he was actually a kind boy who would look after smaller children.

And even when I met that guy and started learning about reading and doing maths from him, Arneau was the only one who didn't make fun of me. He wouldn't go as far as studying alongside me, but when I told him about what I'd learned that day, he'd quietly listen to me.

And then I had that dream. I don't believe in any higher power, but still... That must have been a sign from above.

When I was beaten by those thugs, it was Arneau who came to save me. The only people who ever tried to help me back there were Arneau and that guy. I could forget about all the others—but not those two.

Then I was caught while stealing the medicine that that guy needed, and the people who caught me sold me off to a foreign country. And I've never been back to those slums since. Actually, I've never even been back to that country.

I used to think that it was a coincidence, that all of my many jobs just so happened to bring me farther and farther away from there, but now I know that I was probably trying to avoid going back. After all, a lawless country like that one had plenty of opportunities to make a quick buck. I just didn't want to remember that guy, how I lost him, and how being caught kept me from being by his side as he died. That's also why I tried my best not to think about what happened to the other kids I grew up with. I told myself that I didn't need to know about it anyway.

But now I had a proper job and could walk around in broad daylight. I was surrounded by trustworthy, caring people, and all the darkness pent up inside my heart was disappearing little by little. Right now, I could even bear visiting that country again.

This reunion was really a surprise though. My closest childhood friend, Arneau. Here, of all places. And to top it off, he even remembered me. But as soon as I told him about my job, he walked, no, *ran* away. I'd seen him do that before. He'd do that when he didn't want to bother "proper" people just by being around. Even now, he was probably still doing the same kind of fishy jobs as back in the day.

Anyone else in his shoes would have tried to use me, but Arneau was different. The story that Katarina told me about how he looked after a kitten just reinforced that impression. It's just like when we lived in the slums and he'd care for the younger kids.

I realized he hadn't changed, and I felt like I had to do something for him. Not so long ago, I was still getting by with questionable jobs too.

I definitely couldn't worry about other people then, but so much changed in just a short time.

And I didn't need to think that hard to understand who caused these changes: Katarina Claes, the young lady who's always jumping at the chance to help others despite having very little power to do so. After spending so much time with her, this side of her character had rubbed off on me. Before meeting Katarina, I would have thought very differently of Arneau and his situation. So what if he's still working shady jobs? So what if he doesn't like it? His choice, his problem. But now, I couldn't just brush it off like that anymore.

Arneau had helped me, and I needed to repay that debt. I decided that tomorrow, before my work at the harbor, I'd look for him around the area where Katarina met him.

I closed my eyes and thought that I'd really become someone else. But as I fell asleep, I realized another thing: I liked this new me.

Morning came, and I left the restaurant earlier than usual. Most of the shops were still closed, but several people were already walking along the streets, probably preparing to open those very shops.

I went to the alley where Katarina mentioned she first saw him, but Arneau wasn't there. The kitten had a home now, so this didn't surprise me. I started searching around the surrounding area, focusing on the least safe spots frequented by a lot of foreigners. Arneau was here for work, so it had to be a place like that. I walked around for a while but I had no luck. I eventually went back to the alley, and there he was.

He was standing alone in a corner, looking at a trash can.

"Hey, Arneau," I called out to him, and he glanced up at me, surprised.

"Sora? Why are you here?" He furrowed his brow.

"I was looking for you after you ran off so suddenly yesterday," I explained, and he raised his eyebrows even higher.

"You've found a good, proper job, right? Then you'd better stay away from me. I'd be nothing but trouble for you," he declared.

Just as I thought. He'd run away because he didn't want to bother me. He still was the same old Arneau, always looking out for those around him. This also explained why Katarina got along well with him. As dense as she was, she could tell good people apart from bad ones, by instinct or something. When Arneau claimed he'd be nothing but trouble for me, the me from some time ago would have just replied "Okay then, I'll be on my way." But now that I had the Katarina-disease, I couldn't just leave him be.

"I get you, I really do. But I thought I'd try to help you if I can," I explained, awkwardly scratching the back of my head, and he looked stunned.

"Huh? What got into you?"

"Well, I'm not sure myself. I kinda want to repay you, I guess."

"Repay me for what?" he wondered.

"That time, as kids, when I came this close to getting beaten to death. You saved me, but I never repaid that debt."

"That was so long ago, man. Forget about it."

"No can do. I don't like being in debt, and Katarina was worried about you too."

"Katarina? You mean that weird girl? You two know each other?"

"Yeah. We're coworkers."

"Well, your coworker sure has a thing for helping people who didn't ask for it, huh?"

“She sure does, and I guess that I’ve become a bit like her recently. So now I want to help my childhood friend who never asked for it.”

“...”

“Let me repay you, Arneau. Okay?”

“...I’m so happy that you’re alive. I was worried when I heard that you’d been bought by someone in another country. Now you’ve finally managed to leave our world and step into the lawful one of normal people. Don’t let that go to waste. Stay away from me,” he begged, before turning around and running out of the alley.

Back in the slums, the dump that we called home, there was someone, someone other than that guy, who was worried about me. And he even said that he was happy to know I was alive. Hearing that shocked me so much that I just stood still, staring at him as he fled.

As soon as I snapped out of it, I chased after him. It was too late, though. I’d already lost him. I remembered that he’d always been a fast runner.

“Dammit, when he says something like that, then I feel like I have to help him even more...” I grumbled to myself, deciding that I’d take a day off from my job loading cargo at the harbor. It was day labor anyway, and I wasn’t getting any valuable information out of it. I’d much rather spend the day looking for Arneau. I’d repay my debt, whether he wanted it or not.

I started searching the area. Working at the restaurant, I’d become acquainted with some of the people living around here, and when I ran into one, I’d ask them if they’d seen Arneau. He didn’t have any other features that made it stand out much, but his tan skin made it obvious that he wasn’t a local. And sure enough, when I asked about a tan young man, some people said they’d seen one. I was an expert at this kind of thing and I eventually managed to find a place which

he apparently often walked in and out of. I hid myself in front of that building.

*This is it.*

After a while, I saw a few men leave the building, Arneau among them. I thought that it was the perfect chance, so I jumped out in front of them and addressed him.

“Hey, Arneau.”

“Sora? What are you doing here?” he sputtered, shocked.

“We weren’t done talking,” I said, and he furrowed his brow.

“...I told you you’d better stay away from me,” he reiterated.

“Yeah, but I don’t remember ever agreeing to that.”

He clicked his tongue, annoyed. “Here’s no good. Let’s go some—”

The door of the building he’d walked out of slammed open, interrupting him. A kid ran out through it, followed and quickly caught by another man.

“Let me go! Let me go home! You kidnappers!” the kid shouted, flailing around wildly.

“You ain’t going back home any time soon. Somebody’s already paid for you, so just shut up until we deliver you to your buyer,” the man grunted as he covered the kid’s mouth with one hand.

As I was watching this scene, shocked, the man’s eyes met mine. That wasn’t good. I knew that Arneau was working a shady job, but this was much worse than I expected. And, even if it was just a coincidence, I’d become a witness.

“Who’s this guy?” the man asked, glaring at me suspiciously.

“An old friend of mine. He’s not from Sorcié and he’ll be leaving the country soon. Just go back inside,” Arneau responded, positioning

himself between the man and me. He was trying to get me out of trouble, but his colleague wasn't pleased.

"You want me to just leave and tell him 'oh sure have a nice day' after he saw what I just did?" Unfortunately, he had a point. I'd have said the exact same thing.

"I'll take care of it. Don't you worry," Arneau pleaded, but that didn't prove to be convincing enough.

To be honest, if it came down to it, I'd have no problem overpowering this thug. He probably thought that I'd be easy to deal with because I didn't look as big and burly as him.

He isn't even on guard. I could take him down in a second, I thought, and then I swiftly moved behind him and punched him in the neck.

He let out a scream and then fell down unconscious.

I quickly took the kid from the man's shoulder and into my arms.

Arneau looked surprised. Did he think I was weak too? After all we'd done together in the slums? Rude.

"I'm not that wimpy, you know?" I told him, letting down the kid. I heard someone moving behind me and turned around.

"Hey, handsome. Well done there, knocking our pal out," a man chuckled.

"Yeah, we ought to give you a nice prize for that," another added, laughing crudely. As rough as they looked, I could still take them on. There weren't that many...

"You'd better listen to us, if you care about this girl," another one of them warned, and I noticed the girl that they were surrounding.

"I'm sorry, Sora. I saw you and I tried running after you...and then they caught me." Looking genuinely sorry about what she did, Katarina briefly explained what had happened.

If they had her, I couldn't fight back. I silently put my hands up.

★★★★★

I went out for groceries, then brought some sweets to the girl who helped us find an owner for the kitty to thank her.

I was heading back to the restaurant when I saw Sora, who was supposed to be working at the harbor at this time of day. Curious, I followed him through a series of dark alleys and saw him run toward Arneau. The two were arguing about something. I wanted to go and ask what was going on, but then I saw a kid run out of a building close by, only to be chased and caught by a man. The man covered the kid's mouth with his hand and slung the kid over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

*Something bad is going on here! I have to save that kid!* I thought, but before I could do anything, Sora had already taken that man out. You're so cool, Sora! I was applauding him from afar, when I noticed a few bearish men standing behind me.

"So you're friends with that violent little punk, huh?" one of them sneered, and seconds later I was being held hostage.

If Sora were on his own, he probably wouldn't have had any problem escaping, but since I was there, he chose to give himself up. I felt terrible. Way to become independent, Katarina. There you go again, making trouble for your friends.

The men then dragged me into the building and threw me and the kid who had briefly escaped earlier into the same room. Sora, however, was taken somewhere else. I hoped he'd be fine. I was staring at the door, thinking of what I'd done, when I heard sobbing. Huh? I turned around and saw several children, including the one from earlier, sitting on the floor. Many of them were crying.

"Er, are you all right? What's the matter?" I crouched down and asked one of the children.

“Isn’t it obvious? We’ve been kidnapped and we’re going to be sold off! We’re not all right!”

The reply didn’t come from the kid I’d addressed, but from the kid who’d been thrown inside this room together with me. I looked at the kid’s displeased expression and noticed that she was a girl.

“Sold off?!”

I could tell that whatever was going on there wasn’t even remotely okay, but that took me by surprise.

“Yeah. Sold off abroad. They said that Sorcié children sell well because they’re well-developed and educated,” she fumed.

Could this be...*human trafficking*?! Just as the rumors said, it really was happening near the port! And we stumbled right into it by mistake! But then, could she...?

“Excuse me... Is there a noble girl in here?” I asked. As soon as she heard me, a girl with black hair sitting in the farthest corner of the room twitched. So she’s here too! I walked closer to her and asked, “Are you the baron’s daughter? The magic user?”

She looked at me with her eyes wide open and she slowly nodded. We’d finally found her.

“And...who are you?” she wondered.

“I’m with the Magical Ministry. We were looking for you.”

“So, you’re here to save us?” she gasped, her eyes glistening with expectation.

Hm, I think maybe “we were looking for you” sounded a bit too cool, like I was here on purpose. I probably should have phrased that a little differently.

“...I’m sorry, I was just caught too,” I confessed, lowering my head apologetically. Her face darkened at once, and I felt as if I had let her down. Sorry...

The other children were also listening to our conversation, hoping to be saved, so the whole room was now full of disappointment, and the atmosphere became even worse. Some children started crying again too. I felt as if it were my fault and that I really had to do something about it.

“S-So, recently I’ve read this book, you see...”

I wanted to change the mood, so I started talking about *The Book of Hilarious Facts*, a book popular in the capital which I had recently read. It was full of funny stories, which made the content easy to remember, and the children immediately started paying attention. Because it was mainly popular among the lower classes, I never had a chance to discuss this book with other nobles, and I’d been bothered by that. Since the kids were such eager listeners, I kept talking and talking.

I played the characters in the book, doing voices and gestures as I told the hilariously stupid stories, and the children who started out silent or crying slowly became giggly. When I went wild and people indulged me, I always started going even wilder. That was my personality. So, after a while, I was basically putting on a proper one-woman play for the children.

“And then, his nose turned all red! The end!”

Laughs and giggles. After my long performance, all the children were rolling their heads back with laughter. After that, they must have felt tired, because, one after the other, they started falling asleep. I felt accomplished.

The door slowly opened, and a man wearing a hat pulled very low over his face walked in. He was so quiet that the sleeping children

didn't even stir. I was sure that he was one of the kidnappers, so I instinctively walked between him and them.

"I was wondering who could ever manage to make the kids laugh and fall asleep in a situation like this, but now I understand. It was you," the man spoke, keeping his voice down, as he removed his hat and revealed his face.

"What?!" I blurted out, surprised by what I saw.

"I wasn't expecting to see you again so soon, Katarina."

Indeed, we'd seen each other for the last time just a few days ago, at the International Assembly. He came from Ethenell, a country across the sea, where he was a prince. Cezar Dahl's expression morphed into his usual, toothy smile.

★★★★★

Lady Katarina had left to purchase more groceries so that we would be ready for lunch, but she still had not returned. Regina informed me of this fact just before we had to open. She then told me that maybe Lady Katarina was just lost and that she would ask some of her people to look for her.

I was scared, but I started cooking anyway, as we had to serve our customers. As I worked, I waited for Regina to come to tell me "Maria, we've found Katarina!" but I heard no such news, and lunch time eventually finished. We did not know where she had gone.

And not only that, but Sora, who would normally come back as soon as the restaurant's lunch time was over, had not returned either. Regina, too, had become worried that something might have happened to them.

We decided that the restaurant would be closed for the night, so that we could search for Lady Katarina and Sora. Regina's usual slow, uninterested attitude was nowhere to be seen as she called for

reinforcements from the Magical Ministry and started giving them orders.

I begged her to let me help too, but she replied, “I know how you feel. But you still don’t know this town, its streets, or its people well enough. I’m sorry but I can’t let you wander around in circumstances like these.”

Her response was true and reasonable, and I could do nothing but agree. But though Regina was right, I could not stand the idea of doing nothing either. I thought hard about whether there was anything I could do. I could use Light Magic, but that would not be helpful in looking for people. Why am I so useless? Last time Lady Katarina had saved me, and now that she was the one in need of help, I could do nothing.

If only I could contribute somehow... The Light Covenant? I still have not read much of it. What I have read is not that useful, but maybe, if I read more...

I went back to my room and took the covenant out of my bag. I activated my magic and letters started appearing onto the pages. With an ancient script lexicon in one hand, I started reading.

★★★★★

“Cezar?! Why are you here?!” I asked, surprised, but he raised his index finger and put it in front of his closed lips.

“Shh. The kids are sleeping, and we don’t want the guys outside to hear us either.”

Oh, right. The children were still sleeping after laughing so much they became exhausted. I nodded without saying a word and Cezar lowered his hand.

"These kids were so tense they couldn't even get a rest. You somehow managed to make them fall asleep, so let them enjoy that for a while," he continued, looking kindly at them.

"...I see."

I was surprised to see the kidnapped kids napping like that after hearing my stories, but now I knew why that was. Cezar was still the gentle—

Wait, wait, wait.

"Cezar...what are you doing here?" I was positive he wasn't involved in human trafficking, but I still didn't know why he was in this room.

"Some...circumstances, you know. I wanted to investigate some stuff, so I let this organization hire me as one of their thugs."

"Oh! Is it an undercover mission?!"

"Kind of like that, yeah."

It was just like what Maria and Sora were doing at the castle during the Assembly.

Cezar looked dirty and his hair was all ruffled too, probably because he was supposed to come off as a thug. His ruggedly handsome face was unwashed, and you'd need to take a very good look to tell that he wasn't just another of those mobsters. I remembered seeing him looking more or less like this back in the castle's garden, but people who only knew him in his royal attire wouldn't have a clue.

"What about you? Why are you here? An undercover mission for the Magical Ministry?"

"Uh?! Why do you know that I'm in the Magical Ministry?"

"Once I found out who you really were, I immediately learned that you worked for the Ministry. Everybody knows it."

I'd almost forgotten he knew that I actually was a noble lady. And of course, the fact that I worked for the Ministry wasn't a secret, and most people in high society had heard of it. But apart from those closest to me, everyone assumed that I was only a Ministry employee on paper and didn't do any actual work, so I asked Cezar about that.

"Yes, I heard rumors that you were only hired because you wanted the title of Ministry employee, seeing that you're engaged to the Prince. But knowing you, I couldn't believe that for a second."

Is this a compliment? Am I supposed to be pleased about what he just said? As I mulled this over, Cezar spoke again.

"So, are you on an undercover mission too?"

Surely an employee from the famous Magical Ministry, renowned even abroad, wouldn't just randomly get caught. Nobody would think that. Telling the truth suddenly felt awkward, but I couldn't lie to him.

"Well... I was here investigating a kidnapping, but... I was just caught and locked up in here."

Cezar's face froze. "You were...caught? What?"

"I saw one of my teammates running around and I followed him here. And then I witnessed a child being kidnapped. My teammate beat up the kidnapper, but I was so absorbed in watching him that I didn't notice more thugs coming up behind me. So I got caught," I explained.

Cezar just stared for a moment. "I see," he sighed. "That must have been tough. You really have no sense of danger though..."

"You are right. I'm sorry," I said after another moment of silence. His shoulders dropped.

I was aware of how my carelessness had led to me being kidnapped and I was really sorry for not paying more attention.

“Say, Cezar, what is going to happen to these children?”

“They’re going to be sold abroad.”

“So it really *is* human trafficking!”

“Lower your voice. They’re sleeping.”

“S-Sorry.” I had accidentally raised my voice again.

“And why do you think I’m here, anyway? I won’t let these children be sold.”

“You’re going to save them?”

“I can’t right now, but wait. I’ll save all of you. Just don’t do anything dangerous until then. I don’t think they’d hurt their precious merchandise, but you never know.”

He’s so reliable! Now I have nothing to worry about.

“Thank you, Cezar.” I gratefully bowed my head, but for some reason he squinted at me.

“You’re always so, how do I put it...naive.”

“Hm?” I had no idea what he meant, but he smiled.

“Never change, please,” he said, ruffling my hair. “See you later then.”

I stopped him as he was leaving. “Actually, I’m also worried about my friend. I don’t know where they took him.”

“Got it. I’ll look into that,” he promised, waving one hand without even turning back. Looking at him made me feel much safer.

“Thank you,” I repeated.

I was so scared there for a moment. But if Cezar is here, it's going to be all right. Now that I'm not that worried anymore, looking at these children is making me feel sleepy too. Maybe I should rest for a while. I sat down, leaning against a wall, and fell asleep.

★★★★★

“Same old Katarina.”

I left the room with the kidnapped children and noticed my lips had curled into a smile. It hadn't been that long since I, Cezar Dahl, last saw Katarina Claes. I had a feeling that I'd see her again eventually, but not this soon. And certainly not under these circumstances.

After leaving Sorcié just a few weeks ago, I was back there again and had spent the last few days there. This was because of some information I stumbled upon shortly after returning to my own country.

“It seems that Lousabre is using one of our ports to smuggle kidnapped children,” reported Janne, my childhood friend, former fellow mercenary, and now my personal aide, bringing me a bundle of documents.

“Human trafficking is not legal in our country anymore. As soon as you have proof, free those kids and bring them back to their home country,” I answered.

“Easier said than done. Read the documents. They aren’t selling the kids here.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” I then started leafing through the documents. They had a lot of unpleasant surprises for me.

It said that Lousabre, known for being a dangerous country, kidnapped children from Sorcié and then secretly sold them off. Sorcié was the richest country in the area, and its citizens were

mostly well educated and wealthy. Most of them could even read and write, skills that in Lousabre were usually found exclusively among nobles. This meant that even a commoner kid from Sorcié could prove very useful over there.

For this reason, they tried encouraging immigration from Sorcié, but predictably, nobody wanted to leave their kingdom for a poorer, less safe one. As horrible as it was, I could somewhat understand why they were so desperate to get people from Sorcié that they'd even go so far as to kidnap them. Not that Sorcié was pleased, of course.

Our country, Ethenell, wasn't involved in this issue, or so I thought... Damn those Lousabrians for dragging us into this mess. According to the documents that Janne had brought me, ships from Lousabre would stop at one of Ethenell's harbors on their home from Sorcié, carrying the kidnapped children with them. This was because Sorcié knew about Lousabre's activities and carefully checked all ships traveling directly between the two countries, making it difficult for them to smuggle children without any intermediate stop. They covered their tracks by using Ethenell, which had been on friendly terms with Sorcié ever since the new king had taken the throne.

This also meant that someone inside our country was collaborating with Lousabre. Ethenell was starting to become a better place thanks to the new king, but it still had its fair share of ne'er-do-wells. Too many to drive them out all at once. After all the trouble we'd been through to build a decent relationship with Sorcié, some of these idiots were ruining it.

"Does the king know about this?" I asked Janne.

"I told him about it, but right now he's busy dealing with the rebellion in the east."

"Ugh, that rebellion, right," I groaned.

During the reign of the previous king, there were a lot of people who made a sweet living out of illicit business. Much to their annoyance, his successor was now trying to help the weak and fix the kingdom's problems. In response, those criminals gathered up followers and gave rise to rebellions throughout the country.

"These people...are they trying to destroy Ethenell for good? And to think we were on the right path..." I raged.

Ethenell, under the previous king, was barely even worthy of being called a country. It was so close to total collapse that, had things continued that way, it soon would have been absorbed by one of its neighboring countries. It was the current king who, even at the cost of his own health, had finally rebuilt Ethenell back into a half-decent place. Looking at these rebels, fighting tooth and nail just to protect their own ill-gotten gains, filled me with disgust.

"I'll investigate this myself then."

"...Investigate it?" Janne responded, perplexed.

"I can't just sit here and wait for new information to come in. We already have enough problems on our hands, and I can't let this one grow too big. It'll be faster if I go and fix things myself."

I started preparing myself to leave. Janne knew me well enough not to be surprised.

"It's dangerous to go alone. Take them," he said after calling some capable people to come with me.

Accompanied by them, I disguised myself as a thug and sneaked into the shipping company that was facilitating the human trafficking going on at Ethenell's harbor.

In order to catch all the culprits, including their boss, we went all the way to Sorcié. Unfortunately, since we were at the bottom of the organization's ladder, we couldn't get much useful information no

matter how much we snooped around, and we still had no leads regarding the person leading the operation. Someone really powerful was probably involved.

Eventually, I saw some of the thugs working with me receive orders to kidnap more people from Sorcié. Most of the victims were children, and seeing them cry for their parents made me sad too. Back when I was a mercenary in Ethenell I saw a lot of kidnapped children being trafficked, but those were usually either orphans or they'd been sold directly by their parents. They had no reason to cry for their moms. They'd just silently accept their fate, knowing that they could do nothing about it. Of course, that was sad in its own right...

It hurt having to keep these kids prisoner, but I couldn't do anything that might blow my cover until I had more information. Though as long as I and the people helping me were here, we'd never let these children be sold off to Lousabre. They were so scared they couldn't even sleep, and I still had no clue about who was leading these thugs. I was a newcomer after all. But maybe some of my "colleagues" knew something more. For example, the guy who was a sort of supervisor for all the low-tier thugs, that Arneau fellow. Unfortunately, he looked too smart to let his tongue slip and he wasn't exactly the chatty type to begin with.

I decided I'd go check on the children again. No one around here seemed to care about how they were doing, so long as they were alive. No one except maybe Arneau, but he wasn't here right now. These kids were getting weaker and weaker, and I wanted to bring them something to eat.

When I reached the door, I heard laughter coming from the inside of the room. They were crying their hearts out earlier today! I anxiously looked through the glass panel in the door and saw a girl moving around and speaking as if she was the actress in a one-woman play.

I was already surprised that someone could find the energy to do something like that while being kept prisoner, but what shocked me even more was that, now that I took a better look, I knew that young woman. *Why is she here? Did she get caught? That can't be. No way these thugs can kidnap a noble lady, and the daughter of a duke no less. But she works for the Magical Ministry, so maybe she's on an undercover mission.* In any case, right now she was trying to make the kids have fun and looked like she was having fun too.

I waited in front of the door until she was finished, and the children, after laughing so much, had all fallen asleep. Once I silently opened the door and walked inside, she put herself between me and the children, as if to protect them. A noble lady shielding commoner children. I was moved.

“I was wondering who could ever manage to make the kids laugh and fall asleep in a situation like this, but I understand. It was you,” I greeted her, taking off my hat so that she could see my face.

“What?!” she shouted at me, so startled that she couldn’t move.

She then asked me what I was doing here, and I gestured to her to keep her voice down so as not to wake up the children. She nodded silently. When I told her about how little those kids had been sleeping, she looked surprised. She probably didn’t know about it—and yet she did so much for them. Incredible. I gave her a simple explanation as to why I was there and then asked her to confirm my theory that she was on an undercover mission for the Ministry.

“Uh?! Why do you know that I’m in the Magical Ministry?” she asked me.

I told her that everybody knew about where she worked, and then she said that most people thought she was hired by the Ministry without actually doing any real work there. When I heard about Katarina Claes, before meeting her, I thought the same. But after

actually seeing what kind of girl she was... No way. What she said after that was so surprising that I couldn't believe my ears.

"You were...caught? What?"

Her explanation made the whole thing sound even more stupid, and a sigh escaped my throat. I scolded her for being so careless, and she seemed to agree. This was the same Katarina who ran straight into trouble during the Assembly, no doubt about that. When she asked me about what was going to happen to the children, I replied a bit harshly on purpose, hoping to make her understand the gravity of the situation.

"They're going to be sold abroad."

She looked terrified and she'd probably finally understood the danger that she was in, so I went ahead and added, "And why do you think I'm here anyway? I won't let these children be sold."

Her face immediately lit up. She could flip through emotions at the speed of light. I told her that she'd have to wait a bit longer, and she thanked me, lowering her head in a way which looked really heartfelt. Despite having been raised in that nest of betrayal and treachery that is noble society, Katarina could trust people so easily. I was worried that this could lead her into trouble, but at the same time, it was very pleasant to have someone who never doubted you.

"You're always so, how do I put it...naive."

"Hm?"

She obviously had no idea what I meant. I ruffled her hair, asked her to never change, and then started walking toward the door. Now that Katarina was part of the traffickers' merchandise, I had all the more reason to hurry up and save them all.

"Actually, I'm also worried about my friend. I don't know where they took him," she informed me just as I placed my hand on the doorknob.

Now that I thought about it, I hadn't seen her teammate in the room. I assured her that I'd look into it. It was one more thing to worry about, but I was the one who declared I'd take care of this situation.

First of all, I had to find Katarina's friend. I left and went to the room where all us low-ranking thugs killed time by gambling, drinking, or whatever, but this time the atmosphere was different. Everyone was bustling around. What's going on here? I approached one of the chattiest ones and asked him for an explanation.

"It seems that someone's on our trail. Box up this, carry that... The higher ups want us to move our whole base somewhere else in the middle of the night, so that nobody sees us. They really work us like slaves," he complained garrulously.

Could it be the Ministry that was on their tracks? Had they found this den of thieves? Anyway, if these guys already knew that and were ready to move, it meant that they had a very good information network too. I was even more convinced that their boss must be a powerful figure.

I helped the others out with the packing as I thought about what to do. I even tried to ask about Katarina's teammate, but nobody in the room knew anything about where he was. All of these guys didn't really care about other people, so this didn't surprise me that much. And where was Arneau? Had he been caught? I'd have to use the ruckus of the moving preparations as cover to snoop around as much as I could.

## **Chapter 4: Escape**

“...Oh, Arneau, is that you? Sorry,” he said, grinning, as I knelt beside him and cleaned the mud off of his face with a rag.

My childhood friend was tied up on the floor of a small, dark room. He came looking for me and got involved in this. The man he’d knocked out had paid him back in spades. I had the intuition to tell my colleagues that a man this handsome would be worth a lot of money if we were to sell him, so thankfully, they stopped short of disfiguring his valuable face.

“...This is why I told you to stay away from me.” After finally managing to get his life together, Sora was in this situation because he couldn’t help but follow me.

“I’m the one to blame. It’s not your fault. And by the way, what are you doing?” he asked, confused, as I cut the ropes around his wrists and ankles.

“Everyone’s busy preparing to switch bases. You shouldn’t have trouble escaping right now.”

He gave me a troubled look. “...Don’t get me wrong, I’d love to, but I can’t,” he declared, just as I’d expected.

“You can also probably find that girl and help her escape too. Everyone’s going to be too busy to notice.” Obviously he wanted to save his teammate, that nosy Katarina girl.

Neither of them were on the list of people we were supposed to kidnap anyway. The other guys just figured they’d sell them too because we couldn’t let them go home after they’d witnessed one of the children being recaptured. And given how everyone was so preoccupied about switching to a new base, it wouldn’t really be an issue. I thought that mentioning all of this would be enough for Sora to escape without any regrets. But...

“Oh, of course I have to save her as well. But I still haven’t paid back my debt to you,” he told me. Now that was unexpected.

“Huh? Can’t you tell what situation you’re in?”

“I know, but if I run away now, I probably won’t ever be able to see you again. Can’t have that.”

“I don’t even remember any debt you have with me. Get going already!”

“...No can do. It’s very important to me. And anyway, you like children. This job doesn’t fit you. Run away with us,” he invited, taking me by surprise.

I was so shocked I remained silent for a while. Not because he was talking nonsense...but because he was right. Actually, because I’d just realized he was right.

I hate kids. It’s a nuisance to have them cry while I’m at work, and that’s the only reason why I’m being kind to them. This is what I thought.

But now I remembered about the younger boys and girls I looked after back when we lived in the slums. It hurts to see children cry. Even while working a terrible job like this, I still felt protective toward children and small animals. And Sora’s words had finally made me realize it. Do I hate children? No... Maybe I’ve always liked them.

I could feel those hidden emotions resurfacing...but I couldn’t admit it, and made my point clear to him.

“You say that like it’s easy, but I’m knee-deep in this. I can’t run away anymore. If I tried, they’d just hunt me down. And I’m not like you... I’ve been in this world for too long. Its dirt has rubbed off on me.”

It all started back in the slums. I’d rummage through trash or steal from people just to be able to eat. Eventually, like most other orphans there, I ended up taking on dirty jobs for a living. You

couldn't just walk away from this world when you were tired of it. I started with stealing, went on to scamming rich people, and before I knew it, I was involved in child trafficking. I was way past the point of no return. Sora lived in a world different from mine, too far for me to reach him anymore. I knew that I was going to keep living like this until, one day, I'd die alone.

"...So just stay away from me from now on," I told him.

He didn't reply. I thought I'd finally convinced him to leave.

"...Even if people come after you, I can ask my boss to take care of that." He awkwardly scratched the back of his head, whispering, "This is so out of character for me, but..." and then went on to say, "What I'm going to tell you is secondhand. It was that nosy girl you know about who first told it to me. But, right now, we're both here, aren't we? Our worlds aren't different. We live in the same world."

After delivering that cheesy line, he stretched his hand toward me. That's right. Sora... He was always this kind of guy.

Back in the day, most of the children around us were always complaining about how bad they had it and insulting those who had it better at every opportunity. But not Sora. He didn't let others influence him, and he wasn't envious of anyone. I'd always liked that in him.

I used to think that, if we were together, maybe we could find a better life for ourselves...but he disappeared. He was caught and sold off. That happened a lot back there, but it still made my chest hurt. And even after leaving the slums and traveling from one place to the next, I never forgot about him.

When I found him in this town, living a proper, good life, I was so happy. I wouldn't be able to escape this world. But if Sora had

managed to, that was enough. I believed that. I tried to distance myself because of it.

And yet... I wanted to reach out and grab the hand he had stretched toward me. My own hand was soiled, and I couldn't muster the courage to touch his. He probably sensed my hesitation and stepped closer to me, forcefully taking my hand.

"Let's go," he said, and I found myself nodding.

"Excuse me. I happened to hear your conversation," a voice near the door spoke.

I looked there and it came from one of the new recruits. He wasn't memorable in any way and I barely had any interactions with him. If he'd heard us, we had to do something about him. I started thinking of how to take care of him. He seemed to be alone, so we could just beat him up, knock him out, and leave him here.

Probably understanding my intentions, he put his hands up. "I'm not planning to report you to the higher-ups or anything. Actually, I'll help you escape."

Not that I was one to talk, but I knew better than to trust words from the mouth of someone doing this job. Thus, I didn't feel any safer even after he'd told me that.

"To be honest, I want to burn down this whole operation. But I need your help," he explained with a grin that showed his pointy teeth.

He pulled back the hair that was partially covering his face, and I saw that his eyes were golden. I knew that face. This man...

"...The Golden-eyed Wolf."

That name was famous across most battlefields in this and the neighboring countries. He was known as a fierce beast of a mercenary with golden eyes. I'd seen him myself, just once, in a town near which a war was ongoing. I couldn't forget how intense,

how powerful he looked then. How could I not have realized who he was after working alongside him?

“Oh, you know of me?” he asked, amused.

The forgettable air he used to have around himself was gone for good. I didn’t know that the Golden-eyed Wolf was able to hide his aura so well. He really was as impressive as they said, if not more.

“...But what are you doing here?” I asked him. Why would a famous mercenary be in this peaceful country, moonlighting as a common thug no less?

“I have my reasons to want to crush this den of snakes,” he claimed with a shrug.

If someone as strong as he had a grudge of some kind with the organization, it meant that this whole affair was even worse than I’d recognized at first. It also meant that this time, I was really risking my life. This realization, however, felt distant from me, as if the Arneau risking his life was a different person.

“Unfortunately,” the man continued, “I haven’t been able to find out who’s at the top of the ladder. Don’t you know anything about that, Arneau?”

I knew that if I were only interested in my own safety I’d better shut up. But I also thought that, with the help of this man, I could save Sora, Katarina, and all the kidnapped children.

“I only know the local boss. I think that there’s someone still higher, a powerful noble or something, but we’re not important enough to know.”

“I see. Then tell me about that local boss, please. I’ll get the information I need from him. Just leave it all to me,” he promised, grinning again. Looking at this man and his dependable attitude made me feel safe.

★★★★★

“Wake up. Hey. Wake up!”

“Hm? Is it morning already?”

I heard someone call out to me, and as I woke up from my comfortable sleep, I saw a man I didn’t recognize standing in front of me.

“No, it’s still night,” he said, furrowing his brow, before muttering to himself, “How can she sleep peacefully like this? Does she have no fear or something?”

Huh? What’s he talking about? And who is he anyway?

I looked around me and realized that I was neither in my room nor in the Claes carriage. I was in a small, dirty room full of children who looked scared.

Ah-ha! I remember now. I chased after Sora and I ended up being kidnapped and imprisoned here!

“Right, right,” I whispered to myself, satisfied.

“What is she going on about? I can’t keep up with her,” groused the man. Then, with a suspicious look in his eye, he demanded, “Now that you’re awake, let’s hurry up and go.”

“Go? Where?” I asked.

“This place was found out and now we have to move under the cover of darkness. Don’t give me more trouble than I’ve already got,” he complained.

Did this mean that Regina and Maria had found this place? If so, they’d come to save me eventually. I’d better stay here. But resisting this man sounds dangerous, and Cezar told me to behave.

Seeing my hesitation, the man’s tone grew harsher. “Listen now, stop wasting time. No point in staying here. I was told not to mess

you up too much, since they want to sell you, but I have permission to beat you up a little bit, you know?"

He then grabbed my arm, and I was so surprised that I lost my balance and fell forward. I closed my eyes, bracing for the impact, but there was none. I felt someone supporting my weight.

"Huh?" I opened my eyes and I saw the blue hair I knew so well.

"Are you all right?" Sora asked me, directing his blue eyes straight into mine.

"Yes. Thank you, Sora."

I took a better look at him and saw that his clothes were dirty and his face covered in wounds.

"Are you all right?" I asked him, worried. Somebody had definitely beaten him up.

"Yeah, don't worry."

"But..." I started to say, but I was interrupted by another familiar face calling out to us from the door.

"We don't have long. If they all noticed, we'd have a really bad time. Hurry up."

"Cezar!"

"Sorry for the wait, Katarina. It's night already. Ladies should be back home, sleeping." He grinned his usual grin.

He'd probably found the information he was looking for and had come to save me along with Sora. I also noticed that the man who had grabbed my arm was now lying flat on the floor. Sora had probably knocked him out. In any case, we had no time to lose. We had to run away. They told me that the building was still full of thugs and that escaping together with the kidnapped children was going to be difficult.

"We've moved faster than I expected, so I called for help, but the reinforcements aren't here yet. The thugs here aren't much to worry about individually, but could be a problem if they outnumbered us. Katarina, I heard that you can use magic. Can you defend yourself?" Cezar asked me, and I told him that the only spell I could use was Dirt Bump, which, on a good day, could maybe make someone trip over and fall.

"What are you talking about?" Sora rolled his eyes. "You have an awesome familiar with you."

"You're right!" I have Pochi with me!

"How can you even forget about that?" he asked, disappointed.

"To me he's more like a cute pet."

"Cute pet? Are we talking about the same huge deadly wolf here?"

He had a point, but most of the time Pochi was a tiny little puppy who liked to play fetch in the garden. Of course he actually was a Dark Familiar. I knew that could be dangerous. Since he couldn't come out to play unless I was in the mansion, even if I didn't forget about him, I often forgot that he lived in my shadow.

"I see you two are busy talking, but we really have no time. If you have anything useful up your sleeve, take it out."

"Yes," I answered, and then looked at my shadow. "Pochi, come out!" I called, and my puppy appeared with a cute bark.

Cezar, who'd never seen him, looked surprised.

"Wow. Magic's really amazing."

Even in Sorcié, I was probably the only one who had a familiar living inside their shadow, but since this probably wasn't the time to explain that, I just smiled instead.

"Okay. Let's go now."

Cezar, who already knew the building, was in front, and Sora and I followed him, bringing the children with us.

I looked at Sora, who was the last one at the back, and asked him whether he knew Cezar already.

“I just know that he’s a famous mercenary and that he’s here to destroy this organization. You two know each other, right? How?” he wondered.

It seemed that he didn’t know that Cezar was actually a prince of Ethenell and he wondered why we were acquainted. As for me, I knew that Cezar used to be a mercenary, but I didn’t know that he was a famous one.

“Hm, it’s kind of a long story, so I’ll tell you once we’re back home,” I dodged the question.

I could have just mentioned to him that we met in the castle’s garden while both pretending to be servants, and then when I went after Maria to save her, I realized that he’s actually someone important. After that, I learned that he’s in fact a prince. But telling Sora all that would probably have raised even more questions, so I decided I’d just explain the whole thing more calmly later.

“Sure. I can imagine that you accidentally lured him toward you like you always do.”

“Me? Lure? I’ve never done something like that!” I replied.

Or was he talking about fishing? I hadn’t fished in a very long time, though, so I wasn’t sure.

“I mean when you manage to get friendly with anyone in such a short time. It also happened with Arneau, right?”

“Oh, that’s what you meant.”

Even in my past life, it took me no time to become friendly with people. It must have been because, thanks to my good luck, I was

always surrounded by kind people. Arneau, too, despite being a bit cold, was kind underneath. Huh... Now that I think of it...

“Sora, what happened to Arneau? He was caught too, right?”

When I found Sora, Arneau was with him. I also remember him entering the building with the two of us, so I thought that he’d been caught too, but now I couldn’t see him.

Sora looked a bit surprised, but then, after a moment, he smiled.

“He’s gone to stop the thugs. He’ll meet us once we’re out. Don’t worry.”

“Is that really safe?” I asked.

These thugs were kidnappers. Wouldn’t it be dangerous for a single person to try and stop them? I suggested that maybe we should go and help him, but Sora shook his head.

“It’s his way to set things right... At least that’s what he said. And he can hold his own in a fight. Let’s just trust him and wait.”

I didn’t understand what exactly Arneau had to set right, but Sora looked like he wouldn’t budge. I just nodded and went along with it. Right about when we were done talking, we ran into a man who was probably working with the kidnappers.

“Hey, you... What are you—” he sputtered, but before he was done, Cezar had already knocked him out. This was the kind of speed one expected from a famous mercenary.

Unfortunately, another man walked up on us moments later.

“H-Hey! Someone’s running away with the kids!” he shouted, calling for reinforcements.

Cezar clicked his tongue in annoyance, and then warned the children to stay behind him. They were scared, but they listened to him and

didn't move. Sora was also on guard. As for me, I couldn't really do anything if we had to fight, but I made a fighting pose just in case.

One after the other, thugs started coming out of the neighboring rooms. There were a lot of them. If this was an RPG, I'd try to run away without fighting...but in reality we had no choice. We were surrounded. Even if we wanted to run away, we would need to knock a few of them out to do so.

"Are you trying to steal our merchandise?!"

"Don't you think we'll let you off easily!"

The men shouted all kinds of threats as they started attacking us.

Cezar dodged all of their blows and swiftly moved behind them, counterattacking. Realizing that Cezar was out of their league, they moved toward Sora, only to be met with another excellent fighter. I wasn't fighting, but Pochi had become bigger (just a little, since we were inside a building) and was biting and scratching anyone who tried getting close to me.

Knocking out some and intimidating others, we managed to clear a path between the mobsters, proceeding toward the exit while taking care of any thug who still tried to fight us. We eventually managed to leave the building thanks to the combined efforts of two young men and a dog.

"...Just how many of these people are there?" I muttered exhaustedly.

Even outside, there were still gangsters surrounding us, shouting while they attacked us. They reminded me of cockroaches. When you saw one of them, you could be sure that there were a hundred of them hiding nearby.

Cezar, Sora, and Pochi were doing their best, but the difference in numbers was starting to become too serious even for them.

One of the thugs slipped in between our three fighters and tried to grab one of the children.

No! I quickly moved in front of the child to protect him.

But since I wasn't as strong as Cezar or Sora, and my magic wasn't that impressive either, I just got caught instead.

"You'd better stop moving if you care about her!" the man shouted while closing his hand around my neck.

Cezar and Sora stopped fighting, looking nervously at the man, and Pochi, while he was still baring his fangs, knew he couldn't do anything in this situation.

"Good. Now go back inside," the man crowed, suddenly feeling like he had the upper hand.

It's all my fault...again... Sora being caught was my fault to begin with. Just how much trouble am I going to be for my friends? I have to do something! I have to get free! I mustered up my courage and, with all the strength that I had, I bit the arm of the man who was holding me.

"Wh-What the hell are you doing?!" he screamed, loosening his grip a bit, but I didn't get away in time and he caught me once again, gripping my neck even more tightly now that he was mad at me.

"Ugh!" the sound escaped my throat. I might have made things even worse.

"Katarina!" Cezar and Sora both shouted at once, while Pochi growled. And then, I saw a light. A soft light engulfing all of us like a mist.



At first, I thought that the thugs were somehow doing this to subdue us, but they seemed just as confused as me.

“What...is going on?” one of them gasped.

Even the one holding onto my neck loosened his grip in confusion, and I managed to fill my lungs with fresh air.

I was worried about the weird haze surrounding us, but my priority was thinking of how to get away from my captor... But then, he just let go of me.

And then, he addressed me.

“Oh, miss. I’m sorry for what I just did.”

Huh?! What?!

Unable to process what had just happened, I started looking around, and sure enough all of the other thugs were saying similar things.

“I was behaving like some thug...”

“I’m so, so sorry.”

“I should have known better than to use violence!”

Everyone was apologizing, and some of them were even bowing down on the floor. Just... What is going on here? Only moments ago, all these apologizing men were making scary faces and fighting against us. I couldn’t understand.

I tried looking at Cezar and Sora, but the two of them were also gaping at each other in confusion.

What is happening? And what should we do? I asked myself, when I heard a familiar voice nervously calling out to me.

“Lady Katarina!” The voice was followed by its beautiful owner, running toward me with her golden hair fluttering up and down. “Lady Katarina!” Maria cried once again as she hugged me tightly.

★★★★★

This happened some time earlier. I, Maria Campbell, was in my room at the Harbor Restaurant, intently studying the Light Covenant. I do not know just how much time I have spent doing so.

I was trying to find a spell which could be useful in helping Lady Katarina and the others, but, alas, due to the lexicon at my disposal here not being as comprehensive as the one at the Magical Ministry, I was having a hard time reading. The spells I could read did not seem very useful at all, and the more I read, the more I was taken by anxiety.

It was then that I heard a noise outside of my room. I left, hoping to be greeted by news on the situation, but I only found Miss Regina, Miss Larna, and some men I did not know talking to each other with preoccupied looks on their faces.

“What has happened?” I asked.

“No matter how much we ask around, nobody has seen either Katarina or Sora, to the extent that I’m getting suspicious. It’s almost as if whoever did see them had had their memories erased.”

“Do you mean...?!” My eyes widened, and Miss Larna nodded.

“I think that Dark Magic is involved. Just as we suspected before coming here,” she said gravely.

Again, we were up against Dark Magic. A forbidden magic which one could only obtain by taking someone’s life, in exchange for the power to control people’s memories and intentions.

We had dealt with it several times, but especially so after we had started working at the Magical Ministry. Lady Katarina, by sheer

coincidence, had even happened to stumble upon a Dark Familiar, making her connection with Dark Magic even stronger.

And now...that strange aura which I had felt. The evil aura approaching Lady Katarina. As I was not sure of its meaning, I never spoke of it with her...but it was likely that a Dark Magic user was after my friend. And I knew it, did I not...? Please, Lady Katarina—please be safe!

“But they can’t have tampered with everyone’s memories. They must have missed someone...” Miss Larna said just as the door opened and a man barged inside.

“We found someone who witnessed those two!” he shouted, bringing us the news we had been waiting so long for.

“Well done! And where’s the witness?” Miss Larna asked.

“I can bring him in in no time...but...” he trailed off, looking worried.

“But what?” she responded, her face darkening.

I was starting to feel nervous as well.

“But this witness, you see, he’s kind of a tough nut. He’s seen those two, but we don’t know if he’ll talk about it,” he explained, making Miss Larna’s eyebrows rise.

“That might take some time then.”

After a while, the agent brought in the witness about whom he was talking. At a glance, he looked like a crude, impolite person, and in this instance the contents of the book perfectly matched the cover.

“I’d like to know where the young man and young woman you’ve seen have gone,” Miss Larna began, and the man grinned.

“I can tell you. For a price,” he smirked. He was going to withhold his information unless he was paid for it.

“How much?” Miss Larna asked, dubious but eager.

“How much can you pay?” he countered, and Miss Larna told him a figure that drew another grin out of him.

“Sounds good. Pay in advance,” he demanded, and Miss Larna obliged and then spread a map in front of him.

“Kind of in this area,” he said, circling a very wide portion of the map with his finger.

“That doesn’t help. Can’t you be more specific?” Miss Larna, who was now visibly starting to get angered, asked.

“Maybe I can. But it’ll cost you extra,” he chortled, then shrugged.

“This guy...” Miss Larna murmured to herself, clicking her tongue, “He’s going to ask us for more and more money. We aren’t getting anywhere.”

I agreed that getting the information we needed out of this man was going to be a very long process.

“Can’t we beat it out of him?” Miss Regina casually asked, but Miss Larna shook her head.

“With this kind of guy, that’s not guaranteed to work.”

“You’re right. But we’re fighting against time here... What can we do?”

I could not agree with their suggested methods, but it was true that we were in a hurry. I could not stand thinking that Lady Katarina was in danger while we were losing time. If only there was a way... Oh, of course! Maybe I could use that spell I just read about in the Light Covenant!

“There is a spell I recently learned which perhaps could make him talk,” I informed my restaurant superior and Ministry superior.

“Can’t hurt to try. Go ahead,” Miss Larna promptly agreed.

“Here...” I said, pointing my palms toward the man.

“Huh? You wanna beat it out of me? I’ll let you know that won’t—”

The man was surrounded by a brilliant haze.

“Wh-What’s this?” he yelped, surprised. And then...

“...What was I doing? I know that you’re in trouble, and I was just trying to get money out of you at a time like this... Sorry. I’ll tell you everything. Here, that girl and that boy went through this road...” His attitude changed at once and he started apologetically giving us all the information he had.

Miss Larna and Miss Regina were terribly surprised, but they quickly took note of what the witness had reported and then ordered some of the other people in the room to go there and investigate.

“By the way, Maria, what in the world was that magic?” Miss Larna, looking extremely suspicious, questioned me after the witness had not only apologized, but even returned the money we had given him.

“It is a spell that makes wrongdoers repent. This was the first time I used it, so I am relieved that it worked.” It was one of the spells detailed in the Light Covenant.

“That’s incredible. If you used this left and right, there’d be no sinners left in the world,” she marveled.

“Unfortunately...the effects are temporary,” I continued, and with perfect timing, the witness started screaming.

“My money! Give it back to me!”

The spell was broken.

“Seems like it,” Miss Larna commented with a complicated look on her face.

We went to the area the man told us about, and we found it to be populated by thugs and foreigners. Furthermore, the road leading to the exact spot he'd indicated was full of scary-looking men.

Miss Larna and Miss Regina (forcibly) asked some of those men for information, and we found out that they had been ordered to capture the girl and young man who were trying to escape from a certain building nearby with children. The young man had blue hair and eyes, and the girl had brown hair and blue eyes. There was no doubt that they were talking about Sora and Lady Katarina.

But even now that we knew where she was, we could not go past all the men surrounding the building. My companions were taking them on one at a time, but, if Lady Katarina was in danger, this approach was too slow.

*I have to help somehow... Of course! Maybe I could use the spell from before and make all of these men let us through! I must do it...for Lady Katarina!* I thought, concentrating as hard as I could. A bright haze, much larger than the one from before, surrounded the place, and the men who were fighting so fiercely until moments ago were now calm. I quickly ran past them. Beyond them was the person I was looking for.

“Lady Katarina!” I cried as I took her between my arms.

Feeling her so close to me filled my heart with solace.

★★★★★

“M-Maria! What are you doing here? And what was that haze just now? Did you do it?” When Maria hugged me, I instinctively hugged her back. Seeing her here made me think that maybe she was behind that weird phenomenon.

“Miss Larna and Miss Regina found out about this place, and we all rushed here. The haze was one of the spells I found in the Light Covenant,” she answered.

I knew that she was still deciphering it, but from what she'd told me, I thought that all she'd found so far were basic spells that she already knew about.

"I was reading it as fast as I could, hoping to find something I could use to save you. Luckily, I found this," she went on explaining.

"Maria! You're incredible!" Learning a spell like that, especially now while she didn't have access to the Ministry's lexicon, was really impressive.

"I had to do it," she declared, blushing.

"What kind of spell is it, anyway?" I asked, looking at the men who were still apologizing to us.

"It's a spell that makes wrongdoers repent for their wicked actions."

"Wow! That's amazing!"

"But..."

"But?"

"...Its effects only last for a little while," she frowned.

As if on cue, we immediately saw one of the men running toward us, screaming "What the hell was I doing?!" It seemed that the effect of her spell had expired. We're going to be surrounded again! I panicked, but Larna, Regina, and the others were already knocking them out quicker than they could regain their senses. Cezar's reinforcements finally arrived too, and they started fighting according to his instructions. Shortly after, all of the thugs were tied down and the children were safe from danger.

"It's over now. It's going to be fine," I comforted the children. I was impressed by how well all my friends were collaborating.

Larna, done giving orders, approached me. "Are you guys all right?" she asked.

"I'm fine, but Sora looks wounded," I reported, glancing in his direction.

"Don't worry, we have people who can treat you," she said, looking at him, "so go and have them tend to your wounds."

Sora, however, shook his head. "It's nothing major. But an acquaintance of mine is still inside the building, so let me come along if you go inside," he requested, pointing at the people who, having dealt with the thugs, were ready to enter the hideout.

I knew that he was talking about Arneau. Larna thought about it for a moment, then gave him her approval. "Be careful," she added.

"I would like to go along too!" I piped up.

Larna nodded at me, but Sora furrowed his brow. "You'd better wait outside."

"I'm also worried about Arneau! I have Pochi with me and I promise I'll be careful!" I added.

Sora finally gave me a completely unenthusiastic "Fine."

In the end, the party that entered the building consisted of the Ministry people, Cezar and his men, Maria, who'd said she wanted to help, Sora, and me. The first time I came inside there I was being forcefully dragged, and then when I left, I was running away from thugs. Because of all that, this was the first time I got a really good look at the place. It was dirty but large, with lots of rooms.

"It kind of looks like a noble's mansion..." I muttered to myself.

One of Cezar's men, overhearing me, replied. "It's exactly that. It used to be a noble family's vacation home. It turns out they were using it for unsavory things though."

"Unsavory things?" I asked.

“Nothing that a young woman like you should know,” he responded with a laugh. This man’s attitude reminded me of Cezar’s, maybe because he was one of his subordinates.

While discussing things like that, we kept checking the building’s rooms. Pretty much all of them were empty, since most of the people inside had come after us when we were escaping. However, when we reached one of them, we heard someone inside. We carefully opened the door, and inside there were several men lying unconscious on the floor. And right in the middle of them, looking as if he was about to fall down himself, was Arneau.

“Arneau!” Sora shouted, running toward his friend. I followed him. Once we drew closer, we saw that Arneau was so badly wounded that it was a wonder he was still standing.

“Did you take on all of these guys by yourself?” Sora asked, rushing to support Arneau’s weakened body.

“...Sorry. That’s as much as I could do,” Arneau replied with a husky voice.

“...You try-hard,” Sora said, furrowing his brow.

“We must heal you as soon as possible,” I told him, worried about all of his wounds.

But he just insisted, “...No. I deserved this.”

“But you fought to help us. You definitely didn’t deserve this. We owe you. Let’s get you treated! I’ll call someone who can see to that!”

“It’s all my fault you people were involved in this...” he stated.

“Excuse me! Is there anyone here who can treat wounds?” I shouted.

“Shall I use magic to cure him?” Maria, who had Light Magic at her disposal, answered my call.

“Oh, right, you’re able to do that, aren’t you? Please.” First I forget Pochi, then I forget Maria can use healing magic? Get it together, Katarina!

“Of course,” she smiled.

“I said that I...” Arneau tried to stop her.

“Come on, Arneau, we’ll get you patched up,” I said, and he squinted his eyes.

“Are you all right? Does it hurt too much?” I continued.

“That’s not it. It’s just that it’s all my fault if you ended up here. You should be angry with me, not grateful...”

“Maria, go on,” I requested, helping Sora rest Arneau on the floor.

“Give up, Arneau. She can’t even hear you,” Sora chuckled.

“But I...”

“Just shut up and do as you’re told.”

“I will start now,” Maria declared, and light started coming out of her hands. No matter how many times I saw it, Light Magic was always a sight to behold.

Thanks to Maria’s efforts, Arneau was healed to the point where he could be brought to a hospital and receive more thorough care later.

I overheard Cezar and Larna discussing something complicated, but at least this whole ordeal was finally over. We’d found and rescued the baron’s daughter who had been kidnapped.

## **Chapter 5: Goodbye, See You Again**

“How you doing, Arneau?” Sora asked, entering my hospital room.

“Good enough,” I replied. I’d been healed so thoroughly that most of my wounds were gone.

“Nice to hear.”

“They treated me so well here. And I even got all this stuff.” I pointed to the snacks, flowers, and other get-well-soon gifts I’d received during my stay.

Sora looked at them and laughed. “You probably know who chose most of these. Don’t worry about it. If anything, I’m sorry if she’s been bothering you.”

“...Not at all.” It really wasn’t a bother at all. I actually appreciated it.

These gifts were from Katarina, who, after saving me along with that Maria girl, came to visit me at the hospital. As soon as I told her that I was fine, she started describing all the things she’d brought there for me like she was trying to sell them. Delicious dessert this, fluffiest pastry that. She then told me to eat a lot and get well, leaving me with more snacks than I could ever eat. Maybe she thought that eating could cure all wounds? That...almost made sense, in a way.

“You’re done with the questions from the Sorcié people, right?” Sora asked. When I’d recovered enough to be questioned, one of the kingdom’s officials came in to ask me details about this incident.

“Yeah. They just questioned me and that was it. The other guys were arrested, but they let me go because I collaborated. I was just told to leave the country as soon as I was fully recovered. And all because I betrayed the organization and provided them with a little info.”

The Golden-eyed Wolf, who was working for Ethenell, and I had helped Sorcié’s investigation, and so they’d let me go free. I actually

felt bad about this. I was a traitor to the organization and I was no less of a criminal than the others who'd been arrested.

"Yeah, sure," Sora smirked, "you really think they let you off the hook that easily just because you talked?"

"Of course. That's all I've done," I repeated, and he sighed.

"Sorcié's people are kind, I'll give you that, but you can't really think that's all it'd take for them to ignore your crimes."

"Huh? So I guess they'll arrest me, too, after all?" I wondered, thinking that that'd make more sense, and Sora sighed again.

"You aren't getting arrested. Your crimes aren't as bad as those other guys' to begin with."

"What are you talking about? I worked with those kidnappers to catch and sell children," I pointed out how what Sora was saying made no sense.

"You didn't kidnap any children yourself, and it turns out that you were actually looking after them, right? The other thugs didn't have anything pretty to say about you. 'He doesn't get anything done and just acts as if he's in charge, that kind of thing.' But on the other hand, the children were all for you. 'That mister was the only kind one, please save him,' they said."

I had no idea. I didn't know what to say.

"That's why they didn't arrest you and just asked that you leave Sorcié," Sora concluded. "You haven't changed one bit." He laughed at me. "You're that 'sweet mister' who looks after children. You're not cut for crime. Find something else to do."

I stared blankly. "Like what? I've never been through school, and I don't have a single day of honest work to my name..." I admitted, and then the door opened and an unexpected person walked in.

“Sorry there. I wasn’t eavesdropping or anything, but I was waiting for the timing to walk in and just happened to catch what you two were talking about,” that person announced, showing his teeth in a large grin. It was the Golden-eyed Wolf, who I hadn’t seen since that day. “You’re looking for a job, right? There’s an open spot in your home country of Ethenell. How does that sound?”

I had revealed that I was an orphan from Ethenell when I was being questioned, and this mercenary had probably heard it then.

“...I could never be a mercenary,” I told him. I wasn’t that strong, and wars weren’t really my thing, even if someone did hire me to fight in one.

“Hahaha, that’s not what I’m talking about. What they need is someone to look after children.”

“What?” I croaked, surprised that a wild-looking mercenary would say something like that.

“You know the state Ethenell’s been in until recently, don’t you? You can imagine that there are a lot of orphans there. Now there’s an orphanage in the works, but these are all rowdy brats from the streets, and it’s not easy to look after them. Can’t ever have enough people doing it, let me tell you. I heard you used to take care of younger kids in the slums. Sounds like your kind of job. So, what do you say?”

It sounded lovely, but...

“...But I’m uneducated, and I have nobody to vouch for me,” I objected.

I couldn’t teach anything to the children, and what’s more, I was also an orphan who had no one to confirm his identity or trustworthiness. Who’d ever hire me?

“Don’t worry about the schooling, there’s a teacher hired for that. What the orphanage needs is someone that the kids will listen to. And I’ll vouch for you.”

“You? Be a guarantor for me?”

He’s a mercenary working for Ethenell. I know that much. But who is he? He couldn’t just be an ordinary mercenary... He’s probably connected to someone important, I reasoned, but what he said next blew me away.

“Yeah. Me. That’s right, I never properly introduced myself. You’ll be hired on Cezar Dahl’s good word.”

“Cezar... Dahl? Wait, Dahl?!” Sora gasped, shocked. I was just as stunned.

“Could it be... Could you be... The honorable...?” I sputtered, and Cezar grinned.

“Nothing honorable about me. I’m just a mercenary right now. But I still want to apologize to you two. It was people with that same surname who let Ethenell turn into a mess, making your childhood so difficult. I’m really sorry,” he spoke soberly.

Dahl. That surname belonged to the royal family. Nobody else could bear it in Ethenell. And now a member of the royal family was lowering his head in front of us, apologizing. I felt dizzy.

“I promise I’ll do my best to turn Ethenell into a better country. So, won’t you help me?” he invited, giving me his hand.

This time, I took it of my own accord. I stretched my hand toward Cezar Dahl’s—toward a proper life and a place to call home. Toward everything I’d ever wanted.

“What about you? You’re from Ethenell too. Now you’re living here, but I could let you come back if you wanted to,” Cezar then looked to Sora.

"I...have something I need to protect right here, in this country," Sora replied, looking straight into the royal eyes.

"Good. I wish you all the best," Cezar grinned, before hurrying out of the room, promising he'd come back with the paperwork as soon as it was ready.

Sora and I were left alone in the room.

"...Find happiness, all right?" I murmured to him.

He smiled coolly. "You too."

Through the window, I heard the bustling sound of the people walking down the street. And for the first time, I thought it was a pleasant sound.

★★★★★

The incident was over, but we still had the aftermath to deal with, so we couldn't go back to the Ministry quite yet. By the time we finished questioning the people involved and doing all the necessary paperwork, plus visiting Arneau in the hospital when we had a chance, it had already been more than a week since we'd come to Ocean Harbor. Arneau's wounds had gotten better, and he was discharged from the hospital. I went to tell him that we were going back to the capital, and he said that he'd be going back to Ethenell.

"So we won't be able to see each other again," I lamented, feeling a bit lonely about it.

"When Ethenell is safer, come and visit," Arneau suggested.

"Write us a letter once you've settled in, okay?" Sora told him, giving him the Ministry's address.

I was worried that Sora was going to follow his friend and go back to Ethenell, so I asked him.

“...I have to stay at the Ministry. They’re the ones who gave me this identity,” he said casually.

Sora, who had Dark Magic forced onto him, was now in the Ministry’s care. They had given him a new identity, including a surname. He wasn’t staying here out of his own free will.

“...So, given the choice, you’d go back,” I reasoned. I felt sad at the idea, but after all, it was normal for him to want to return to his home country.

“...Not really,” he answered, ruffling my hair.

I could have done without the hair-ruffling, but his answer had made me smile.

After saying goodbye to Arneau, it was time to say goodbye to this town we’d grown accustomed to so quickly. When we were ready to leave, a huge crowd of people, including the restaurant’s regulars and some of those who lived close by, came to see us off. Of course they didn’t know that we worked for the Ministry, so we told everyone that we just had to go back to our respective homes. They all seemed sad to see us go.

“You’re going already? You should’ve stayed a bit longer!”

“I won’t be able to eat Maria’s desserts anymore? What a shame...”

“It just won’t be the same without Katarina around!”

Along with these heartfelt farewells, they gave us lots of souvenirs, like fruit, all kinds of snacks, and even some local trinkets.

Larna, Sora, Maria, and I, drowning under all those presents, boarded the carriage that would bring us home.

“Come again!”

“We’re waiting for you!”

“I’m looking forward to the next time you visit!”

Everyone was shouting in our direction.

“Goodbye, see you again!” I called back from the window, waving my hand, as we left Ocean Harbor.

I’d gotten used to the salty breeze coming in from the sea that was brushing against my face one last time.

★★★★★

I, Susanna Randall, also known as Larna Smith, had just finished reporting to the Magical Ministry. Now I had to report to the man who had helped us throughout this incident, Jeffrey Stuart, the eldest prince and the fiancé of my public alias.

“Lately I’ve been so busy that I can’t even go take a look at them. It’s really stressful,” he grumbled as soon as we met. He was talking about his younger brothers, whom he loved to the point of obsession. I stared at him coldly.

“Is that why you’re collecting things like these? I’ll let you know that stealing is a crime.”

On his desk there were a variety of items labeled as “Alan’s towel,” “Jeord’s pen,” “Ian’s book,” and so on. I hadn’t been that creeped out in a while. This maniac, not content with staring at his brothers’ portraits and spying on them, had resorted to stealing their stuff. I felt he’d gone way too far.

“Susanna, please, you misunderstand. I would never steal from my beloved brothers. These are old things that they had thrown out,” he answered with a smile.

“That actually...doesn’t make it any less creepy.”

Discussing this wasn’t going to change anything, so I decided to ignore that topic and move on.

“Anyway... I think you already read what I wrote to you, but as we suspected, Dark Magic was being used. Everything points to Sarah, the girl we’re looking for,” I explained.

“Just as I thought. Always busy, that girl. I really wonder what her intentions are.”

“Once again, we found no clue as to that. The nobles involved were being controlled so much that asking them was pretty much useless.”

“Hm... It’s incredible that we can’t even find out how she approached them. That would be very difficult if she was working alone. There must be someone powerful backing her up,” Jeffrey hypothesized.

“That’s probably the case.”

“I wish they’d stop trying to ruin the peaceful country I want my brothers to live in!” He sounded as if he was joking, but he had a dead serious look on his face. He could be a brother-obsessed pervert, yes, but he really cared for them and for his country.

“And, as I stated in the letter, Ethenell’s prince, Cezar, was involved too. He was a huge help to us, but since people from his country were in the wrong too, he said that we didn’t really owe him anything,” I tried to get the conversation back on track.

“Haha, lucky for us! Debts to foreign royalty are the last thing we’d want to make.”

“I’ll have to agree with you there. Anyway, I’ve written all the details that didn’t fit on the letter in this report right here. Read it when you’ve got the time,” I concluded, handing him a stack of documents.

“Thank you,” he replied with his usual smile, “I know how busy you are. I really appreciate you coming all the way here.”

“Don’t mention it. And you try not to work too hard, okay?” I advised, noticing the dark circles under his eyes. He looked surprised but then started laughing.

“You too, Susanna,” he told me, still smiling.

I waved and left his room. As I walked past the castle’s gate, the sky was already tinged with the sunset’s colors. It had been a week since I’d last seen the capital’s sky. It was beautiful.

★★★★★

“...And so our mission was completed successfully.”

After the long carriage trip, my friends, who already knew that we were going to be back, were waiting for us at the Ministry.

They all greeted me as soon as I stepped off, and then I was brought to one of the Ministry’s parlors to be bombarded with questions.

“How was it?” “Are you all right?” “Are you hurt anywhere?” and so on.

As always, I tried to reassure everyone by telling everything I’d done.

“I worked as a waitress! And then Sora and I were captured by kidnappers, but thanks to him, Pochi, and Maria we managed to escape and arrest them.”

However...far from being reassured, everyone looked even more worried. But...everything turned out fine! What’s the problem?

“Big Sis, wait. You said that this was going to be a safe mission. Nothing more than an investigation. Why in the world were you captured?” Keith asked me sternly.

“W-Well, there was a little...accident, let’s say. A coincidence. Nothing more than a coincidence. I just happened to walk up to the kidnappers’ hideout.”

"Pray tell, Katarina, how could such a thing ever happen by coincidence?" Jeord asked, sighing.

"I-I was chasing after Sora, and..."

"That would be your colleague, correct? And may I ask why you were chasing after him, and if you were alone at the time?" Jeord continued.

"I saw him while walking through the street and just went after him... And, well, I was alone..."

"Why would you do that, Big Sis? Haven't I told you not to do things like that?" Keith said, his eyebrows rising higher and higher.

Things like these?! What's that even supposed to mean?! Sigh. I know how this is going to end. Whatever I say, Jeord and Keith are going to get mad at me. I glanced over in Mary and Sophia's direction, hoping for some help.

"And when you were captured, they...didn't do anything to you, did they?" Mary, whose face had turned completely pale, asked.

"Hm? Nothing, no. I was just closed up in a room for a while."

"But that's terrible! Was it a dark, filthy underground cellar?!" Sophia queried, letting her usual unstoppable imagination run wild.

"No, it really was just a normal room. It wasn't comfortable or anything, but it wasn't a proper jail either. And I just walked out without any trouble, eventually."

"And how did you manage that, anyway?" Alan wondered, suspicious.

"Oh, that. Sora and Pochi fought their way through the thugs, one at a time, and we made a path for ourselves through their unconscious bodies."

"You don't call that walking out without any trouble, you call that forcing your way through with violence..." Alan groaned, exasperated.

"Well...hm, if you put it that way..."

"How one puts it has absolutely no bearing on the matter," Jeord interrupted. "You had to fight to go back to safety. I hope you understand how dangerous that was. Now, are you wounded?"

*H-He's so scary!*

"I-I'm fine. I got out scot-free," I promised, waving his worries off, and then Nicol, who'd been quiet all along, took his shot at me.

"That makes it sound like it was dangerous," he spoke flatly, with his usual emotionless expression.

"...Huh?!"

As he stared at me, I felt as if he could almost read my mind. I figured I'd say what I'd been hiding all along.

"While we were running away...I tried to protect one of the children and I kind of got grabbed..."

"Grabbed?! Were you not hurt then?!" Mary, somehow even paler than before, shouted.

"No, really, I was just choked for a bit..." I assured her, immediately regretting that admission.

"You were grabbed and choked. Big Sis... That's terribly dangerous!"

"Is your neck wounded?!"

Everyone gathered closer to me to check my neck.

I made everyone worry again...

I waved my hands again, clarifying, "It was just for a second. It wasn't anything major, really," trying to make my point clear. "Look, not

even a scratch, right?” I added, showing everyone my neck and causing a collective sigh of relief.

They seemed to have calmed down, but they followed up with murmuring and sighing.

“...In what world does this not count as dangerous?”

“This whole thing was the definition of danger...”

I have to lighten things up here.

“B-But you see, Maria saved me with her Light Magic, so it really was fine. Maria even learned a new spell! You should’ve seen it...” I tried changing the topic to her new spell, but nobody seemed to even hear that part.

“Big Sis probably doesn’t understand what we mean by danger...” Keith fretted.

“She most certainly does not. Her threshold for considering a situation dangerous is considerably higher than ours,” Jeord replied.

The two of them were giving me scary looks.

“M-Maybe that could be, but I’m really fine, so...”

“Perhaps our safest choice is to keep her imprisoned, so that she may not run into danger,” Jeord mused.

“...That seems a bit too much,” I gasped, terrified by his proposal... But Keith *agreed* with him!

“Indeed. Setting up strict limits regarding what she can do would be sure to keep her safe. But of course I wouldn’t want you to worry about it, Prince Jeord, so my family will take that burden.”

You usually never agree with Jeord! What are you doing?!

“Why, I will gladly spare you the trouble. Katarina is my fiancée, and it is after all my responsibility to see to her safety. She shall reside in the castle, with me.”

“Not at all. Our family will take care of Big Sis. She will stay in the Claes mansion.”

“We are more than eager to help too. She is a friend, after all. Right, Prince Alan?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Big brother and I will help too, of course.”

“We definitely will.”

“None of you should be involved in this. This matter only concerns me and my future wife.”

“We are not talking about marriage here, Prince Jeord.”

All of my friends were busy discussing where and how to lock me up. The worst part is that nobody disagreed with the idea at its core. Seeing that things had gotten even worse, I tried to sneak out, but they immediately found out when I opened the door.



“Big Sister, we’re not quite done here.”

“Katarina, where might you be going?”

They tried to keep me there, but thankfully, I saw Maria coming back from reporting to higher ups.

“I must go to report too,” I excused myself, since I was actually told to do that right after Maria.

The most prominent members of the Katarina-scolding club, Keith chief among them, were probably still going to complain to me later, but that was still better than having everyone do it at once.

I walked through the Ministry’s hallways for the first time in a while, thinking of how to convince my friends not to lock me up. *Maybe I’ll have to ask Sora and Maria to tell them how awesome and safe I was throughout*, I thought, not yet knowing that Maria would eventually tell them that I went back into the hideout to look for an acquaintance, pouring fuel on the “Let’s imprison Katarina for her own good!” fire.

In any event, the case of the baron’s kidnapped daughter was finally over.

## **Afterword**

Hello, everyone. For some of you, it's probably been a while. Satoru Yamaguchi here.

Thank you for reading volume 9 of *My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom!*

I remember when an editor first contacted me about the story I was uploading online... That was five years ago.

At first I was suspicious, thinking that it was some new kind of scam, but I soon regretted thinking ill of the editor when I was told that they'd be happy to meet me in person.

When I saw the first volume in print, I was so moved. I then saw the second volume and thought that I'd cherish it for the rest of my life. Who would have thought that, five years later, we'd go as far as publishing nine volumes?

And, as volume nine is released in Japan, the anime adaptation will also be broadcast on television. I was already ecstatic at the idea of my story being published, but seeing it turn into an anime is really a dream come true. I can't wait to see the work that the talented production staff has put into turning *My Next Life as a Villainess* into an anime.

And all of this is thanks to the readers who have supported this story for so long. I know that I will never be able to thank you enough, but, nonetheless, let me tell you: thank you so, so, so much.

As for the content of this volume, we see Katarina, right after the International Assembly, go on an undercover mission for the Magical Ministry. Together with Sora, Maria, and Larna, she goes to a city called Ocean Harbor to find out more about a young noble girl who was kidnapped.

This is the first time in her (current) life seeing the sea, but she doesn't let it get to her head too much. She works as a waitress as part of her cover, and does a pretty good job too.

She usually went everywhere with either Maria or Sora, but she realizes that putting herself between the two would make her just like the game's villainess that she's always trying not to become.

Will she solve the kidnapping case?

Will she manage not to interfere with other people's love lives?

You can find out in this volume! And there's also a certain character coming back.

After the Japanese release of this book, the fifth volume of Nami Hidaka's manga adaptation is going to come out. It's time for the Magical Academy! We'll finally be able to see our beloved novel characters in manga form! I can't wait!

I want to once again thank Nami Hidaka for the beautiful illustrations, the editors, and everyone whose collaboration made this book a reality.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart,

Satoru Yamaguchi

## **Bonus Short Story**

I was born and raised in Ocean Harbor. My father owns a fruit shop that has been operating for four generations. We mostly just sell fruit to the nearby restaurants, but there are enough of them to make our business do relatively well.

Right now I'm a busy student. One day, I want to make our fruit shop much bigger.

By the way, I love sweets. With my father owning a fruit shop, we've always had fruit for dessert. I never had any sweets when I was little. I remember the first time I ate one. It was so delicious... I fell in love with that taste. Some people can bake them themselves, but I'm too clumsy for that. I just wait for my allowance to buy them. Going through stores eating all kinds of sweet delicacies is kind of my hobby.

Recently, I found a place that has the most delicious desserts: the Harbor Restaurant. It's very close to my home, but I never went there before because it was known for just serving meals made by other shops. However, a few days ago, they hired a new cook, and the food they started serving is amazing.

After hearing about it I immediately tried to go there, but it was too late for desserts. Dad brought some home though, and that was the start of it all.

It was so good that I've started going there whenever I have the chance. I can't go every day, since I can't afford it, but I go as soon as I have my allowance.

The waitress, a girl named Katarina, is very beautiful and kind. She even lets me try desserts that they aren't selling yet. Everyone who goes to the Harbor Restaurant for lunch loves her, but Dad told me that she's even more popular at dinner time. He even said that some

people go there just to meet her, including the son of the greengrocer in front of our house, who's so in love that he goes there every day.

But a girl that pretty and kind can't be single, right? One day, coming back from school, I happened to run into Katarina. She was walking together with a handsome young man with blue hair. She was smiling, and he was looking at her with so much love in his eyes. I was pretty sure they were dating. Too bad for the greengrocer's son. They looked so good together too. Those two beautiful people could be in an illustration of a romance novel. I decided I'd ask her about it next time I was at the restaurant.

But then, when I asked her about it...her reply really surprised me. I realized that she was completely oblivious when it came to romance and, what's worse, she didn't even realize that the blue-haired man likes her. Poor guy.







Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters of series like this by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)

## **Copyright**

My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! Volume 9

by Satoru Yamaguchi

Translated by Marco Godano

Edited by Jonathan Engel

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2020 Satoru Yamaguchi

Illustrations by Nami Hidaka

All rights reserved.

First published in Japan in 2019 by Ichijinsha Inc., Tokyo.

Publication rights for this English edition arranged through Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC

[j-novel.club](http://j-novel.club)

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: July 2020

*Download all your fav Light  
Novels at*

*Just Light Novels*