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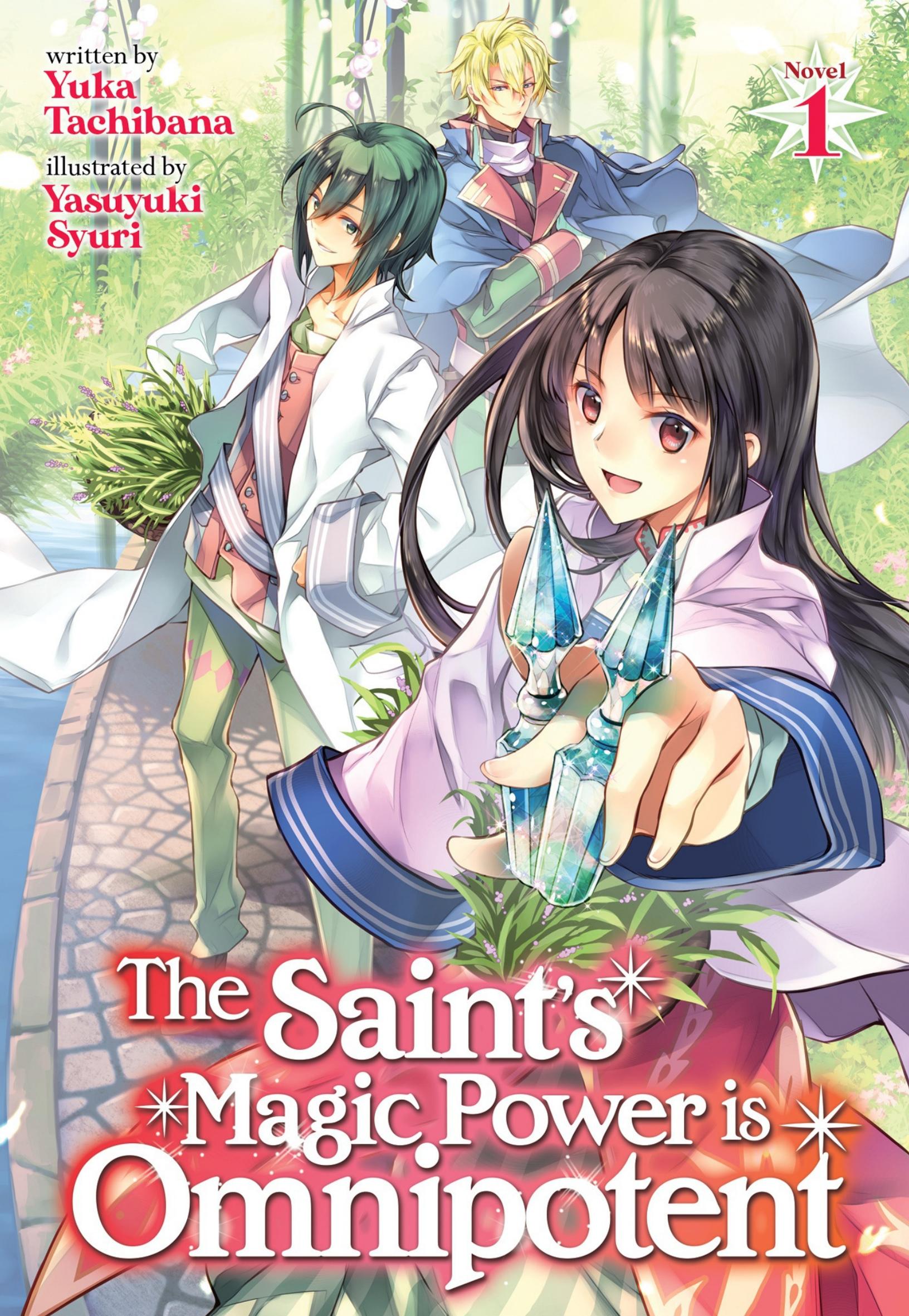
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illustrated by

**Yasuyuki
Syuri**

Novel

1



The Saint's Magic Power is Omnipotent

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*"Thank you.
It's because
of you that
I'm still here
today."*

Albert Hawke

The knight commander of the Knights of the Third Order, known as the Ice Knight. Sei saved him from a mortal wound.

Sei

Sei Takanashi, an office lady in her twenties who was summoned by the Saint Summoning Ritual. Her saintly powers enhance her abilities by fifty percent.

*"Since you
arrived, you've
only gotten
prettier."*

The Saint's Magic Power is Omnipotent

Jude

A researcher at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora. Friendly and compassionate. In charge of teaching Sei.



If I heal him, it'll be hard to insist
that I'm an ordinary person,
I thought. If I didn't know him
personally, I might've just pretended
I didn't see anything and walked
away. No...I'd probably end up
healing anyone I saw who
was in need, no matter
who they were.

My heart churned with an
uneasy melancholy.

"Area Heal!"

I prayed for his recovery
as I cast the spell.

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Afterword

The Saint's *Magic Power is Omnipotent



WRITTEN BY
Yuka Tachibana

ILLUSTRATED BY
Yasuyuki Syuri



Seven Seas Entertainment

THE SAINT'S MAGIC POWER IS OMNIPOTENT VOL. 1

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Illustrated by Yasuyuki Syuri

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Prologue

ONE DAY, I was unexpectedly summoned to another world by the Saint Summoning Ritual.

The hour was late. I had just returned home from work and was slipping off my shoes in the foyer when it happened: an incandescent white light suddenly spilled out around my feet. It was so blindingly bright that my eyes shut tight on instinct.

When I dared to open them again, I was no longer in my familiar apartment kitchen but a vast room built of stone.

“It worked!”

“Ooooooooh!”

A crowd of people burst into cheers. I had no idea what to make of them and tried instead to understand my surroundings.

In front of me stood two types of people: some dressed in surcoats who looked like knights and others who wore long robes that brushed their ankles.

The knights were in an uproar; they clapped one another on the back with a celebratory air. Meanwhile, the people in robes remained seated on the ground, though they were all smiling faintly as if they had just seen some kind of difficult task through to its end.

I turned my attention to the floor. It was as black as the stone walls, but when I peered closely, I noticed that someone had drawn strange dark lines directly beneath where I sat. The lines connected to each other in a way that reminded me of a magic circle.

To my right was one of those massive stone walls. To my left, however, was a girl. She was the only other person in this room dressed anything like me. Granted, I wore a full suit while she was wearing a more casual knitted top and a skirt. Nevertheless, we definitely looked like we came from the same modern era.

Everyone else, though...with all that armor and all those robes, I almost

wanted to ask if we had tripped into some kind of video game.



The girl beside me seemed to be in her late teens, and she had a dazed look on her face. I suspected she and I had been brought here without warning in much the same way.

Honestly? A part of me wanted to start screaming my head off. I desperately kept a grip on my alarm while I tried to comprehend our situation.

Just as I was beginning to process what had happened to us, the doors on the left side of the room flew open and several people swept inside.

In the lead was a devastatingly hot guy with crimson-red hair, whose attire made him look like a noble of the Rococo era, though without a wig. Behind him was an equally hot black-haired knight, and yet another unfairly hot guy with navy-blue hair brought up the rear. He was also dressed like a noble, though his finery was plainer than the red-haired guy's.

At a guess, the handsome red-haired man was a prince, the gorgeous knight was his personal guard, and the beautiful third guy was some kind of official.

But, dude, if you keep dying your hair that bright shade of red, you're gonna be bald in the future!

As I tried to escape reality in my hot-guy reverie, Red Hair knelt before the younger girl beside me. With a wide smile on his face, he asked, "Are you the Saint?"

What in the world?

Act 1: The Research Institute of Medicinal Flora

IT HAD BEEN A MONTH since my summoning. The warmth of spring was close at hand, and I was sowing herbs in the royal palace's garden.

Why was this my responsibility? Because I now worked at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora, which was located right next to this garden. In fact, I slept there, too.

Yup, that's right. I no longer resided in the royal palace. I lived in a research institute.

The day I, Sei Takanashi, was summoned to another world by the "Saint Summoning Ritual," I learned it had been passed down since antiquity here in the Kingdom of Salutania.

I also learned that something called "miasma" was manifesting all across the kingdom. It always appeared relatively close to where people lived and had a detrimental effect on humans. Furthermore, though the reasons were yet unclear, when the miasma reached a certain density, it churned out monsters. The more concentrated the miasma, the stronger the monsters. In turn, defeating monsters dissipated the miasma. As such, it was necessary to hunt and kill the unholy beasts to stop their source from gaining strength.

However, every few generations, the growing density of the miasma far exceeded the speed at which the monsters could be slain. Fortunately, during these eras, a maiden who would become the Saint always appeared in the kingdom.

The Saint's magic was so powerful, she could annihilate the miasma's monsters in the blink of an eye. In so doing, her magic instantly balanced the rate at which monsters were slain versus the rate at which the miasma condensed.

According to one theory, once the Saint had appeared, the miasma could no longer condense at all, at least in her divine presence.

Incredible, right?

The Saint was generally supposed to manifest all on her own, but at one point in ages past, despite the rapid growth of miasma, she had failed to appear. The sages of that time desperately experimented with all types of magic until they devised a ritual for summoning the maiden who would become the Saint from a faraway land.

And so, most annoyingly, the sages of the present era summoned me.

The ritual itself had only been performed that one time long ago; the current sages hadn't known whether it would work until they actually tried it. Luckily for them, those sages of the past were as clever and powerful as they seemed, because the ritual did indeed manage to summon the Saint—two of them, in fact.

Up until now, there had only ever been one Saint at a time. "How did we wind up summoning two of them?" the sages asked. "Maybe it's because the present state of the miasma is so exceptionally dire, we require another Saint to drive it back?"

The mystery remains...unsolved.

Anyway, that was all anyone had told me in the month since I had been brought by the Saint Summoning Ritual.

As for how I wound up living at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora, well...

After the ceremony, that red-haired lordling who swept into the room was unmistakably the crown prince of the kingdom. He didn't spare even a glance for me; his sole focus was the other girl, Aira Misono. It wasn't long before he swept out again, this time with Aira.

Honestly, I wasn't too surprised. I was in my twenties, while dear Aira was in her late teens—she was obviously closer in age to the prince than I was. Not to mention, she had fluffy brown hair, perfect skin, rosy cheeks, doe eyes, and a certain soft sweetness that just made you want to protect her.

Whereas I, who had just come off of multiple rounds of late-night overtime, had my hair up in a messy ponytail, unhealthy skin, thick glasses, and permanent dark circles under my eyes. Compared to Aira, I looked ridiculous.

So, you know, I couldn't say I didn't understand why the prince only had eyes for Aira. But it was still pretty rude of him to summon someone without their permission and then just completely ignore their entire existence!

On the other hand, the other people in the room were equally taken aback by how the prince blithely dismissed me. They were even more alarmed when they realized I was going to be left behind. They had no idea what to do with me.

Really, I was even more bewildered, but it was pointless to just sit there. So, I smiled at one of the robed guys—then I grabbed him by the collar and began to interrogate him. “I have a few questions, if you don’t mind.”

“Wh-what would you like to know?” he croaked.

Since I was taller than him, his wary grimace and panicked look made me feel like I was actually bullying him. Normally, I would have felt bad, but considering the situation, I couldn't be bothered with shame.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“This is the royal palace of the Kingdom of Salutania.”

“Kingdom of Salutania?” I had never heard of such a place. Given how many countries there are, it could have slipped through the cracks of my education, but a part of me knew that such rationalizations were just attempts to escape my unnerving new reality. “I see. So, why am I here?”

“Well... Um...” The robed guy hesitated, but a stern look from me squeezed a frantic answer out of him. “W-we called you here using the Saint Summoning Ritual!”

“The Saint Summoning what?”

That was when they told me about this Saint Summoning Ritual, which I previously described.

“So...this is actually a different world...from the one I was in before,” I murmured.

"Yes, I believe that's likely the case..."

Stuff like miasma and monsters simply weren't a thing in the world I came from. Although, perhaps they actually *were* in my world, and I just never found out about them? A small part of me hoped that was true. But the robed fellow quickly dispelled those hopes; he talked about these horrors as if they were a common, inescapable fact of reality here in the Kingdom of Salutania.

No matter how much I didn't want to admit it, I had definitely been summoned to another world.

"Okay." I breathed in and out. "I get that I was brought here by this Saint Summoning Ritual, but how do I get back to *my* world?"

My thinking was, if the Saint appeared in order to balance the density of the miasma, maybe once everything was back to normal, the Saint would no longer be needed. Then I could go home.

But in a small, regretful voice, the man in robes simply said, "You cannot."

With that, my hopes were extinguished.

He explained that this was only the second time the Saint had been summoned from another world and that the previous Saint lived out the rest of her days in the kingdom. As of this moment, no one knew a way to return the Saint to the world she came from.

I could never go home. That realization shocked me to my core. As if scrabbling for a distraction, my mind fixed on the red-haired prince's utterly tactless behavior. I decided then and there that I knew all I needed to know about this Saint-summoning and miasma-monster business, and that I was going to get the heck out of this kingdom.

First, I'd get out of this room—then the palace, then the capital, and then I'd make my way to whatever country was neighboring this one!

Thinking back on it, I realize this plan was rather boneheaded, but at that moment, I couldn't stand to be with these people a second longer. I released the robed man and marched out of the room. Everyone—from the robed guys to the knights—came chasing after me in a panic.

"Lady Saint! Where are you going?"

"I'm leaving."

"You mustn't! Please, wait!"

For some reason, I thought I'd be able to just see my way out, but I quickly realized I was in a true palace. The hallways seemed endless, and I had absolutely no idea which way to go. I was pretty worked up at this point, so I just kept bulling down the halls, no matter where they led. Eventually, though, a knight caught up to me and blocked my path.

I glared at him, immediately peeved that someone was trying to stop me. The knight grimaced in the same way the robed man had when I menaced him. He said, "Please, wait a moment."

"I'm pretty sure I already spent plenty of moments in that room, especially if you factor in the moments I wasted talking with one of your robed guys."

"I realize that, but please. Just one moment more."

The knight was crouching and using his massive body as a wall, as if trying to keep me in the palace no matter what it cost him. For some reason, his desperation made me calm down a bit. I nodded reluctantly. The knight melted in relief.

"This way, please." To my chagrin, he led me away, back into the depths of the palace. Then he left me in a room somewhere in that labyrinth, but not before saying, "Someone will be with you shortly."

Once he was gone, a maid entered, pushing a tea cart complete with a tea set. Despite my misgivings, the warm tea she poured soothed my irritation. For one, it was absolutely delicious, as I supposed you would expect from a place like this. With my newly clear head, I tried once more to process everything I had been through.

Unfortunately, I couldn't quite concentrate. After the maid poured my tea, she didn't really talk to me or anything; she just stood close to the wall, though it seemed she was standing at the ready to attend my needs. Maybe she assumed she was doing me a favor by leaving me to my thoughts. However, with nothing to do but spin my mental wheels, I wound up feeling wildly

uncomfortable.

Just like that, an hour went by. Back home in Japan, leaving an angry client stewing on their own for a whole hour would absolutely lead to a severed contract.

Right as I was starting to fume again, someone finally knocked on the door.
“Come in,” I replied.

At my invitation, the official-looking blue-haired man I had seen with the prince entered.

While the tea was still quite good, and I was thankful to have had the time to compose my thoughts, the hour-long wait had pushed me right back to my limits. So, of course, I wound up glaring at him without even thinking.

The guy flinched in surprise and wiped sweat from his brow, but he nevertheless dedicated himself to telling me even more about the kingdom and the circumstances I had found myself in.

According to the blue-haired man, the capital was surrounded by grasslands through which monsters freely roamed. Furthermore, it took no less than a week by coach to reach the neighboring kingdom, and there was a good chance of being assaulted by bandits along the way. For someone like me, who knew nothing about this world, it would be pretty much like trying to beat an impossibly difficult video game.

Given all that, I was suddenly grateful for the knight who stopped me from leaving.

“I have heard that you expressed the desire to depart, but you cannot, realistically, live outside the royal palace.”

After everything this milquetoast official described, I was forced to agree.

While I was pretty sure that I could eke out some kind of living in the royal capital, I doubted I’d ever recover the same sense of security that I had back in modern Japan. At the very least, so long as I was in the kingdom, I needed to maintain the same kind of vigilance I relied on when traveling abroad.

If I’m going to be stuck in this world, I suppose I’ll live in the royal palace for

now. I'll get my bearings here first, and then, when I'm ready, I'll get out! I thought as I relented. I would follow this official's advice and live in the palace. For now.

After the official took his leave, the maid who had served me tea brought me to the chambers where I was to stay from now on.

My new home was far bigger than my one-bedroom apartment back in Japan—it was more like a suite in a hotel, since it had a living room connected to two bedrooms. The interior design was done up in an extravagant Rococo style. It reminded me of those outlandishly expensive hotels in Europe that advertise themselves all over the internet.

I collapsed on the sofa in the living room, thoroughly exhausted. The yellow light streaming through the window told me it was afternoon, but when I was summoned from Japan, it had been the dead of night. Not to mention, I had only just gotten home from work. I supposed there was a time difference between the Kingdom of Salutania and Japan.

Seeing as I was running on empty from all those days in a row of killer overtime, not to mention the abrupt change in my entire world, I don't remember what happened after I collapsed. I assume that I fell asleep.

When I woke, I found myself on a luxurious bed. Someone must have carried me to it. By then, it was the following morning. I had also been stripped of my coat and business suit, and stuffed into a white dressing gown.

Eep! Who the heck changed my clothes?

I assumed (hoped) the culprit was the maid who brought me to this room, but I couldn't help feeling a bit, you know, alarmed.

I thought about putting on something else, but I was unsure if I had license to hunt around for more clothes without permission. I figured there might be someone in the living room, so I made my way there.

When I opened the door, I found the same maid from yesterday waiting for me. Tentatively, I told her I wanted to put some more substantial clothes on. She guided me right back into the bedroom, where various kinds of dresses

hung in a closet. They were all way too gaudy for me, though. Not to mention, they looked incredibly expensive—the type of clothes I'd be afraid to move in because I'd definitely get them dirty.

Because I had no plans for going anywhere or doing anything, I asked for something modest and comfortable. The maid could only find one dress that matched my description, though you could probably still call it fancy.

While I was changing, I nervously asked the maid if she'd been the one to change me out of my clothes the night before. She confirmed, so I thanked her sincerely. She responded, "It was my pleasure, milady."

Honestly, I felt like she was being overly attentive. But I suspected pointing it out would only make her offer more profusely humble protestations, so I tried to stop worrying about it so much. I had already put up with quite enough of that fluff.

And then, somehow, two weeks had gone by. All in all, I had way too much time on my hands.

The first three days weren't so bad, since I was still freaking out about this whole summoned-to-a-new-world thing. But the lack of anything productive to do quickly started getting to me. I had all the necessities of life, such as food, clothing, and shelter, but otherwise, I was largely ignored.

I saw neither hide nor hair of that blue-haired official after the first time he came to see me, even though I kept waiting for him to contact me. Whenever the maid was with me, we chatted a bit, but it was hard to keep a constant conversation going, and she seemed to have other duties to attend to, so she didn't stay with me all day. Whenever she left, it was just me all alone in the room, and without a TV or a smartphone to keep me preoccupied, I was bored out of my mind.

But it's not good to stay cooped up in your room all day! Unable to take it any longer, I made up my mind to go for a walk. I told the maid as much, and she insisted that she would accompany me. However, I would have felt bad making her come with me when I knew she had other responsibilities. Ultimately, I forced my way out on my own, saying that I was just going to wander about in

the garden directly in front of my chambers. She was still pretty reluctant to let me go.

I started with nosing around the aforementioned garden, but gradually, day by day, I expanded the scope of my explorations. During my wanderings, I came across an herb garden.

Back in Japan, I had been really into herbs and aromatherapy as a way to burn stress from work, so I was instantly intrigued by the garden. Some of the herbs looked similar to those that could be grown back home, which gave me hope that perhaps the plants weren't all that different in this world.

That was when I heard a voice. I turned to find a handsome young man with an amiable smile. He had piercing emerald eyes and forest-green hair to match. He introduced himself as one of the researchers at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora located next to the garden.

"Do you have some business at the institute today?" he asked me.

"Oh, not in particular. I was just taking a walk when this garden caught my eye. I thought it looked interesting, so I came over."

Upon hearing that, he seemed to take interest in me in turn, and he proceeded to tell me about the herbs they were growing. Lavender, rosemary, angelica—the names were all the same as in Japan, and when I pressed further, I learned they had more or less the same effects as well.

"We use these herbs to make HP potions," he explained.

"Did you just say HP potions?!" I was shocked to hear him say the name of a game-type item like it was a real thing.

"These herbs have their own individual effects when dried and made into salves, or when boiled and drunk, but they're even more effective when used in potions."

"Huh. Is that so?"

At his research institute, they studied medicinal herbs, but it seemed his main focus was making potions, as he proved to be a veritable expert. While I listened to his descriptions of different kinds of potions, I found an intriguing

parallel: the same herbs used in salves a long time ago in my world were being used as the ingredients for HP potions in this one. What's more, the effectiveness of potions was linked to the effects of the herbs used as ingredients.

As I listened to this researcher's explanations, time passed without my noticing. Suddenly, it was almost evening, and I knew I had to return to the palace.

"Thank you very much," I said. "I truly enjoyed learning with you today."

"Thank you for being a great listener. I do hope you'll stop by again sometime."



Obviously, I took him up on his kind offer and made my way back to the herb garden the very next day. As I meandered, the researcher spotted me and once again joined me on my walk, telling me about the uses of the herbs growing in the immediate vicinity, as well as the effects of the potions that could be made from them.

The third day I visited, we once more toured the herb garden, but on the fourth day, he took me into the research institute itself, and I got to meet the other researchers. I enjoyed hearing everything they had to say as well. We mainly discussed medicinal plants and potions, but soon enough they started telling me about the latest trends in the capital and about the people working in the palace.

It wasn't long before I found myself hanging around the institute every day, and it got to the point that traveling there and back to the palace was starting to become a real hassle. I mean, it took a half hour each way on foot to reach it. The palace's gardens were truly vast. According to my maid, everything in sight was part of the palace grounds.

If only I didn't have to spend that whole hour traveling back and forth every day, I'd have even more time to spend with the researchers.

"I'm starting to think I'd rather just live here," I said one day.

"I think that's a great idea," said Jude. He was the researcher I had first met in the herb garden. We had grown quite friendly since my discovery of him and his research institute. He readily agreed with me when I admitted my thoughts. "Actually, a bunch of the other researchers live here at the institute—as do I."

"Really?"

"Yup. Though some of us have estates in the capital as well. Even so, our institute is on one side of the palace, and the capital is on the other. Not to mention, we're so far away from the palace itself. Given all that distance, since the first person decided to just up and live here, more and more people have followed suit."

Jude's family also resided in the capital, so for a while he commuted from his residence, just like everyone else. However, once he realized a few of the

researchers already lived in the institute, he promptly decided to move there as well.

I really sympathized. *I guess everyone felt the same about traveling all that way—commuting is such a pain.*

“What are you two talking about today?” I heard someone ask behind me.

Jude and I turned to find Johan Valdec, the head researcher at the institute.

“We were just chatting about what a slog it is for me to come here from the palace every day and how nice it would be if I could just live here,” I said.

“Here at the institute?”

“Well, yes. I heard some of the researchers already do... Is that right?”

“They do indeed. Wait, does that mean you want to work here now, too?”
Johan grinned.

His words took me by surprise. *Work at the institute?* I supposed it was true that the people living there were all researchers. It might be weird for someone not similarly employed to take up residence among them.

Not to mention, it was clear to me that if I were to move out of the palace and into the capital, it would be far better to have a job than to remain unemployed. Also, working at the institute would be way more exciting than wasting day after day, bored to tears in the palace. Plus, it would mean working with herbs, which I already had a fascination with. I could study potions, too, which I knew nothing about. I started to feel genuinely enthused by the prospect.

Yeah! Working at the research institute's a great idea, I thought, and with that, I turned to the head researcher. “That’s right. I want to become a researcher.”

“Oh, really? Then we’ll need to proceed along the formal channels,” Johan said in a somewhat teasing manner. But he still made his way back to his office, albeit somewhat slowly.

Later, once I was formally employed, Jude told me with some surprise that, at the time, he was positive Johan was just joking.

But I had made up my mind. That very day, as soon as I got back to my chambers in the palace, I asked my maid to act as an intermediary. I needed to ask the blue-haired official about my prospective employment. By then it was already evening, so I had to wait until the next day to meet him.

The official stopped by after breakfast while I was taking a tea break. “I heard there was something you wished to discuss?”

“That’s correct. So, you see, I have an interest in herbs and would like to work at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora.”

“Very well, then.”

“Huh? Just like that?”

I thought he was going to need way more convincing to give his consent, but it turned out Johan had already made my case. An agreement had been made that I would move to the institute from the palace.

Up to that point, I was half-convinced Johan’s suggestion was merely in jest, but it seemed like he’d really done the work to get the approval of the blue-haired official guy. *Good going, Johan!*

I immediately set out making preparations for my move. I didn’t have much—just the business suit, coat, shoes, and a purse I had brought home from work when I was summoned. However, it wasn’t like I could work in a research institute with a single suit. I needed more clothes and other daily necessities. The official said he would arrange for those, though, so I left it to him.

In the end, he prepared a few sets of plain shirts, skirts, and dresses that wouldn’t look out of place in a research institute, as well as a collection of personal items, such as towels and soaps. Included among my new belongings were the dresses and accessories I had taken a liking to during my brief time living in the palace, as well as several new ones with similar designs. The official must have taken my preferences into consideration.

I suspected the official had even prepared the furniture I found already furnishing my new chambers on the third floor of the institute. It all matched and had a bright, welcoming tone. It looked like my new home would be a pleasant place to spend time in; not at all how I’d imagined living in such a place

would be.

"Thank you so much for all of your help," I said to him on the day of my move. His final preparation for me was a carriage that I would ride to the institute.

"Don't mention it. Please feel free to let me know if there is anything else you need," he replied, wearing his usual tired, somewhat nervous smile.

"I will. Thank you." I had absolutely zero intention of ever returning to the palace, so I thought it unlikely I'd be asking him for help ever again. Still, I thanked him again anyway before getting into the carriage.

And so, I was employed as a researcher at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora, and I even had a room there to call my own.

Act 2: Potions

HE WHO DOES NOT WORK, neither shall he eat.

Before I knew it, I was an official employee of the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora. At first it felt a bit presumptuous making my hobby into a job, but thinking back on it, I definitely made the right choice.

It seemed my recruitment had been a bit hush-hush, because on my first day, Johan, the head researcher, gathered everyone around to inform them that I had been hired.

At Johan's urging, I greeted my new coworkers. "My name is Sei, and starting today, I'll be working here with you all. I look forward to our collaboration."

For some reason, everyone looked flabbergasted. Even though I was acquainted with most of the researchers already, the news seemed to hit them like a bolt from the blue. As a result, my greeting fell kind of flat. There was an audible pause before a wave of murmurs broke out through the room.

"I suppose, in the meantime, we'll put...Jude in charge of you," Johan said in a slightly raised voice that suppressed the whispers.

"Huh? Me?" Jude asked in surprise.

I was honestly relieved that the person I was most closely acquainted with would be the one in charge of my training. Back in Japan, there were plenty of times when I had to work with someone I didn't know all that well, so if I had to, I was sure I'd be able to stick it out here, too—but it's so much better to get to work with someone you already know, especially one you get along with well. I bet Johan took that into consideration when he assigned Jude to me.

"I'm looking forward to collaborating with you." I gave my formal greeting to Jude again.

"Me too." Jude might have been surprised, but his smile seemed genuine when he said that.



With that, he began walking me through the research institute's business. As one might glean from its name, the institute's main subject of research was medicinal flora, as well as potions. Also, as I noted, the benefits of the herbs were about the same as the ones found in my original world, so when I described what I knew from my time back in Japan, Jude was impressed.

"You sure know a lot already," he said.

Apparently, the knowledge I had acquired pursuing my hobby was equivalent to the information imparted in upper-level courses at the Royal Academy, which was where the nobility attended school.

In general, noble children attended the academy from the age of thirteen until they turned fifteen, at which point they were considered adults. Upper-level courses were for those who continued to study until they were eighteen years old. While he was there, Jude had studied pharmaceuticals and medicinal flora. All in all, it seemed like the world I came from was far more advanced in its knowledge of the natural sciences and the like.

Speaking of Jude, his research area of expertise was, of all things, potions. Potions! That trademark item of RPGs.

Potions in this world could either be drunk or smeared on wounds. My impulse was to assume they were similar to the medicines from back home, but it turned out they were quite a bit different—they worked instantaneously.

Just how fast *did* they work? The second I got my first accidental cut in this world, I dabbed a drop of potion on it. Between one heartbeat and the next, my cut vanished. No matter that I had been warned, I was shocked.

Though, I think Jude was more shocked when I immediately grabbed a blade to cut my fingertip again. I just wanted to know more about the effectiveness of potions! It was only a little cut, too, but he panicked, and later he seemed actually mad.

The rest of my first day consisted of him showing me around the facilities and describing the work they did in each location. The next day, Jude finally showed me how to brew potions—not just because that was his field of research, but because I was champing at the bit to learn more about this strange substance

that was so unlike anything in my world. I had made up my mind that I wanted to research potions with him.

"All right, let's get started," he said.

And just like that, Jude set about concocting a potion with practiced hands. He started by adding a careful selection of herbs to a pot, along with some water. Then he boiled it all together while continuously imbuing it with his magical power. At last, the potion was finished.

Potions were divided into grades—low, medium, and high—which were partially determined by ingredients. However, you couldn't brew a high-grade potion just by following a specific recipe. To achieve such potency, subtle magical manipulations were required. In the end, the potential quality of a potion was determined by the maker's Production skill level.

Additionally, the ingredients for high-grade potions cost a great deal on their own. Between the exorbitant cost and the fact that only a few people alive could actually produce them, high-grade potions were sold at a price that would make anyone think twice before using them. Not that most people had to worry about such things, seeing as only royalty and titled nobility could afford to buy them anyway. You definitely couldn't find these potions for sale at a typical apothecary.

But let me return to one small detail involved in the process of making potions—one you might have wondered about when I seemed to skip over it, earlier. To make a potion, it was necessary to boil the ingredients while imbuing the whole with magical power. That's right. Magical power.

Initially, I was shocked when Jude mentioned that part. I mean, potions were one thing, but there was absolutely no way there was any such thing as magic in my world.

"How do you 'imbue' something with magical power?" I asked Jude during his demonstration.

"Huh?" The question barely made sense to him.

This world was, in a word, magical, and magical power, MP for short, was required for using magic. Furthermore, there was a variety of magic known as

Practical Magic that just about anyone could use. That meant magical power was a concept familiar even to the youngest children of this world.

First potions, now magic. Everything I learned made this new world sound more and more like it had been born of a fantastical video game, but no—this was my concrete reality.

“Wait, you’ve never used magic before?” Jude asked.

“Right.”

“Not even Practical Magic?”

“Nope.”

Even commoners could use Practical Magic, so Jude was utterly bewildered. However, since potions couldn’t be made without magic, Jude was going to have to give me a whole lecture on how to use it if I was ever going to follow in his footsteps.

“All right, it’s finished,” Jude said when he had wrapped up his demonstration.

“Wow!”

He filtered the boiled contents and then poured them into a slender vial. The completed potion was a delicate, translucent pink liquid. It was the simplest low-grade HP potion possible to make. Jude chose it for the demonstration partly because the key herbs grew right outside in the institute’s garden and were therefore easy to acquire.

“I can hardly believe it’s possible to make these,” I said.

“Low-quality HP potions are actually pretty easy to produce.”

“But you have to use magic for it to work, right?”

“Yeah, but like I said, it’s not that complicated.”

“Really? Well, I still think it’s amazing.”

“Y-you do?”

The more I thought about it, the more excited I was to see something that should exist only in fantasy, but I was making Jude bashful. The cheeks of his

handsome face turned a slight pink to match the potion in my hand. They were a sight to behold as well.



After Jude's demonstration, he segued into the promised lesson on magic.

The first step was to feel out the magic power within oneself. As someone who came from a thoroughly unmagical world, this was no mean feat.

Since Practical Magic, which was largely invoked with simple chants, was accessible to anyone in this world, people often simply weren't conscious of their own magical power. However, a heightened awareness was required in order to concoct potions or call upon other types of magic.

At first, Jude walked me through various techniques for feeling the magic within myself, but no matter what he tried, I felt as magical as a doorknob. That was when he assisted me with the method used at the Royal Academy, which required me to place my hands in his.

"Okay, here we go." Jude held up his palms towards me.

I did as he instructed and placed my palms on top of his. His hands were bigger than mine and roughened from his work with earth, loam, and the like. They were, without question, a man's hands. Wherever we touched—the pads of his fingers, the flat of his palm—his temperature was just the slightest bit higher than mine. It made me self-conscious, since this kind of intimacy was a bit out of the ordinary.

Stop, stop. Don't lose your cool over this. This is for work. For work!

As I was struggling to keep my feelings in check, Jude interrupted my thoughts. "Okay, here we go."

And there—that was when I finally felt something. A gentle heat, or force, or something like that, steadily transferring into my right palm as Jude channeled his magic into it. Even harder to describe was the feeling that, after he started channeling, something moved inside of me, almost like it was being washed away. That was my magical power.

The magic Jude fed into my right hand didn't emerge from my left—instead, it circulated throughout my body like blood.

I supposed that, the second I was summoned here, I stopped being an earthling. The magic I could now feel flowing through me definitely didn't

qualify as earthling stuff.

"It feels like there's something moving through me, like a pulse," I said.

"Really? You can feel it already? That's your magical power." Jude seemed a bit startled, but he smiled all the same.

Apparently, even using the Royal Academy's method, it took most people about a week to be able to grasp the feel of their magic. Yet here I was, somehow able to sense mine the second he channeled the tiniest smidgen of magic into me.

"You've got talent," Jude chuckled.

Even after Jude broke the channel, I was able to feel that flow of magic within me. That meant we could move right on to actual magic manipulation, which ended up going so smoothly that Jude was startled all over again.

"Wow. I didn't think I'd be done with the lecture so quickly."

"I'm sure it's because you've been such a patient teacher. Thank you very much," I smiled.

His cheeks flushed as he got all bashful again. But it was the truth—everything Jude said about magic just clicked for me.

While in that good mood, he moved on to start teaching me Practical Magic as well, saying that it just didn't make sense for me not to have it at my beck and call.

Though it hadn't been long since my summoning, Jude and I had grown quite close. With him, I felt as though I could say anything that popped into my head. Even so, as he was a longtime researcher at the institute, I tried to treat him like I would any senior at a company I worked for. Still, Jude insisted I not act all stuffy with him, since we were practically the same age.

Armed with his teaching, I focused on brewing low-grade HP potions. I wanted to raise my Production skill level so that I might one day be able to make the high-grade variety. Plus, I found I enjoyed the process of leveling up via single-minded focus on the same specific task. Even at a young age, I loved

games with grinding challenges, and I would become completely absorbed in completionist pursuits.

Fortunately, the low-grade HP potions weren't wasted—we used them for research.

That was how it came to be that the first person to notice something amiss wasn't Jude but another researcher.

"Sei," he called for my attention from a few desks away.

"Yes, what is it?" I turned, and he beckoned me over. I didn't know what to expect as I joined him.

Once I was at his desk, he pointed at the low-grade HP potion sitting on it.
"Did you make this?"

"Um...yes, that looks like one of mine."

We marked the vials so we could tell who brewed what, just in case someone needed to trace an effect back to the person who had created it. The vial he pointed at did indeed have my mark on it.

"Did you do anything different when you made it?" he asked.

"No, not in particular. Is something wrong?"

"Hmm. I don't know exactly why, but the effects of your batches have been unusual."

This researcher was developing a brand-new recipe for a potion that would enhance the effectiveness of other potions. While using one of the institute-made potions for his experiments, he noticed the outcome was distinctly different from when he used a store-bought version. On further examination, he found that while some institute-made potions had the same effects as the store-bought ones, others did not. At length, he discovered it was actually only my potions that were so different—and in fact, more effective.

When I told the researcher I hadn't done anything other than follow the exact recipe Jude taught me, he was dubious to say the least. But I was positive I hadn't added any other ingredients or done anything different.

"And this is really a low-grade HP potion?" the researcher pressed.

"I believe so. Or it's whatever Jude taught me it is."

"I see. Then perhaps I should ask him about this." The researcher called Jude over as well and explained the apparent anomaly. I listened attentively, hoping I would have a sudden epiphany, but I didn't have any new insights.

"You're sure you only taught her the standard recipe for a low-grade HP potion?" the researcher asked Jude.

"Definitely. I don't even know another way to make it."

"Hm. I suppose the next step would be to get her potion appraised."

"That should sort this out right away, yes."

Because they couldn't figure out where things had gone awry, they submitted the potion I made for an official analysis. A short while later, the researcher came back to us with the results.

To my shock, whoever appraised my potion confirmed that for some reason, it was quite a bit different from the low-grade potions available in stores. Specifically, it was about fifty percent more effective.

"Your potions really do have unusual properties," Jude murmured while examining one of my vials in his hands.

We had submitted several more of my samples for appraisal, and it seemed every single one of them was rated more effective than anything on the market.

"But all I did was brew them the way you taught me," I insisted.

"Well, that pink color means it's definitely a low-grade HP potion. I wonder why it's different."

"Maybe I'm just super good at brewing?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure that's our answer. What's your Pharmaceuticals skill level right now?"

"Let me check. *Stats*."

Saying "*Stats*" made a semi-transparent window pop up that only the spellcaster could see. It was a Practical Magic spell, one Jude had taught me to check my current skill levels. This ability to constantly monitor my level was one

of the reasons I became engrossed in increasing my Production skill. The dopamine rush of seeing all my numbers increase inadvertently spurred me on toward maxing out my skills.

Sei Takanashi – Level 55/Saint

HP: 4,867/4,867

MP: 6,057/6,067

Battle Skills

Holy Magic: Level ∞

Production Skills

Pharmaceuticals: Level 8

“I’m at Level 8 now,” I confirmed after checking my Stats.

Jude tilted his head to the side, humming thoughtfully as he did. “You can’t make mid-grade potions at Level 8.”

“Well, does it really matter? It’s not like the things I’m brewing are *less* effective.”

“Of course it matters. This is a huge difference; we can’t just chalk it up to a calculation error. It’s our job to figure out this sort of thing!”

Jude was getting worked up, so it was no use trying to brush it off. I had no choice but to put a pause on my other work and go along with his investigation.

“I use the same type and amount of ingredients as everyone else,” I said. “And I follow the same steps. I suppose the only difference is the person making it.”

“Yeah...” Jude looked contemplative.

“Do you think there might be something strange about my magic...?”

“Or is it that you imbue your potions with more magic than usual?”

“Hm. I can’t say for certain, but I don’t think I do.”

“Honestly, from what I can tell while watching you work, I don’t think you do, either.”

For a potion to become more potent, it was generally necessary to add more herbs, up the amount of magic used, or alter the ratio of ingredients. However, within the bounds of the standard recipe, even these adjustments wouldn’t lead to an efficacy increase of more than a few percent. They certainly wouldn’t explain a whole fifty percent.

The process itself was also too simple to introduce any real variation. At most, you might be able to imbue boiling water with magic *before* adding the herbs. The usual procedure, where magic was added during the boiling process, had

been deemed the most efficient, but it didn't have any effect on potency.

Jude and I made sure to test all these hypotheses nevertheless, making several additional potions with as many variations as we could think of.

"Magical power has an elemental component, right? Could that have made an impact?" I asked.

"I don't really think so."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"If there were an effect, we would see a difference in potency when a potion is made by someone without Magic skills."

Among Battle skills were Magic skills, which included a variety of elemental types. Practical Magic wasn't counted among those skills, and in order to differentiate, people with Battle skills in Magic were called mages. I thought the magic of someone with such skills might naturally have certain elemental attributes, but Jude made it sound like that wasn't the case.

"Maybe you're adding something other than your magic?" Jude offered.

"Something like what?"

"Hmm, I'm not really sure myself." He took a long hard look at my hands and then chuckled. Between that and his expression, I knew he was just joking. Lately, he had started cracking wise like this more often, even while we were in the middle of other discussions. He sighed. "But why in the world is this happening to your potions?"

We were back to square one.

"Well, I guess all we can do is keep testing it," I said. "Like you said, it's our job to find out the reason, right?"

"Ha ha! Yeah, I suppose I did."

Even with those discouraging initial roadblocks, Jude and I continued to brew potions under increasingly imaginative conditions. That was how I spent my peaceful days in the research institute.

“Stats.”

Sei Takanashi – Level 55/Saint

HP: 4,867/4,867

MP: 5,867/6,067

Battle Skills

Holy Magic: Level ∞

Production Skills

Pharmaceuticals: Level 21

In the three months since my summoning, I had brought my Pharmaceuticals skill up to Level 21 just by making potions. The grade of your work went up every ten levels, so I could now make high-grade HP potions. But I still messed up a lot, and because high-grade potions required the use of a large quantity of rare herbs, I wasn't authorized to brew them on my own. I'd only made three since I passed Level 20.

However, there were vanishingly few people who could make high-grade potions, so it was an accomplishment in itself that I was able to. Apparently, until I arrived, no one at the research institute had the ability. Before, whenever they needed those potions for research, they had to make an order from somewhere else. Now that I was able to produce them at the institute, everyone was tremendously pleased about all the time and funds we were bound to save.

I was happy to help. After all, in order to level up your Pharmaceuticals skill, you needed to make more potions. Typically, the number of potions you could make in a day was limited, since you had to expend MP (you know, magical power) to do it, and you would eventually run out. Therefore, it inevitably took a considerable amount of time to level up. But me?

"Yet again, you've managed to brew a remarkable number of potions today," Jude said.

"I have?"

"Yeah. It's pretty unusual to be able to produce more than ten mid-grade potions in a single day."

We took a moment to look at my long, long line of mid-grade HP potions neatly arranged in the storage cabinet. Just like my low-grade brews, they were uniformly fifty percent more effective than potions of any other origin.

According to our head researcher, Johan, my strange ability might even lead

my mid-grade potions to be more effective than the high-grade variety.

Jude and I were still working day and night to try and find the reason for my abnormal creations. Even now, we didn't have a clue, so we were starting to ask other researchers to inspect my potions, hoping they would find something we overlooked. We asked different people to analyze different specific elements, such as my brewing process, or the outcomes themselves. All the while, I continued to make potions and only potions. All day, every day.

One afternoon, just as I was finishing the last of about 150 low-grade potions I'd made that day, Jude approached me. "Wait, you're still making those?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

That was when I finally learned there was an average number of potions anyone could make in a given day, which I supposed made sense, what with the finite MP problem. Not to mention, the amount of magic needed to properly imbue a potion increased with its grade. On average, medics, who specialized in brewing, could make one hundred low-grade potions or about ten mid-grade potions a day. Researchers averaged a bit fewer.

It was true that potion production made my MP decrease, but it was by such a negligible amount that I didn't really think about it.

When I said as much, Jude pondered whether I was actually imbuing my potions or not, but when I checked my Stats, my MP was indeed decreasing. Besides, if I didn't imbue them with magic, I just wound up with boiled herb soup.

Ultimately, Johan instructed me to prioritize research that would hone my abilities, so I wandered back over to making potions like usual. Buuut...it seemed I got a bit carried away. I ended up brewing more potions than we were able to use in research, so we wound up with a not insubstantial surplus.

We now had such an ample stock that we could make a tidy sum if we sold them at market. Unfortunately, since my potions were all fifty percent more effective than the regular sort, I was told we might create some problems if we tried to sell them all. We were stuck with the overstock.

"Oof. You made a ton again today. Johan's going to be mad."

“Once I get into the groove, I keep forgetting to count how many I’ve already made,” I apologized. This was a teensy white lie. My goal was to reach a high enough level that I could start producing high-grade HP potions without any restrictions, and for that, well, I needed to make more potions.

This ambition might have already caused some problems. Just the other day, Johan complained we were running low on herbs since I kept using up what we harvested from the garden.

I didn’t like getting yelled at, so I came up with the brilliant idea to hide today’s extra supply in my room. However, right when I snuck over to take some of the day’s new potions out of the storage cabinet, the door to the institute flung open with a bang.

When I turned, I saw a soldier breathing heavily.

“Where’s the head researcher?” the soldier shouted as he staggered into the research institute.

I wordlessly pointed toward Johan’s office and the man pelted toward it.

What in the world?

A few moments later, Johan and the soldier rushed right back out.

“We have an emergency. Gather all the recovery potions—every last one.” Johan, who always wore an unflappable smile on his face, looked shaken as he gave the order.

“What happened?” asked a researcher standing nearby.

“The Knights of the Third Order just returned from the Ghoshe Forest. They were attacked by a salamander. Many were injured, and they don’t have enough healing supplies.”

The Third Order had been dispatched to the forest west of the capital on a monster-slaying expedition. Apparently, they had sustained terrible damage and were now in need of our help.

With a clash and clatter, everyone emptied their drawers and shelves of potions, depositing their supplies on the desk nearest to the entrance. Jude and I brought armfuls from the storage cabinet as well.

"You have this many?!" The soldier couldn't help staring at the steadily growing sea of vials on the desk.

Well, we have kind of been stockpiling them recently.

Once we emptied the cabinet, I remembered the high-grade HP potions hidden in my room and dashed off to get those, too. When I returned, it looked like our work area had been scraped clean of its stores, and the next job was to load up the cart waiting outside the door.

"Some of you go with them." At Johan's instruction, the researchers closest to the door clambered into the cart.

High-grade potions in hand, I jumped into the cart as well. The horse set off at a brisk pace, and then there was nothing to do but wait. I asked Jude, who was beside me, "So there was a dragon in the Ghoshe Forest?"

"A dragon? No, nothing like that."

"But isn't a salamander a fiery sort of dragon?"

"Huh? Not quite. A salamander is just a fire-breathing lizard."

Wasn't that more or less the same thing? I couldn't get the image of a great flaming dragon out of my head. "I just can't believe a lizard could cause that much damage."

"Well, it's a pretty big lizard. It's also incredibly fast. It may not be a genuine dragon, but it's still a high-ranking monster."

"I see." With Jude's description, my mental image of a salamander changed into something like a ten-meter Komodo dragon.

In either case, since this creature could breathe fire and move at high speed, I was absolutely confident that if I ever had to stand off against one...I would freeze on the spot and give up all hope of surviving.

I couldn't even begin to imagine how terrifying it was for the knights to have to fight such a powerful monster. At last, the cart drew to a halt in front of a building at a far corner of the royal palace grounds.

A battlefield awaited us inside.

"How awful..." I murmured.

Jude was silent.

Normally, this was a reception room, but now it was filled with the grievously injured lying on the ground while doctors and nurses rushed between them. The groans of the salamander's wounded victims filled the air.

From the grim cacophony, I heard a doctor shout, "Are those potions here yet?!"

Until this moment, I had been so carefree about living in the palace, then the institute, and with my meticulous potion-making. Now, my mind just stopped and I became rooted to the spot, stupefied by the horror.

Johan, who had led us in, clapped his hands. "Distribute the potions! You two, over there! Jude and Sei, hand them out on that side."

"Yes, sir!" we said in unison.

I scooped up an armful of potions and began passing them to the doctors. They were stationed by the most severely wounded, and the second I handed over a vial, they administered the contents to their patients.

On account of the shortage, the doctors began with distributing low-grade HP potions to the severely wounded. The injured knights would have been able to make complete recoveries with mid-grade HP potions, but without enough of those on hand, the doctors knew something was better than nothing. For now, they had to stabilize those on the brink of death.

"What in the world?!" a doctor cried out in surprise.

She had just applied a potion to her patient, whose skin had been shredded by the salamander's claws and whose breath was haggard. Yet now her patient's wounds had completely vanished. Their eyes flew open as their pain evaporated, and they gingerly checked their body. Every single scratch was gone; even the color had returned to their face.

"That was a low-grade potion, wasn't it...?" The doctor held up the empty vial to inspect it.

It was admittedly difficult to discern the grade of a potion once you had

already used it up. I knew what was going on, but I kept it to myself. The doctor had indeed used a low-grade HP potion, but it wasn't just any brew—it was one I had made. In other words, it was fifty percent more effective and therefore behaved more like a mid-grade potion.

I scurried away to dole out more potions before the doctor could ask me anything further. As I went, I heard other doctors and nurses voice their bewilderment, but I did my best to keep my head down.

Right now, I was focused on getting my potions into the hands of those who needed them.

"Do we have any high-grade HP potions?" someone called from the back of the room.

I looked in the direction of the voice to find a huddle of doctors and knights.

Were they the ones who called out just now?

I still had a mid-grade potion, so I hurried to bring it over. As I got closer, I heard more of their nervous debate.

"This will be a challenge even with a high-grade potion. Isn't there anyone who can use Healing Magic?"

"Even if they could, they'd have to be at least Level 4."

"What about the Saint? Can't she use Level 4 Healing Magic?"

"Prince Kyle forbade us from subjecting the Saint to such horrible sights," an official apologized.

"What? That's absurd!" snapped a knight.

By Kyle, they meant the rude, redheaded crown prince who looked like he'd go bald in the future.

I admit, the wounds of the grievously injured were gruesome to behold without anything to censor them. I had a relative tolerance for the sight from watching slasher movies, but the scene was by no means easy to look at. I did my best to avert my eyes as I passed out my potions. Sweet little Aira, though, would most likely have fainted upon seeing something like this.

The knight who lashed out at the official was undoubtedly a friend of the patient in dire need. I couldn't tell the severity of their wounds because of the crowd, but they were clearly in an awful state if even a high-grade HP potion wouldn't guarantee their recovery.

Once I was close, I realized Johan was among the gathered. When he noticed me, he said, "Sei! Do we have any high-grade HP potions?"

"If you do, then please, give it to the knight commander!"

When I turned in the direction of the person who had spoken, doctors and nurses burst into a flurry of movement.

It seemed the patient's condition had taken a sudden turn for the worse. I pushed my way through the crowd to reach them.

As I drew closer, I discovered the upper-right half of the patient's body was scorched to a crisp. He was covered in deep gashes as well, including one so broad that it was surely a miracle he was still alive. His ragged breathing began to weaken.

"Step aside!" I pushed past a doctor to get a closer look at the injured man. He clearly didn't have many more breaths left in this world. I swiftly extracted one of the high-grade HP potions I had stuffed in my apron pocket, popped out the cork, and brought it to his lips.

"Drink!" I pleaded.

Slowly but surely, his blackened lips parted, and he gulped it down. Everyone, the doctors, nurses, knights, and officials, watched with bated breath.

I don't know how long it took—time sort of stopped for me somewhere—but once the patient finished the whole vial, his head fell back on his pillow. There, bit by bit, his charred black skin peeled and flaked away, revealing perfectly whole and healed skin beneath. His breathing eased and didn't stop, like I had feared—instead, he fell into a gentle sleep.

I sighed with relief from the stress of it all, and cheers broke out around me.

Act 3: Cooking

FOUR MONTHS after my summoning, I heard that as a result of saving all those knights from the Third Order, the research institute was to receive a special reward from the palace. We were also presented with a gift of gratitude from the family of the knight commander of the Knights of the Third Order, since he happened to be the beloved third son of a noble in the borderlands. Additionally, the Third Order bought all those extra potions I made that we couldn't sell on the market.

Thanks to all that, our institute had a plentiful budget.

"So, is there anything you'd like?" Johan asked me one day when I came into his office to bring him some tea.

I was taken aback, and it took me a moment to think it over. "Hmm... A bath and a kitchen."

"A bath I can understand. But why a kitchen?"

"Uh, because I like to cook." This was true, but there was a little more to it.

Basically, the cooking in this world was abysmal. It was like most of the meals relied on the flavors of the ingredients to do all the work, and there was hardly any seasoning. They used salt and vinegar in some meals, but that just didn't do anything for me. I ate at the dining hall for people employed at the royal palace just like everyone else, but it was uniformly awful. Like, "I went on a diet without even meaning to" levels of bad.

I never thought of myself as a picky eater before, but after being summoned to the kingdom, I became keenly aware that I was a Japanese person who was particular about her food.

So while cooking had never been my forte—even though I loved food—I figured anything I made had to taste better than the slop they served here. But to do anything about this problem, I needed a kitchen first.

"You can cook?" Johan asked.

"Well enough."

Johan tilted his head in what seemed like actual surprise. I didn't think this was some kind of revelation.

Do I just not look like someone who can cook?

I gave him a questioning look and he gathered himself to explain. It turned out the nobles and wealthy merchants of this kingdom employed their own personal chefs, so noble women never cooked. Of course, the wives from commoner families did.

"Well, I'm a commoner," I said.

"Ah, that's right." He smiled wryly, seemingly having forgotten this fact.

As the head researcher at the institute, Johan knew I had been summoned to the kingdom. He had learned it from that blue-haired official when my employment at the institute was arranged. Very occasionally, Johan liked to ask me about my life back in Japan, such as what my position had been and what kind of life I had lived. I always told him that I was a run-of-the-mill commoner who worked at a run-of-the-mill company.

"You don't seem like a commoner, if you ask me."

"I think I come off exactly like one, though."

"That couldn't be further from the truth. Few commoners in the kingdom have such a sophisticated education."

According to Johan, commoners didn't go to school. The Royal Academy Jude had attended was for the children of nobility. The only exceptions were children from commoner families who possessed skills in Magic; they were allowed to attend on a scholarship basis.

Johan didn't know what to make of the compulsory education I described in Japan—a system where even commoners received a thorough schooling.

Once I had answered his questions on the topic, we went our separate ways. However, two days later, a craftsman came to the institute.

At the time Johan asked me what I wanted, I answered honestly, but I was kind of half joking. It never occurred to me he would actually have a room with a bath and a kitchen constructed. I was a bit naive, truth be told.

Construction proceeded at such frightening speed that I had to wonder if there had already been plans underway when he initially asked me. It seemed the bath and the kitchen were completed in no time at all. It might not even have been finished faster back home in Japan.

With that, the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora expanded.

The kitchen was substantial, and next to it was a dining hall large enough for all the researchers to eat in at once. We even employed a chef to go along with it. Everyone was pleased to have these new facilities for the research institute, since they meant we would no longer have to trudge all the way to the royal palace employee dining hall. My shut-in colleagues were especially happy.

"What are you going to make today?" Johan asked from behind me.

"Herb-roasted chicken and salad," I said as I chopped lettuce into tiny shreds in a corner of our new kitchen.

We may have had a chef, but I liked to come in and cook in my free time. I mean, the reason I asked for a kitchen in the first place was because I couldn't stand the kingdom's cuisine, after all.

I was afraid the specially appointed chef would be put out when I asked to cook my own meals, but thankfully, she amiably offered me a corner of the kitchen to work in. Though, she watched me like a hawk whenever I came in. I suspected she was an ambitious sort of person.

The first time she asked for a bite of my cooking, she was left stunned for a moment, then wound up eating a whole portion in total silence. After, she asked me to teach her the recipe. Ever since, I had let her follow along every time I made something new.

It was a good thing I did, because soon the food at the research institute dining hall became so delicious that no one even considered going to the dining hall in the palace. With the quality of the cooking now so high, I didn't often feel

the need to make anything for myself either. The chef kept begging me for new recipes, though, so at this point I was cooking once a week just to treat her.

"Something the matter?" I asked Johan as I prepared the chicken.

Both he and the chef had been loitering around, studying my actions, since I started cooking.

Keep staring and you're going to burn a hole through the chicken yourselves, I thought.

Come to think of it, Johan always came to watch me cook if he was at the institute when I started.

"I was just thinking how delicious that looked," he said.

"Ah, thank you."

"What flavors are you using this time?"

"For seasoning, just salt and pepper. I'm leaving the rest to the herbs."

"I see."

I glanced over and found him solely focused on the chicken. Just like I thought. "Do you want some?" I asked. "Oh... Though I think I saw you having lunch already."

"Hm... That's true, I did, but..."

I glanced again; he wore a slightly awkward look on his face. Despite that, he didn't move to leave, so he must have really wanted a taste.

Was it the smell of the herbs? I sprinkled freshly picked basil and rosemary from the garden on the chicken to finish, so it did smell amazing. I even used the herbs in the salad.

I plated the roasted chicken with a salad and homemade dressing to the side. Originally, I had pulled out two plates—one for me and one for the chef—but I grabbed a small third to dish out another portion. The chef cheerfully carried the plates to the dining hall and set them on the table nearest to the kitchen. I followed after her with a basket of bread.

"There's some for you too, if you'd like," I pointed out the seat with the

smaller dish to Johan, who had trailed behind me.

He happily took his seat. “Your cooking is delicious as always.” He smiled warmly, enhancing his already fine features.

I was just glad he liked it. He had already eaten lunch, so I didn’t give him that big of a portion, but it seemed like he would have happily taken more. He ate it all, even soaking up the leftover juices and herbs with a piece of bread.

“I’m still surprised that herbs can be used like this in cooking,” Johan said.

“Really? Where I come from, we use them all the time.”

While in my world, basil, rosemary, and other herbs were frequently employed as seasonings, here, herbs were mainly prescribed for medicinal use and rarely if ever showed up in food.

“They’re also supposed to help prevent food poisoning and aid digestion,” I added.

“Is that so?”

“Oh, yes. There’s even a traditional type of medicinal cooking meant to prevent sickness.” That cuisine was actually from China, but I talked about it like it came from my country so the chef wouldn’t figure out I was talking about another world entirely. Though for all I knew, the chef had already figured out I wasn’t born here. But just in case.

Johan was extremely interested in hearing more about the relationship between food and herbs, so he kept asking questions. Normally, he stayed cooped up in his office handling administrative stuff, but at times like these I realized he really was a researcher at heart.

He did occasionally ask me about things I didn’t know the answer to, but then I would hypothesize and he could describe his own observations as well. It was nice and all to talk this way, but since it mostly came down to herbs, I felt a bit bad because the chef wound up being left out.

“Sei.” Jude approached me one day while I was making sandwiches for my latest new recipe demonstration for the chef.

"What's up?"

"Johan sent a message—he needs you to deliver this document to him at the barracks of the Knights of the Third Order."

"I'm kind of busy right now. Can you do it?"

"No, for some reason he asked for you specifically."

"Huh, I wonder why. Does he need me right now, or can it wait? I'm almost done."

"I think you have time to finish."

"Okay, I'll go after. The barracks of the Third Order, right?"

"Right. He wants you to bring it to the knight commander's office."

"Will do!"

When I arrived at the knight commander's office, the guard posted outside the door let me in right away. Johan must have told him to expect me. Inside, the room was furnished with a full lounge suite and an elegant desk. I found Johan and another man, who I assumed was the knight commander, seated in ornate chairs.

"Excuse me. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," I said.

"It's quite all right. Thank you for bringing this," Johan smiled as I handed over the document.

"Well, I'll get back to the institute, then." I was hoping that was all he needed, so I turned to go.

However, Johan stopped me. "Wait."

I looked at him quizzically. He urged me to sit next to him. But why? I glanced at the knight commander, and he encouraged me to do the same.

Having no other recourse, I sat next to Johan as he began to speak.

"This is the girl I was talking about," Johan said.

"I see, so you're the one," said the man. "My name is Albert Hawke. I'm the knight commander of the Knights of the Third Order."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Sei." I didn't give him my family name, since only nobles had those in this world. I learned that the first time I introduced myself to Johan. "Takanashi" was an unfamiliar surname to the residents of this kingdom and would undoubtedly cause headaches if people started asking questions about where it came from, so I generally opted not to tell people.

The knight commander sat diagonally from me as I took him in. He had slightly wavy blond hair, and his blue-gray eyes had a cold, steely cast.

He seemed to be about the same age as Johan, though he was more well built, as you'd expect of a knight. Though...Johan was pretty tall, too, and he also seemed sturdy. But it was something like, the thickness of their muscles was different?

The point is, this knight commander was probably the most beautiful man I'd met since my arrival.



“Do you remember what happened during the Third Order’s latest expedition?” Johan asked me suddenly while I was wondering why he had bothered to introduce me to this person.

“What expedition?”

“The one that suffered a salamander attack.”

“Oh, that.” If he had just mentioned the salamander part in the first place instead of calling it an “expedition,” I would’ve known what he meant!

He meant the incident where a great number of knights were terribly wounded in the Ghoshe Forest just west of the capital. No one I knew talked about it anymore, so I had pretty much forgotten about it. I definitely didn’t remember the knights were from the Third Order.

“Do you recall giving a high-grade HP potion to someone?”

“Ah, yes.”

“This is your man.”

Ack. Another thing I forgot—the one I saved with a high-grade HP potion had the worst injuries of them all. His terrible burns were so hard to look at, I hadn’t taken in that much of his face. But now that I was trying to remember the incident, I recalled a nearby knight calling him “knight commander.”

So he was the one who nearly died that day.

Seconds after Albert drank my potion, his charred black flesh fell away; tender new skin had regrown beneath it. I didn’t linger to see him any more fully healed, as I went right back to rushing around, doling out potions.

Now that I could at last see him again, I noted that his skin was smooth and unblemished; there was no hint of burn scars.

The potions of this other world really are astounding, to have healed him so perfectly, I thought.

His other wounds must have healed nicely, too. The researcher in me really wanted to document the efficacy of my high-grade potion, but I couldn’t exactly ask him to take off his clothes and show me or anything.

"Thank you," Albert said. "It's because of you that I'm still here today."

Whoops. I must have been staring at his face while pondering how I might convince him to let me study his recovery, because now he was faintly blushing. Cute guys blushing had a ruinous effect on me. My heart skipped a beat.

"It was nothing..." My noncommittal answer caused Johan to snort next to me. When I glared at him, he covered his mouth as he held back laughter. "What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing."

It didn't look like "nothing" to me, especially as he continued trying to suppress his laughter. Albert eyed Johan's strange behavior with suspicion as well. Or maybe it wasn't suspicion but offense? Or embarrassment?

Wait, embarrassment?

Albert furrowed his brow; his displeasure was subtle, but I think he was about to tell Johan to knock it off.

Before he could, Johan recovered himself and artfully changed the subject. "Oh, that reminds me. You were after high-grade HP potion ingredients, weren't you, Sei?"

"Yes, but don't those have to come from the forest?" I was relieved he had managed to dodge Albert's ire.

Earlier in the month, I had pestered Johan for those precise ingredients. We grew a modest amount of the necessary herbs, but we were running low due to a certain someone's recent excessive picking.

I still wanted to make boatloads of potions in order to increase my Pharmaceuticals skill, but unfortunately, these herbs were tricky to cultivate, so Johan forbade me from using any more than I already had. I tried asking him about buying the herbs from elsewhere, but since they were so hard to grow, they were prohibitively expensive. So much so, in fact, that it was beyond our means to purchase them in bulk even with our currently ample budget.

Notably, these herbs also grew in the forest outside the palace, but while harvesting those wild plants wouldn't cost financial resources, it would take

tons of human ones. Not to mention, monsters lived in the forest, and it was exceedingly dangerous for a researcher to venture out there on their own.

"That's right," Johan answered. "Your herbs grow in the southern forest. How about you go and pick some for us?"

"I'd really prefer not to get attacked by monsters, though."

"The Knights of the Third Order are willing to protect you."

"Huh?"

"As thanks for all of the potions you made."

I reflexively glanced at Albert, just to be sure Johan wasn't pulling my leg. The knight commander's earlier dour expression had shifted to something much gentler. It seemed true enough that he was willing to act as my escort so I could go collect more herbs. However...

"But we've already received something in thanks from them," I protested. Not only had we been given a special reward from the palace, we had been presented with gifts from Albert's family as well. I couldn't let him go out of his way to give me yet another thing.

Johan grinned. "Well, you see, the knight commander wanted to do something for you personally."

"Hey!" Albert tried to cut him off in a panic.

It was too late, though. Johan had already said it. Still, was it okay to employ knights as a personal favor?

"What does he mean, 'personally'?" I tilted my head at the knight commander.

Albert coughed as if I had picked up on some untoward implication in Johan's words. He still seemed to feel a bit stiff as he explained, "We are planning another expedition to rout the monsters in the southern forest. I meant to ask if you wished to join us."

"I see." Well, if they were already planning to go, I didn't see any problem with going along. And it was true that I wanted those herbs. I bowed. "If you don't think it would be any trouble, then I would love to accompany you."

Albert nodded in agreement, seemingly pleased.

With that, we got to business discussing all the practical details, such as when this expedition was going to be and so forth. Before I realized it, we had talked into the evening.

So it was that I joined the Knights of the Third Order on their journey to the Saul Forest.

The Third Order routinely went on monster-slaying expeditions in the areas surrounding the capital. Where the Ghoshe Forest sat to the west, the Saul Forest was in the south.

Once, such expeditions had been more rare, but in recent years, monster-slaying had become nearly routine. The capital would quickly be overwhelmed if the knights didn't make a point to face monsters and beat back the miasma as often as possible. Now that the Saint had been summoned, they hoped the situation would gradually improve over time.

They're all counting on you, Aira!

This expedition was a bit unusual in that researchers from the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora were accompanying the knights. Although the primary objective of the trip was monster-slaying, once my colleagues heard I was going, they insisted on joining, too. They weren't about to pass up a chance to collect herbs growing in the forest, especially as there might be some we didn't yet have in the garden. This was going to be a first for all of us.

Some researchers wanted time to survey the wild vegetation as well, but Johan rejected their proposal outright, as protecting exploring researchers would distract the knights from their main objective. It was absurd enough to have researchers, who were all but useless in a fight, accompanying knights on this deadly expedition. The trip was only possible thanks to the indulgence of the Order.

Since so many researchers wanted to go picking, I actually considered skipping the trip entirely to stay back in the institute—I loved the idea of a leisurely day spent on potion production. But Johan told me I was obligated to

go, seeing as I was the one who wanted the herbs the most.

"Hey, don't stray too far," Jude warned me when I set out to harvest some herbs I spotted a little off the path. I quickly picked them and hurried back to Jude, but he only had more lecturing for me. "This place is more peaceful than the western woods, but that doesn't mean there aren't any monsters. Make sure you tell me before you go anywhere."

"Sorry. I will."

The monsters in Saul were supposed to be weaker, but that didn't mean they were absent—or that they weren't still monsters. I knew I had to be careful, but after growing up in Japan, where I never had to be wary of my surroundings, it was hard not to just walk off to grab something I wanted without a second thought.

I heard Albert chuckle behind us. "I've got my eye on her. She'll be all right so long as she stays within range."

We had broken up into three different teams of knights and researchers. The knights had determined it to be the most effective strategy, and the knight commander himself was part of our team.

Apparently, since the monsters of the southern forest were so comparatively weak, Albert didn't usually join the expeditions to it. However, I'd heard gossip from another knight that he came along this time specifically because of us. I knew this was supposed to be his way of saying thanks, but I still couldn't help feeling like we were just being a big pain in the butt.

"Thank you," I said. "We must be pretty deep in the forest now, huh? I guess we're lucky that we haven't seen any monsters." I was pretty sure it must've been at least two hours since we entered, but not a single monster had appeared. Was this normal?

When I asked Albert, he admitted it wasn't. "No... Normally, we would have encountered several of them by now."

"Really?"

"Yes. In fact, this absence is rather unusual." He furrowed his brow as he thought about it, then went to consult with his knights.

Huh, I wonder where they all went. It doesn't feel like the calm before the storm... But I sure hope a strong monster like a salamander doesn't suddenly attack us, I thought as I collected herbs along the path toward the rendezvous point.

I didn't trouble myself with those thoughts for long. Once we joined up with the other groups in the clearing, we were going to have lunch.

"Delicious!" voices here and there declared as they ate.

I was quietly pleased; I had helped to make it.

Originally, the knights planned to prepare our meals, but considering the sorry state of this world's cuisine, there was no way I could sit on my hands and not pitch in. The soup I flavored with herbs was a big hit.

"I hear high praise for the meals at the research institute's dining hall. Are you the one in charge of cooking there?" Albert asked as he examined the soup in his spoon.

Albert had peppered me with questions even while I was cooking, such as what the name of each herb was and why I was adding them to the pot. He reminded me of Johan in that way, who always hovered behind me doing exactly the same thing.

One of the researchers told me that Johan and Albert had been best friends ever since they were little. Maybe that explained why they behaved so similarly.

"No, I only provide the recipes—the chef is in charge of all the preparation," I answered.

"I can't believe you lot get to enjoy such delicious meals all the time. It makes me wish I could, too." He smiled as he took another bite. The look on his face made me happy as well.

However, I felt a bit nervous. After this morning's expedition, the knights and researchers had developed a sense of camaraderie. Everyone sat where they liked, and spoke to whom they pleased, and the knight commander himself sat right next to me. On my other side was one of the other team commanders.

Even with the intergroup mixing, I was the only researcher lumped together with these men of high military rank—Jude had scooted away despite my efforts to rope him in.

Jude better watch his back! I'll remember this...

Another knight piped up then. “I heard you put some herbs into the soup, and I can’t help but notice that my body feels warmer than usual. Did one of the herbs have that kind of effect?”

“Ah, yes, that’s right. I added...”

After I answered him, I got more and more questions about cooking with herbs. Of particular interest to the knights were herbs that might enhance snacks like sausages, which they ate while drinking alcohol.

The lively conversations about cooking continued all through lunch. In the afternoon, we went out for another round of exploration, and when evening came, we returned to the palace.

As so many people went on the expedition this time, we decided to assemble at the Third Order’s practice field when we got back. We were all exhausted, but because there were no casualties, the researchers were huddled together in small groups, chattering like they had just come back from a field trip.

To my surprise, they weren’t discussing the rare herbs they managed to procure but rather the monsters they encountered along the way, as well as the knights who slew them. Yet even after lunch, not a single monster had appeared before my group. One of the knights had even joked, “Maybe they’re just hiding in the bushes, trembling with fear before the knight commander’s might.”

Albert was considered strong enough to take one or two monsters all by himself—just as you’d expect of the leader of a knightly order. Even so, it was unheard of not to encounter any monsters at all.

Unlike us, the other groups had each run into several monsters. Some of the researchers got a chance to fight alongside the knights in a supporting role, blasting the monsters with Battle skill Magic. The researchers even claimed they had fun, as they hadn’t gotten to slay any monsters since their time at the Royal

Academy.

"When I heard we were joining a monster-slaying expedition, I prepared myself for much worse. Yet we mowed them down easy as anything. What a letdown," said one researcher.

"I know what you mean," said another. "It went surprisingly smoothly, given how long it's been since I last had to face any monsters."

"You too? I felt like it went even easier than when I was at the Academy."

"I wouldn't go that far."

One of the knights nearby joined in on their animated conversation. "You guys thought that was easy, too?"

"Huh?"

"We were just saying how strange it was that our movements felt lighter than usual."

According to the knight, at first, the knights each thought they were having an unusually good day, but after a discussion with their fellows on fighting techniques, they realized that everyone's physical abilities seemed to have increased.

"I wonder what the reason is," a researcher mumbled, which caused others to start chiming in with their ideas.

They all quickly settled on a reason, though.

"Could it have been the food?" someone suggested.

"That's it!"

Everyone concluded the soup they had for lunch was the only thing significantly different from usual.

Those herbs I added to the soup became a subject of keen interest. The researchers were used to eating seasoned dishes at this point, but such a lunch was new to the knights. The researchers were now intensely interested in getting back to the institute as soon as possible to begin investigating this

potential new discovery.

Despite our exhaustion, at the “all clear” signal that told us we were released to go home, my colleagues were once more bursting with energy. They were buzzing with ideas all the way back home.

One week later, in order to research the cause of the change in the knights’ physical abilities, we began our experiments. We cooked under different conditions, ate the results, and analyzed the outcome. That meant that not only were we eating a hearty breakfast, lunch, dinner, and late-night snack, we were munching practically all day long.

Pretty soon, we didn’t have enough mouths to finish off the amount of experimental food we were producing, so we begged the Knights of the Third Order to help us, seeing as we were on such cordial terms with them now. The knights were only too happy to take us up on the offer, especially after having heard so much about our dining hall’s delectable fare.

In the end, we deduced that when someone ate food prepared by an individual with Cooking skills, their physical abilities increased. Furthermore, Cooking skills operated a bit like Pharmaceutical skills, in that a person who possessed them imbued magic into their cooking. To our delight, we found most of the dining hall chefs possessed the skill. It went without saying that the chef at the research institute possessed them, too.

Sei Takanashi – Level 55/Saint

HP: 4,867/4,867

MP: 6,067/6,067

Battle Skills

Holy Magic: Level ∞

Production Skills

Pharmaceuticals: Level 28

Cooking: Level 5

It turned out that I had skill levels in Cooking, too, which was likely the root of everyone's physical ability boost during our expedition.

Despite eating at the dining hall every day, we researchers had never noticed the buff, since our work didn't require much strenuous effort. However, the knights figured it out right away due to the physical nature of their work.

To be honest, I thought there might be another reason why the researchers just never noticed it. Given the skill-level factor, it seemed possible to me that my make-potions-fifty-percent-more-effective-than-usual curse also applied when I cooked. If I had a hand in the preparation, my food was bound to have a greater physical effect than that of a chef of equal skill. That very well might have been the reason my forest soup's power had been so obvious to everyone.

When I mentioned this theory to Johan, he blanched and forbade me from cooking in a public place ever again—at least, not without a good reason.

Behind the Scenes I

NOW LET'S REWIND the story a bit—and perhaps take a different point of view.

Eight grim-faced people sat at the council table in the palace of the Kingdom of Salutania. Together, they shouldered a heavy burden.

"Let's hear your reports," Prime Minister Dominic Goltz said, looking grave.

The eight members of the council included ministers, such as the minister of Military Services and the minister of Home Affairs, as well as the commanders of each knightly order and the grand magus of the Royal Magi Assembly. Seated at the farthest end of the table was the king.

Josef Hawke, the minister of Military Services, spoke next. In a low, strained voice, he said, "The situation is yet...disappointing. We send our knights in rotation to slay the monsters, and thus far they have managed to endure, but at this rate, in the near future the monsters will escape the bounds of the forests."

The miasma was condensing by the day, and the monsters born from it grew ever stronger. Although the miasma always manifested relatively close to civilization, no one had any solid theory as to why exactly it did so, or what even caused it to take form. It accumulated most quickly and easily in places where humans didn't immediately live, such as forests and caverns, but because these sites were always near villages and towns, monsters born from the miasma would inevitably invade homesteads, leaving human casualties in their wake.

Usually, routine dispatches of knights were sufficient to prevent the monsters from swarming these vulnerable settlements. However, every few generations, the miasma condensed at a rate that exceeded the one at which monsters could be slain.

Just as was happening now.

So far, the council had dealt with the rise in monster attacks by sending the knights out more frequently, but as the years wore on with no sign of relief, the number of expeditions needed to beat back the miasma only increased. The

minister of Military Services and the knight commanders of the knights were in agreement: they would only be able to hold out for another year or two. Once the knights succumbed, the remaining monsters would flood out of the miasma and lay waste to every human settlement in their path.

Alphonse Hummel, the minister of Home Affairs, spoke next. “We have received reports from nobles across the kingdom. They face many of the same difficulties and cannot sustain the fight.”

While the royal knights protected the forests surrounding the capital, the kingdom’s nobles were expected to slay monsters that emerged in their own domains. However, it was hired mercenaries, not farmers, who faced these beasts. The mercenaries worked together in guilds, and the lord of a region paid them in return for exterminating monsters and keeping the peace.

But with the number of monsters now on the rise, the lords’ coffers were unable to keep up with the mercenaries’ demands. Those fighters’ lives were on the line, and they wouldn’t deploy without respectable compensation, even if it was in defense of the land where they lived.

Normally, if mercenaries refused to deploy, or if there simply weren’t enough of them to face the threat at hand, the palace sent knights to bolster a noble’s forces. Unfortunately, the knights were already at their limit dealing with monstrous incursions around the capital. The court was in no condition to sacrifice troops to any other regions in the kingdom.

The prime minister’s frown lines grew deeper at hearing the two reports. He turned to Michael Hoover, the commander of Special Services. “Any updates on the search for the Saint?”

Michael’s tone was somber. “Unfortunately, we still haven’t found her.”

In times when the miasma grew too dense, the maiden called the Saint was meant to appear somewhere in the kingdom. Her miasma-cleansing magic was unbelievably powerful and could instantaneously eliminate monsters. The appearance of the Saint would quell the miasma and shepherd in a new era.

In every instance of recorded history, the Saint was found somewhere in the kingdom, and thus Special Services was searching for her. They assumed at first that it wouldn’t take long to find her, but three years had come and gone with

no sign of the Saint. They continued to scour every corner of the kingdom, knowing that an age of ruin nipped at their heels. Every time their hunt turned up nothing, they thought, perhaps, that the Saint simply hadn't been born yet, and returned to places they had already searched in hopes that she would make herself known.

And yet the Saint still hadn't been found.

A heavy silence fell over the room.

The grand magus of the Royal Magi Assembly, Yuri Drewes, broke the silence with a whisper. "Is it time we turned to legend?"

Everyone at the table looked at him.

Yuri gazed at them each in turn before producing a document for them all to see. "There is a rite known as the 'Saint Summoning Ritual.'"

"Everyone's heard of that. Isn't it just a fairy tale?"

"No. It was truly performed. I have the steps of the ritual written right here."

"How did you find it?"

"It was written in a grimoire I found in the Forbidden Depository."

"Can we trust the contents of this book...?"

"I cannot say. The instructions for the ritual are recorded, but the steps seem quite complicated. We will require a number of mages to perform the spell as well. Our odds of success are, by my guess, fifty-fifty."

"Such low odds..."

"But it seems to me our chances are better with this than they are if we do nothing and wait for the monsters to invade."

The Saint Summoning Ritual was ancient, created during a time when the Saint had failed to appear, no matter the density of the miasma. The sages of that legendary era pooled their knowledge to devise it and were, in the end, able to summon the Saint from a faraway land.

However, this ritual that seemed increasingly vital had only been performed once, in the era of the sages who had composed it. Therefore, it was impossible

to tell if the ritual would actually work or if the sages of the present era could even perform it correctly. Furthermore, the ritual required a number of mages and arcane tools, and it would incur a tremendous cost. In a more peaceful time, the kingdom would never have considered it, but all the expense was a trifle in a world nearing the end of its mortal coil.

The king had been silent up until this point. Now, he commanded: “Perform the ritual. The Royal Magi Assembly will begin preparations immediately. All others, continue with your appointed duties.”

And so, the Kingdom of Salutania decided to perform the Saint Summoning Ritual for the first time since the era of legend.

Against all odds, the ritual was a success; they summoned a maiden from another world. However, there was a minor problem: they summoned *two* maidens.

As far as anyone knew, there had only ever been one Saint at a time, whether she appeared by natural means or by summoning. Was only one of the maidens the Saint? Were both of them Saints? Or was neither of them the Saint they had been looking for? The only one who might have determined that was the grand magus himself—unfortunately, he fainted as soon as the ritual was completed. Even now, he remained in a deep sleep.

That wasn’t the only problem. It was only the day after the ritual that the leaders of the kingdom learned two potential Saints had been summoned. The day of, the crown prince, who supervised the ritual of his own volition, informed the king that it was an unequivocal success. That was the sum of his report—he said nothing of how many people were summoned.

Following the crown prince’s initial report, the leaders of the kingdom briefly hoped that the world would finally find some peace. However, on the following day, they found themselves bewildered when they learned that, for some reason, the crown prince had only spoken to one of the Saints and had seen fit to leave the other one behind. On top of that, the other Saint had immediately tried to vacate the palace in her anger at being treated in such a manner. Thankfully, a knight managed to change her mind about leaving, but it was

frightfully easy to imagine that she now had a dreadful impression of the kingdom.

Upon hearing this, the king said wearily, “What the hell was he thinking?”

One night, a month after the Saint Summoning Ritual, the sun had set and all was concealed in darkness. Two men relaxed over a bottle of wine at Count Valdec’s villa in the capital. One of them was the second son of the Valdec family and the owner of the estate, Johan Valdec, who was also the head researcher of the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora. The other was Johan’s best friend since childhood, the third son of the Hawke family and knight commander of the palace’s Knights of the Third Order, Albert Hawke.

The two often joined each other at the Valdec estate to drink, though they hadn’t had much time for it recently, as Albert was so often on the hunt for monsters. The last time they were able to enjoy a night together had been well over a month ago.

“I heard you recently brought on someone new at your institute,” Albert said while they were updating each other on the past month’s exploits.

“Hm? Oh, yes, we did.” Johan grinned.

Albert had tried to bring up the topic casually, but Johan suspected this was the true reason Albert had gone out of his way to make time to meet up at the Valdec estate.

“What is she like?” Albert asked.

“Extremely normal.”

“Normal?”

“She’s no different from the other researchers.”

Though Johan answered in a roundabout way, Albert was too curious to let the topic drop. Johan always dodged Albert’s questions like this, even when he knew the answers. It was his way of teasing his overly earnest friend. Albert knew what Johan was up to, so he was amused rather than annoyed, though he gave Johan an exasperated look to prompt him to continue.

Satisfied by the expression, Johan finally gave his friend the answer he sought. “For now, she hasn’t voiced any complaints about the palace, and she takes her work quite seriously.”

“I see... I heard she was infuriated by her summoning and that she gave a mage a look so menacing he nearly wet himself.”

“I heard something similar. Those fellows always try to put on airs, but now they’re bowing and scraping to get back into her good graces.”

“You think so?”

“Of course.”

The day the Saint Summoning Ritual was performed, Albert was on another monster-slaying expedition, so he only knew bits and pieces of the story from hearsay. Among those bits, he heard one of the Saints was now employed at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora where Johan was the head researcher. He figured asking Johan directly about her would yield answers more quickly, so he searched out his old friend.

Johan readily told Albert the story of how Sei the potential Saint came to the institute. How first, about two weeks ago, a woman with black hair and black eyes began visiting every day. The first person she spoke to was Jude, but the other researchers—who were all male—soon took interest in this woman who was equally invested in herbs.

Early on, Johan felt apprehensive at the sight of Sei, what with her unusually colored hair and eyes. A few days before, he had run into his older brother in the palace corridors and learned that not one but two Saints were summoned. One was a girl with brown hair and black eyes, and the other was a woman who had black hair and black eyes. Given that, Johan immediately contacted his brother after his first meeting with Sei.

On hearing that a black-haired, black-eyed woman was frequenting the institute, Johan’s brother promptly called him to the palace. Johan was directed to a room where he found himself facing not only his brother, but an official with a high-ranking title.

As they sat across from one another on gilded sofas, Johan’s brother

confirmed that the woman visiting the institute was one of the women who had been summoned. Then he politely pleaded with Johan to take her in at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora.

Why is this being asked of me? Johan wondered. Although this woman was still only one of the potential Saints, the true Saint was equal in rank to the king. In truth, she might be even more invaluable than the king, considering the fate of the world rested on her shoulders. Why, oh why would they want to leave someone so critically important in a tiny research institute sitting in the far corner of the palace grounds?

When Johan asked as much, the official took out a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his brow and gave an answer through gritted teeth: as a result of the crown prince's behavior, Sei had an absolutely awful impression of their country. In fact, after the crown prince left her behind, she tried to leave, too—not just the room but the kingdom itself. Though they had managed to somehow stop her from exiting the palace, and the official persuaded her to remain in the kingdom, the state of affairs was still messy, to say the least.

There was no precedent for two Saints appearing simultaneously, let alone two being summoned by a ritual. At present, those in the palace were of the opinion that only one of them was likely to be the Saint. However, because they were traveling through uncharted waters, it could yet be that both maidens were Saints, and therefore it would be dangerous to let either of them go. For now, they were determined to keep both women.

Luckily, Sei was proving interested in the palace's herb garden and had taken to going there every day. The official hoped that by establishing a deeper friendship with the other researchers, she might develop better feelings toward the kingdom.

"In other words, you're ordering me to clean up Prince Kyle's mess," Johan said.

"Our original plan was to give her a tutor that would teach her about the kingdom. That's more or less what has become of the other potential Saint, who Prince Kyle has sent to the Royal Academy," the official replied.

"So, since you've already lost her goodwill, you're planning to let her do

whatever she wants in order to curry her favor.”

“That’s correct. Though we’re in no state to take things slow... Still, knowing you, you’ve already sent a list of demands to Home Affairs.”

“Ah, you do know me.” Johan grinned and raised his glass to the official.

It seemed that the official’s assumption was that, as a noble, Johan understood the palace’s position and wouldn’t have any problems taking Sei into his care. However, Johan didn’t care for the official’s attitude or the carelessness that had led to him trying to heap new burdens on Johan and his researchers. So he put on a troubled expression, pretended to think, and then began to list a book’s worth of reasons for why he would have to decline.

Wouldn’t it be hard for Sei to travel all that way from the palace to the research institute every day? There were some people who lived at the institute for that same reason, and what would they do if she said she wanted to do the same? Even if she did concede to living in such conditions, wouldn’t it be problematic to force her to reside in the filth of a working institute? They could remodel one of the floors, perhaps, but the institute simply didn’t have room in its meager budget to afford something like that.

Johan came up with problem after problem and at length got the official to give him every concession he desired.

As Johan’s brother watched him casually force the official to agree to remodeling the entire research institute “for the Saint’s sake,” his expression stiffened. Johan ignored him.

Once negotiations were complete, rebuilding Sei’s future living quarters became top priority, and they were completed at the unheard of speed of a single week. Fortunately, the rooms were completed before she moved in.

“But it’s odd. If they were so desperate to improve her mood, why did all those officials abandon her to her chambers?” Johan mused.

“What do you mean they abandoned her?” Albert asked.

“She complained about it to the other researchers. Though she was given her own chambers in the palace, they left her completely alone, so she was bored.”

"What do you mean? That's not what I heard at all."

Johan raised an eyebrow at Albert's protest.

According to Albert, the rumors were that after the potential Saints were summoned, one maiden felt unwell and took to bed. Though Sei had indeed been exhausted after the summoning, the real reason was the time difference between Japan and the Kingdom of Salutania. At the time of the summoning, it had been morning in Salutania but the middle of the night in Japan. Consequently, after being taken to her chambers, Sei immediately collapsed on the sofa and fell deep asleep.

On finding Sei passed out on the sofa in what seemed like a coma, the lady-in-waiting quickly ushered in an official. Given the difference between Sei's unconscious state and her fury of just a few hours before, they only became more convinced that Sei's condition was taking a turn for the worse. Her sickly pale skin from the endless days of exhausting work and the dark circles under her eyes from years of sleep deprivation just made her look more frail.

The official summoned the court physician and had him examine Sei, but thankfully the doctor's diagnosis was that she was just exhausted. There were no signs she was afflicted with some kind of disease. Therefore, the official arranged for Sei to get some proper rest, which included a moratorium on visitors.

This series of events had contributed to the king's late discovery of the two potential Saints. Although, Albert still suspected some infighting and panic might have been involved in the officials' reluctance to give the king a complete report.

"I see. Now that you mention it, her complexion was pretty dreadful when she first started coming to the institute."

"How is she now?"

"Now? Hmm... Far better, I would say."

Thinking on it, Johan realized Sei's early appearance could easily have been interpreted as that of someone prone to poor physical health. Some time had passed since, and her skin was still pale—likely a result of being cooped up in

the institute all day—but the circles under her eyes were lighter, and she looked far sturdier.

“I see... Is she eating well?”

“What kind of question is that? What are you, her father?”

“Sh-shut up. I just heard that the woman Prince Kyle is looking after hasn’t been eating very much lately and it’s become a problem.”

“Is that so?”

“The head chef has tried everything they can think of, but she barely touches her food. His Highness is growing worried that she might faint from malnourishment.”

“Now that you mention it, Sei doesn’t eat much either.”

“Maybe a spare diet is normal where they come from?”

“Good question. Maybe I’ll ask her.”

As Sei and Aira had been summoned from Japan, both women found the flavor of the Salutanian cuisine rather lacking. The paltry seasonings meant most flavors came directly from a dish’s ingredients, which neither of them particularly cared for. It was for that reason that neither of them had much interest in food, but the crown prince was issuing orders left and right out of his concern for Aira, the other potential Saint. They had yet to yield any results.

“Prince Kyle sure is enthusiastic about this,” Johan mused.

“Well, you know how it is...” Albert trailed off, but Johan knew what he meant.

There were presently three princes in the Kingdom of Salutania. For generations, the eldest prince had always become king, so the firstborn prince was treated as the crown prince. However, the present second-born prince was an exceptionally talented young man who had attracted the support of a number of factions—ones who would rather see him crowned king.

In truth, the second prince hoped for nothing of the sort and the king denied any intent to buck tradition, so it had yet to become much of a problem. However, the crown prince had long been aware that he was in many ways his

brother's inferior, and he couldn't help worrying about the existence of interests plotting against him.

Johan was aware that Prince Kyle had requested to be the one to supervise the Saint Summoning Ritual because he hoped to garner the favor of other nobles. Unfortunately for him, by angering Sei, he managed to do the complete opposite, and now he was feeling even more pressure than usual.

"Is His Highness still handling affairs related to both Saints?"

"Yes. His Majesty is concerned by his son's blunder, but he's decided to watch how His Highness handles things, especially since having someone else take over now might lead to future conflict. It was lucky for them both that you've managed to ease the mind of the other potential Saint. He must be hoping that His Highness can still recover."

"Especially since a struggle for succession could plunge the kingdom into chaos." Johan sighed; he predicted such chaos was inevitable if any royal infighting broke out on top of the problems they already suffered from the miasma.

Prince Kyle was tragically apt to give off an unseemly impression and could be a bit impulsive and straightforward, but many thought well of him for his compassion. Plus, he had the support of the second prince and his close aides, so there were no real problems facing his ascension. The king no doubt thought that losing a few points in popularity among the nobles was nothing to losing one of the potential Saints, so if Prince Kyle could win Sei's favor, there was hope yet.

"It's still strange that there were two of them... I mean, was the ritual actually successful? We've never had more than one Saint at a time before," Johan wondered aloud.

"It was undeniably a success," said Albert.

"Where's your proof?"

"The number of monsters has begun to decrease."

Ever since the ritual, the knights had seen the effect on their regular monster-slaying expeditions. The monsters already in existence hadn't vanished, but the

rate at which new ones spawned had slowed, and therefore there were fewer overall. As a result, the knights believed the ritual was a success and that the Saint must surely be in the palace. They reported as much to their leaders.

They still had no idea which of the women was the Saint—or whether both of them were—since the grand magus of the Royal Magi Assembly, the only person who could ascertain the Saint's identity, was still unconscious, but the feeling of oncoming tragedy that had saturated the palace was at last dispelled.

"I see. It would be good to see things start easing up on your end, too," said Johan.

"Yes..." said Albert. "My knights are exhausted, as I'm sure you can imagine."

"Is your next hunt going to be in the western forest?"

"No, first we have a round in the east. Once we're finished with the west, I plan to take a long break—longer than usual, in any case. The western forest may be more dangerous than the eastern and southern ones, but the way things are going, I don't expect we should have any problems."

"Well, I doubt anything will ever happen to you, but be careful."

"I will."

They had no way of knowing that, in a video game, they had basically triggered a certain ominous flag with that conversation.

Act 4: Skincare Products

IN THE FIFTH MONTH after my summoning, Jude found me in the middle of distilling an essential oil from lavender I had harvested in the garden.

"What are you up to over there?" he asked. "Is that for a potion?"

"No, no. It's for a facial moisturizer." That day, I was after the floral water that was a by-product of making essential oils.

Since my arrival in this world, I had been forced to engineer my own skincare products. I had a prior interest in homemade cosmetics, but now I was driven by necessity. It wasn't that this world lacked any concept of skincare, just that such lotions were exclusively luxury items targeted at the nobility. Lucky for me, I worked at the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora. I had all the tools and facilities I needed to concoct my own skincare routine, not to mention access to any ingredient I could imagine.

"Huh, so you can put herbs in those, too?"

"And flowers! Like roses and so forth."

I should note, while this world had the *concept* of skincare, the products were...let's say, unlike potions, most of the recipes were questionable, as in they contained ingredients that I had zero intention of putting on my face in any form whatsoever.

I actually tried using potions at first, but I quickly realized that I was on the wrong track. Potions were only meant to cure wounds; they didn't have any moisturizing or brightening effects like I needed my lotions to do.

"Weren't you making some earlier, too?" Jude asked. "Did you use lavender then as well?"

"I did, but it wasn't for a moisturizer."

"Aha. Was it something with a different effect?"

"I suppose you could put it like that, though generally the outcome is pretty similar."

"Is that so. Well, whatever you make, I'm sure it'll be incredibly effective."

I smiled wryly at Jude's comment.

The skincare products I made were indeed potent. Once, on a whim, I imbued one of my lotions with magic while stirring, and it came out exceptionally well. The difference in effectiveness between the cosmetics I made with and without magic was like night and day. It seemed my Pharmaceuticals skill and that fifty-percent-bonus curse were to blame.

When I realized that my Pharmaceuticals skill could impact cosmetics, I asked one of the other researchers to try making the same kind of lotion. Just as I expected, his lotion came out quite a bit differently. I had made an inadvertent discovery; the researchers hadn't seen the link between cosmetics and Pharmaceuticals skill before, and they were pretty surprised.

They probably never noticed because, for one, only a limited number of wealthy people actually used skincare products in this world, and two, the researchers were all men who didn't really have any interest in cosmetics in the first place.

When I reported this to Johan, along with the persistent interference of my fifty-percent-bonus curse, he laughed about how this was like me with cooking all over again. Though, his laugh sounded somewhat weary to me.

"Did you start making your skincare products after you came to the research institute?" Jude asked.

"Yup."

"I knew it."

He did? I looked at him with a puzzled expression.

Jude smiled sheepishly. "Since you arrived, you've only gotten prettier."

"Huh?" Where'd that come from?! I gaped openly, every thought ejected from my brain. I knew I understood him though, because I could feel my cheeks begin to glow. No man had ever said that to me before. I was unexpectedly shy.

"Wh-why would you say something like that?"

"Hmm? It's the truth though." Jude laughed in a totally matter-of-fact way, even though he had to see my cheeks were burning.

I supposed that between the absence of late-night overtime in this world and my ability to live a well-regulated life, my appearance was changing. The dark circles that had been a universal constant under my eyes for so many years were now vanished, and my hair and skin were supple and shiny. What's more, my eye cream had somehow improved my eyesight, and I didn't even need glasses anymore.

Back in Japan, my late-night every-night schedule meant beauty routines and dressing up were way outside my energy quota, so men never really paid any attention to me. But thanks to the changes in my appearance brought by my new life, I had kinda started looking forward to seeing myself in the mirror.

Still, an unpopular woman is unpopular for a reason. I might have changed on the outside, but inside, I was the same mousy old Sei. On that count, I was completely flustered by this sort of situation.

I wound up saying something sharp like, "Oh, stop making fun of me."

But for some reason that just made Jude smile even more, though he did seem a little abashed.

All that said, my morning routine didn't differ hugely from how it was back in Japan. I woke up, brushed my teeth, washed my face, and applied my skincare products. The effect was startling, granted. My homemade products were clearly doing their job; I looked much healthier in general. I smiled gleefully as I examined myself in the small compact mirror I had brought with me in my purse when I was summoned.

However, I still didn't have time for makeup—in part because I didn't have any. I knew how to put together basic skincare products, but I didn't know the first thing about producing makeup, so it was out of reach. I didn't mind so much. I never really liked wearing it anyway.

Once I was satisfied with my appearance, I got dressed.

Today was my day off, so I got my wild start by lounging around and doing absolutely nothing at all! But that could only last so long.

“Stats,” I chanted to check my current condition.

Sei Takanashi – Level 55/Saint

HP: 4,867/4,867

MP: 6,067/6,067

Battle Skills

Holy Magic: Level ∞

Production Skills

Pharmaceuticals: Level 30

Cooking: Level 8

Hmm. Both my Pharmaceuticals and Cooking skills had increased. A little more food prep and my Cooking level was bound to continue growing, but lately it had become harder to bump up my Pharmaceuticals skill, even when I made high-grade HP potions.

Could there be a potion more valuable than the high-grade ones I already knew how to make? The herb and medicine books in the research institute didn't describe any such thing, but maybe in the palace's library I could find a book with stronger recipes?

You're going to start a new project on your day off? You workaholic! I thought to myself, but alas, there was nothing else I really wanted to do.

I supposed I could have gone shopping in the capital, but I'd never been off the palace grounds before and honestly felt a bit nervous about it. It would probably be different if there were someone to go *with* me, but...

Whatever! I'll spend the day in the library and read books.

Jude spotted me as I descended the stairs from my room on the third floor to the first floor. "Oh? Are you going out, Sei?"

He was carrying a box in both arms, and it was overflowing with herbs. Unlike me, he was on duty today and was bringing supplies from the storehouse into the institute.

"Yup, I'm headed for the palace library," I told him.

"I see. Today's your off day, isn't it?"

"Sure is."

"See you later then."

"Bye!"

I stepped out of the institute and set off toward the palace. It took a familiar

thirty long minutes to get there, though I supposed it was good exercise. I didn't get enough of that nowadays, seeing as I spent all my time cooped up in the institute fiddling with potions, so I probably needed to get out and move around more often.

Though admittedly, it was a pain...

At length, I made it to the palace. I had been to the library several times for work, so I knew my way around. Along the way, I took in the vases and paintings that decorated the halls. As you would expect from a palace, each and every one was exquisite. Delicate patterns graced the ceramic vases, and the elegant paintings depicted lush scenery. I enjoyed just getting to see them; I guess it was the same feeling I got from a museum art exhibit featuring pieces that originally came from castles.

Before I knew it, I reached my destination. When I opened the library door, I was met by the sight of dust motes wafting through the sunlight trickling in from a high window. The opening door must have stirred them up.

There weren't many windows in here in order to protect the books, so the lighting was faint. In that dim, I began hunting through the books on the shelves. I picked out a number, settled in a nearby chair, and began to read.

Interestingly enough, the contents of the books weren't written in Japanese, but I could understand them. Maybe insta-translation was an effect of the summoning. I think I read them in Japanese in my head, though. It gave me a funny brain feeling.

I don't know how long I was there all by myself, but just as I was making my umpteenth trip back to my chair from the bookshelf, I heard the door open with a creak. This wasn't odd in itself, since anyone who worked in the palace had free access to the library. I glanced at the door, assuming it would be one of the usual officials, but to my surprise I found a lovely girl in an extravagant dress. Her neatly curled blonde hair hung in a partial updo and her blue eyes were keen.

She's gotta be some noble's daughter. A high-ranking one at that.

People like her were everywhere in the palace, but it was the first time I had ever seen a highborn lady in the library. I must have been staring because she

noticed me as well. She positively beamed; I bowed my head reflexively.

I was pretty sure it would be rude to gawk at her any more than I already had, so I took that as the signal to return to my reading. But a few moments later, a book was placed in front of the chair opposite mine.

When I looked up, I found the young noblewoman had started to read. There were plenty of other seats available. I wondered why she chose the seat so close to mine, but I decided not to fixate on it and once more buried myself in words.

Just as I finished going through the last of the books I had picked out, I heard the afternoon bell chime three times. I realized I had been in the library for quite a bit longer than I meant to be and decided it was high time to get back to the research institute.

Right when I stood, the lady spoke to me. “I beg your pardon.”

“Ah—yes?”

“May I see that book?”

I guessed I had grabbed a book she was interested in, and she hoped to read it before I put it away. I was finished with it, so I gladly handed it over. Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw how many other books I still had in my hands.

“What an arcane collection you have there. Are you from the research institute?” she asked.

“That’s right.”

“I suspected as much. I noticed everything you were reading was written in Classical Salutarian! I always have such trouble getting through it.”

Huh. My magical insta-translation meant I didn’t even notice when I was reading something written in thick classical language. I chuckled awkwardly in an attempt to cover up the fact that I hadn’t felt the books were hard to read at all.

“Does my lady possess an interest in herbs as well?” I asked her, trying but probably failing to imitate the noble way people like her spoke.

"Yes, that is correct." She smiled awkwardly, too.

Was it my question? Or my terrible attempt at imitating her speech? I wasn't sure which faux pas had made her uncomfortable, so I figured I should just see myself out as quickly as possible—before I caused her any further distress.

"If it would please my lady, come visit the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora someday," I managed. "Every herb in these books can be found in our garden. Oh, and, um, my name is Sei, and I work there."

"My thanks, Sei. I apologize for not introducing myself sooner. My name is Elizabeth Ashley."

"If you would excuse me, I should be getting back to the institute."

"Good day."

I shoved the books back onto the shelves and scurried away.

The second I stepped outside, I was assaulted by a wave of heat. Summer was definitely here. I hadn't noticed in the library, as it was typically cooler in there than in the palace corridors. They must have engineered some way to control the temperature for the books.

I fanned myself as I made my way back down the road to the institute. On the way, I heard hoofbeats approaching from behind. When I looked over my shoulder, I was met with a whole herd of horses. The people astride them looked like knights, and I had a feeling I knew the person leading from the front.

"Sei!" the leader called to me. It was Knight Commander Albert of the Knights of the Third Order.

"Oh! Hello." I waved tentatively.

As the knights drew closer, I realized I recognized some of them. They must have been the rest of his squadron.

"Are you on your way back to the institute?" Albert asked.

"That's right."

"Climb on and I'll give you a ride there if you like."

An odd, wavering feeling stirred in my stomach. There was a long way to go

before I reached the institute, and I was grateful for Albert's concern, but, well... "Thank you for the offer, but I've never ridden a horse before."

Albert held out his hand. "Grab hold."

I hesitantly took his hand and, easy as anything, he pulled me right up onto the horse's back so I was seated in front of him. I knew I didn't weigh much, but what strength he must have to just heave a woman up like that—and with only one hand! Were all knights so able?

"Let's go." Albert took the reins while I was still reeling and spurred the horse forward.

I clutched the saddle horn. It was a bit unnerving being high up on a horse like this. A low chuckle came from behind me as Albert wrapped an arm around my waist.

"Don't worry, I've got you," he said.

"Th-thank you."

Did we have to be so close? It was the first time I'd ever felt someone else's body pressed fully against my back. For a woman like me who had never had any admirers before, let alone a boyfriend, this degree of intimacy was a bit, um, difficult?

It almost feels like he's hugging me from behind. When that thought crossed my mind, my ears began to burn.

"Why were you at the palace today?" Albert asked.

"Oh, it was my off day, so I decided to go read in the library."

"Is that so. What kind of books did you find?"

"You know, ones about herbs. There was something I wanted to look into."

Every time he spoke, his voice vibrated through my back. Although my heart was pounding like crazy, I was gradually able to find my center while we talked.

"You went to study on your day off? That sounds more like work to me." He sounded genuinely surprised.

"Hmm, well, I think of it more as a hobby," I declared.

“Do you have any other hobbies?”

“Good question...” I was at a loss for an answer. I mean, I spent so much of my time working—here, but especially in Japan—that I didn’t really have much time to find any *more* hobbies.

As we continued chatting, we approached the fork in the road. One branch led to the research institute, the other to the barracks. Knight Commander Albert told his knights he intended to take me all the way back to the institute and broke off from the rest of the group. I assured him I didn’t mind being let down so he could stick with his knights, but he insisted that it wasn’t that far out of his way, and he wanted to be sure I made it the rest of the way home.

And so, he did.

“Sei, I find this sentence somewhat difficult. Might I request that you tell me what it says?”

“Hmm, let me see...”

I had run into Lady Elizabeth—Liz for short—in the library again, and we were talking books. However, it seemed like I was always on an errand whenever we ran into each other, so we never got to chat for very long.

Every time we met, Liz would ask me about the contents of books written either in Classical Salutarian or in a foreign language that she didn’t understand. It seemed like she was conducting some kind of study, and she always wanted to discuss parts that were especially difficult to decipher.

At first, she asked me about the grammatical structures, too, but unfortunately, I couldn’t explain anything about those. I was limited to digging into the content of any given book.

“I see. So that is what it means. My thanks,” Liz said.

“No prob. Glad I could help.”

“I apologize for always being such a bother while you’re working.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s a nice break.”

Compared to before, I had adopted a much more casual way of speaking to her. Also, after the third or fourth time we ran into each other, she told me to call her “Liz” instead of “Lady Elizabeth” and urged me to address her like I would any of my other friends. How could I deny such a pretty lady’s request?

“You have such lovely skin,” Liz remarked suddenly.

Our heads were pretty close at the moment, due to poring over the same book while we were talking, so I guess she was close enough to notice. I was still taken by surprise by this compliment from such a striking girl. Liz’s skin was perfect, like a porcelain doll’s—even nose to nose, I couldn’t see her pores.

Also, well, I really wasn’t used to compliments and wasn’t sure how to respond. The best I could come up with was, “You think so?”

She smiled—gorgeous!—and insisted. “It is so very easy to tan in odd places in this season, no matter how much care one takes. Did you not tell me before that you work in the herb gardens at your institute? Yet you haven’t taken on any color at all. The tone of your skin is flawlessly even.”

“Really? You don’t look at all tanned to me either.”

“Oh, of course, I ensure I take proper precautions against the sun every day. However, I cannot help but wonder what kind of lotions and ointments you use.”

Given everything we had talked about, I wasn’t surprised that Liz was interested in skincare, though she was more passionate about it than I would have guessed. Maybe it was because she was a noble; most adults in Japan didn’t share her depth of knowledge on the topic, let alone regular junior high school students. When I was her age, the most I did was slather on sunscreen.

Was she what you would call a girly girl?

“I make my skincare products myself,” I admitted.

“Truly?” Liz’s eyes sparkled.

The very idea of making your own cosmetics had to sound ludicrous to a noble like her. However, Liz was a student of herbology, and she unleashed a flood of questions, such as what ingredients I used and what effects they had. I

rapidly got the feeling she was more interested in this than the books she was always asking me about.

At length, Liz trailed off. Then out of nowhere, she took me by surprise yet again. “But I’m sure that skincare isn’t the only reason you’re so pretty.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“You fell in love recently, didn’t you?”

What?! My jaw fell open, and I couldn’t remember how to close it.

Liz giggled, hiding her lips behind her folding fan.

Why in the world would she think something like that? Fell in love? *Me?* No way, never in a thousand years! When would I even have the time?

Liz’s eyes sparkled over her fan. “The other day, I happened to overhear a rumor that Knight Commander Hawke has taken to spending much of his time with a certain lady.”

I frowned at her, even more bewildered. “Who’s Knight Commander Hawke?”

Liz snapped her fan shut and peered. “You do not know Lord Hawke?”

The only commander I could think of was Knight Commander Albert. Was his last name Hawke? I really couldn’t remember. Not to mention, Johan was always just calling him “Al.”

Tentatively, I offered, “By Knight Commander Hawke, do you mean the knight commander of the Knights of the Third Order?”

“So you *do* know him.”

“Yes, he’s friends with the head researcher at the institute.”

Okay, we were talking about the same guy. But I wasn’t about to assume I was the only woman Albert spent time with.

“Well,” said Liz. “Someone said they saw a woman riding on horseback with him the other day.”

Erk. Okay, the rumor was definitely about me. Ever since Albert and I ran into each other on my way home from the library that first day, he had taken to ferrying me back to the institute every time I went to the palace. On horseback

no less, just as the eyewitness had seen.

I still felt unbearably self-conscious riding like that with him, so I often tried to say no, but then Albert would get such a sad look on his face that I wound up saying yes anyway. On top of that, the first few times he took me straight to the institute, but recently he'd started taking detours to show me around the palace grounds. That was probably when someone saw us.

"Ah...that probably is me," I admitted.

"I knew it." For some reason Liz looked relieved, which left me confused and a little concerned.

"Why did you say it like that?" I asked.

"Hm?"

"You just seem kind of, I don't know, like you have one less thing to worry about. Would there have been a problem if it were someone else?"

Liz's lovely countenance twisted into one that seemed to say "Oh, I wish she hadn't asked that!"

I hurried to tell her that she didn't have to divulge anything to me if she didn't want to when she sighed and shook her head. "No, no. You see, for my part I was sure that it must have been you. However, there are rumors at the academy I attend that the woman was someone else."

"Really?"

"I'm afraid so."

According to Liz, the other woman was rumored to be one of Liz's classmates. That meant this other person was about fifteen years old as, if I remembered correctly, the oldest students at the academy were fifteen.

A fifteen-year-old and the knight commander? Oof, I could see how that would be suspicious.

"Lord Hawke's a lot older than girls your age though. Wouldn't that be a problem?" I asked.

"Oh, not at all. It would be a little unusual, but I wouldn't call it problematic."

Different worlds, I guess... But then what *was* the problem? As I pondered this, Liz wrinkled her nose and finally explained herself with some reluctance. "You see, it's more of an issue for the girl herself."

"How so?"

"Unfortunately, she has been the cause of quite a bit of trouble...since she's grown unusually close with a number of boys who already have fiancées."

Fiancées?! Of course I knew the word, but practically speaking, the concept was pretty foreign to me. Nevertheless, I could see how it would be a problem for this girl's fiancé to hear a rumor that she had gone riding with a knight.

As I understood it, the noble children attending the academy were often engaged by around that early age. In this kingdom, you were free to marry once you were an adult, and adulthood was the ripe old age of fifteen. So, maybe it wasn't "that early" after all.

In any case, I was curious to hear more. "Say, does Lord Hawke have a fiancée?"

"I do not believe so."

"Ah. From how you described the situation, I thought he must."

A spark of mischief had returned to Liz's eye. "If he did have a fiancée, then it would be a problem for him to go riding with any woman at all."

"Oh, hm. That's true."

"Hee hee. Lord Hawke is a gentleman who minds his manners, so I believe you have nothing to worry about."

For a moment there, I was concerned that I might have accidentally crossed some lines, but now my fears were assuaged. No matter what world you were in, it was no good to be involved in rumor-worthy activities with someone who was already engaged. Honestly, I had a feeling it would be an issue for Knight Commander Albert if people thought he was in a relationship with someone like me even if he *didn't* have a fiancée.

Unlike me, he could take his time picking and choosing his romantic partner. If only I could make people understand that he was always bringing me to the

institute because he was just such a thoughtful person. I felt awful that he might lose his chance at love because of this rumor.

"At any rate, there's nothing interesting going on between Lord Hawke and me," I told Liz firmly.

"Oh? Really?"

"Yes! A-anyway, tell me more about what this rumor is doing to your school."

"Oh, yes. Well, because the rumor is that she courted the attention of the Ice Knight—"

"Wait, who's the Ice Knight?"

Liz blinked. "Lord Hawke."

According to Liz, Albert was known as the Ice Knight first for his expertise in wielding Ice Magic and second because he so rarely made any show of emotion.

Wait, what? He's always smiling at me...

"Since Lord Hawke is so well-liked, they were saying things such as 'She's collecting again,'" Liz continued.

"Which I'm assuming means that the guys she's friends with at school are also popular?"

"That's right." Liz put a hand to her cheek and sighed gloomily.

So, to summarize, a classmate of hers at the academy had all of the popular guys waiting on her hand and foot. Someone mistakenly assumed she had also gotten involved with Albert, who was popular outside the academy, and now everyone was complaining about it.

But why did Liz seem so crestfallen?

"You seem pretty upset. But I'm not sure how this impacts you... Does it?"

"I'm afraid it does. The fiancées of the lords that girl keeps around have asked me to help."

"Shouldn't they be asking their fiancés to stop hanging around her instead of bothering you about it?"

"They say they have already made their frustrations clear, and yet the situation has not improved."

"I know this might sound rude, but aren't you powerless to help this situation, too?"

"Indeed..."

Liz sighed again and cast down her eyes, the picture of depression. It made me want to help *her*, if nothing else. But as someone who had close to zero experience in affairs of the heart, I had no advice to give.

"The other day, one of those girls stopped coming to school," Liz confessed.

According to Liz, the young lady's fiancé was one of the problematic classmate's admirers, but there was another issue.

Being fifteen, the girl was dealing with a mild case of acne and had been anxious about her appearance for quite some time. She kept trying to clear up her face, but nothing worked. As a result, she was unable to make herself look as pretty as she thought she should and felt plain compared to the other students.

One day, the young lady overheard her fiancé compliment their classmate to some guy friends of his. Liz had been with the girl at the time, so she heard his exact words. He had said that their classmate's skin was so smooth that he wanted to touch it and that she always dressed so prettily. At any rate, it all boiled down to praising her appearance.

In that moment, Liz and the girl left quietly before the boys realized they had been overheard.

The young lady was devastated. Her fiancé had never once complimented her in such a way, and she feared he was unhappy with her appearance. Already depressed about her persistent pimples, this revelation made her so anxious that she was now unable to leave her bed.

"If only she could do something about those blemishes, then I am sure she would feel just a little bit better," Liz said.

"That's true." I was mulling the situation. I couldn't give any advice when it

came to love...but I might just be able to help in my own way. "I might have a way to get rid of those pimples."

"Really?!" Liz's lovely face brightened immeasurably.

I nodded with a smile and proceeded to spend the next hour explaining in as much detail as I could everything I knew about how to tackle blemishes from my days in Japan.

Once Liz and I went our separate ways and I finished my work for the day at the institute, I sat down with materials to get cracking on more skincare products. I wanted to do everything in my power to help this young lady with her problems, even if it was only the acne.

Just as I was prepping the ingredients, Jude walked by. "Skincare again?" He could tell what I was up to just from looking at the ingredients on my desk.

I nodded. "Yeah, I'm helping someone out."

While I was hard at work on my new project, Liz got her friend to tell her what skincare and treatments she had already tried. Sure enough, Liz reported to me that the girl used products with terrible ingredients and dubious treatments that sounded more like some kind of sorcery.

For all I knew, one of those methods actually was the best way to banish pimples in this world, but for now, I got Liz to make her friend promise not to use any other kinds of cosmetics or treatments while she was trying out the one I made for her. We had to be scientific, or I wouldn't know what kind of effects my lotions had. Liz conveyed everything to the girl, including how to wash her face, what food could affect her skin, and that she absolutely needed to get a proper amount of sleep.

The skincare lotion I made was a sort of insurance in case the routine changes weren't enough. After I combined the ingredients—all of which I had heard could help with acne—into a glass container, I stirred them with a thin glass rod while imbuing it with magic. While I did so, I found myself wishing sincerely for the zits to heal and the girl's skin to clear up.

I didn't normally do such a thing when making these for myself, but this time was special.

As I rolled the wish over in my mind, the contents of the glass began to glow white. Nothing like that had ever happened before, so I was a little startled. I scooped some out and rubbed it on the back of my hand just to test it, but I didn't feel any concerning prickling or anything. In fact, I couldn't discern anything odd at all in the finished product.

I guess I'll do a patch test just in case. I'll give it to Liz once I'm sure it's okay, I thought to myself as I moved on to brewing the next lotion.

Two weeks after I delivered my homemade skincare products to Liz, I found her waiting for me in the library, brimming with excitement.

"Sei! Those skincare products you made were incredible!"

We were in the library, but she could barely keep her voice down as she excitedly came over to me.

Liz had passed the lotions and ointments I made to her friend the same day I gave them to her, as well as making sure to repeat my instructions for pimple care. The young lady had despaired of ever ridding her face of what plagued it, so at first she didn't seem very enthusiastic, but she went ahead and followed the instructions anyway. Amazingly, she began to see results the very next day, and everyone in her family was hugely encouraging about it.

One week later, she returned to the academy. The other ladies were in an uproar over the dramatic change in the girl's appearance.

"Though now I'm afraid we have another problem," Liz told me, though she didn't seem all that concerned.

"What's that?" I asked with a head tilt.

Once I heard the answer, I kind of regretted it. She wasn't kidding about it being a problem.

"Now everyone wants the same kind of skincare products that you made for her."

Not only had the young lady's pimples vanished, she now had flawless skin. The change had stoked the other young ladies' desires to improve their skincare

as well. They demanded to know what products she was using, and since the girl told them that she got them from Liz, they were pestering her instead. Liz refused to say anything other than that they had been made specifically for her friend, but the other girls were still giving her the third degree.

"I doubted you would be able to fulfill *all* their requests," Liz explained.

"You've got that right."

It wasn't just a problem of getting lotions to every interested girl but the fact that I'd have to keep making more and more in order to satisfy the needs of continuous use.

I told Liz to let me think it over a bit and returned to the institute. However, I couldn't come up with any solutions on my own. At times like these, the best thing to do is ask others for advice, so I brought my predicament to Johan.

"So, do you have any ideas?" I asked him.

"You've gone and done it again."

Despite his amusement as he laughed at me, Johan was a good person. We thought it over together and ultimately decided to give my skincare lotion recipes to a shop Johan had good relations with, which would then sell them for us. The products the shop made weren't as effective as mine, but they definitely still worked.

When I told Liz about our plan, word of the miraculous skincare products rapidly traveled from the lips of the young ladies to the ears of their families, and soon enough those lotions were such a popular product that the shop sold out on the very first day.

Naturally, Johan had sold the recipes in return for a percentage of the profits, and it went without saying that the research institute received a very nice return.

Act 5: The Royal Capital

IN THE SIXTH MONTH after my summoning, I knocked on Johan's office door.
"May I come in?"

I entered once I received permission, bringing with me a tea cart complete with tea, sandwiches, and sweets. Johan and Knight Commander Albert were seated across from each other on the facing sofas, waiting for me.

"That looks delicious," Johan said as I cheerfully set the table.

Both men were fixated on the plates I had brought. I wasn't scheduled to work that day, but when I heard that Albert was coming to the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora for some reason, I decided to make some things for them to snack on, like a sort of afternoon tea set. We didn't have a three-tiered tray, so I just arranged the food on regular plates. Liz did tell me that they used plates with legs for tea parties at the palace.

I poured the tea into cups and placed them in front of Johan and Albert. Finally, I poured myself a cup of tea and sat next to Johan.

I felt like Albert looked a bit distraught, but I tried not to overthink it. I mean, the prospect of sitting next to *him* made me feel way too nervous.

"Thank you for putting this together even though it's your day off," Albert said apologetically.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I really do enjoy cooking, so I didn't mind at all."

It might have been my day off, but on those days I usually wound up doing the same sort of things I always did. Plus, since Albert brought the sweets, I was happy to turn his offering into a real tea party.

Albert's sweets were all sorts of colors and so delicate. I think they must have been made out of fruit. Sugar was sprinkled on their tops, and they looked extremely sweet—and I'd hardly had anything that would count as dessert since I got to the kingdom, so I was kind of looking forward to this.

Johan and Albert were finished talking about whatever Albert had come to discuss, so the three of us got to chat while we dug into the food.

"Still, you do seem to work quite a bit," Albert said.

"You think so?" I asked.

"It's your free day, yet here you are at the institute when you could be anywhere else."

"Well, I do live here. And I like to get a bunch of chores done when I have the time."

I did exactly the same thing on my days off even back in Japan. I would get a lot of practical life stuff done, like the laundry and cleaning my apartment. However, here, I had finished all that in the morning, and luckily there was also a servant who took care of the laundry for me, which would have taken the most time.

As it turned out, the majority of the researchers who lived at the institute were from noble backgrounds and had never done their own laundry before, so they employed someone to do housework for them. However, I didn't like the idea of someone going into my room, so I cleaned it myself. I was pretty sure my colleagues had servants doing that for them, though. If they didn't, the research institute would have been a toxic jungle.

"Besides chores, don't you usually do more research or go to the library? That's nearly the same as work," Albert continued.

"But I really am working less than I did back when I lived in Japan."

Because of their positions at court, both Johan and Albert knew I had been brought here by the Saint Summoning Ritual. I didn't know if it was because they didn't want to make me miss it or anything, but they tended not to ask all that much about my life back in my old world. Occasionally I would bring it up myself, though, and because of that, they knew I used to live in a country called "Japan."

"I used to work every day from the third bell of the morning until the midnight bell," I told them.

"What?" Johan's eyes opened wide with shock as he raised his voice. I don't think I'd ever seen him look like that.

Albert didn't say anything, but the teacup he brought to his lips remained undrunk, and his eyes were wide as well.

Of course they were shocked. The third bell of the morning referred to 9 a.m., while the midnight bell was midnight, just like the name implied. Calculating in the time it took to get dressed and commute, I had to wake up at 6 a.m. every day and got home at 2 a.m. every night. We were supposed to have weekends off, but I went in on Saturdays anyway. I stayed home on Sundays so I could get my apartment back in order. Not to mention, I'd probably start having some serious health problems if I didn't.

In this world, on the other hand, people typically lived by the rising and the setting of the sun. It differed depending on your occupation, but our working hours at the research institute reflected that lifestyle as well. I'd been working from around 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. pretty much every day. That was it. Not to mention, during breaks I got to sit down and enjoy tea with my colleagues in the institute or with the Knights of the Third Order, and no one got mad.

Maybe other people's lives were different, but my life now was way more relaxed. I really got to take it easy.

From Johan and Albert's perspective, I supposed it sounded like I used to work far too much.

"By work, do you mean as in...you were required to attend parties in the evening or something as such?" Albert asked.

"Nope. I was a commoner, you know."

I knew attending parties was a requirement for nobles like them sometimes. Maybe some people back in Japan had that kind of responsibility, but I imagined it was the sort of thing only celebrities and the like had to worry about.

"A commoner who sounds nearly as busy as our prime minister," Johan mused.

"Oh, everyone I knew lived the same way."

"It really sounds like you worked yourself like one of our officials."

"It does?"

The government officials were run pretty ragged in this world. However, the majority of them were nobility.

"Oh, now it all makes sense," Johan said as if in understanding. He stretched a hand to my face.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"I was just thinking how much prettier you've gotten since you came to our world."

"Huh? Why are you saying something like that?"

"The condition of your face when you first came to the research institute looked exactly like one of those officials when they're especially preoccupied." Johan touched his fingers to my cheek and then ran his thumb along the skin beneath my eye. "But now even those dark circles are long gone."

It was the first time someone other than my family had touched my face like that. My heart began beating wildly in my chest. I was sure I was blushing, too.

Johan seemed quite amused by my reaction. His expression didn't change, but I caught a delighted glint in his eye. He had noticed I was unaccustomed to being touched by others and lately had taken to teasing me like this.



Nngh. I wanted to get away, but due to the close quarters of the sofa we shared, I couldn't move much and therefore was unable to put distance between us. As I was internally cursing the situation, I heard a cough.

I glanced across the way to find Albert glaring at Johan.

Please glare at him more! I pleaded. Turn him into an ice statue like some kind of Ice Medusa!

Johan noticed his friend's ire as well and promptly removed his hand. Then he turned his teasing on Albert instead. "What, you want a turn touching her, too?"

"That's not it!"

For now, though, I sipped my tea and breathed a sigh of relief.

It was hot. Sooooo hot. It was the middle of summer, though it wasn't as humid as it could get on an island like Japan. But hot was hot, and there was no wind.

If I could've gotten away with it, I would've worn a camisole and shorts with no shoes, but that wasn't possible. If I wore such attire in the research institute, I was bound to cause my poor colleagues to get nosebleeds and faint. Camisoles and shorts covered even less skin than the ladies' underwear of this world. That was why, even though it was the peak of summer, I was bundled up in a long-sleeved shirt and a skirt that covered my ankles. I felt like I would faint from heatstroke, so I rolled up my sleeves, but it was still suffocatingly hot.

I was supposed to finish some documents for Johan, but again, hoooot! I soon gave up writing altogether, and then I gave up trying to endure it, period.

"Say, Jude?" I walked over to his seat.

"Yeah?" he said. The heat seemed to be getting to him as well since he had his shirt magnificently unbuttoned.

That's not fair. I want to free my chest, too. Then I might actually be able to work!

"Would you mind coming with me for a moment? There's something I'd like some help with," I continued.

"Sure thing."

Jude let me bring him to the kitchen. It was long past lunchtime, so the chef was nowhere to be seen. I glanced around and spotted my goal—a cleaning bucket on a shelf along the wall. I scooped it up, placed it on the ground, and spun around to face him.

Jude was a deft hand at Water Magic, and I was pretty sure he once told me he could use his magic to fill tubs.

"Can you make cold water appear in this bucket?" I asked him.

"I can, but what are you trying to do?"

"I want to cool my feet."

"Uh, but..."

"It's indecent? Don't worry, there's no one else here."

In this world, it was considered highly improper for a woman to flaunt her bare feet at a man. Just the other day, Liz had lectured me about it as I was fanning myself with my skirt in the library. When I pointed out we were both girls, she gave me a tight, tight smile and said, "But what if someone sees you?"

Really, the look on her face at that moment was frightening.

Anyway, it came as no surprise that my request had Jude all hesitant and blushing.

"Maybe you should get a bucket to soak your feet in, too. I'm sure it'll feel nice," I suggested, trying to coax him like some kind of foot-bucket seductress. "You don't have to worry. No one's going to come into the kitchen at this time of day, and it's not like I'm going to soak my feet for hours on end. Please?"

"Ugh... Okay, fine. Just be careful that no one sees you."

"Thank you!"

Despite his misgivings, Jude called on his magic to fill my bucket with water and then swiftly exited the kitchen. I didn't miss that he shrewdly took another

bucket with him on his way out. No doubt he meant to do the same thing elsewhere.

Say what you want about propriety, but everyone gets hot.

The kitchen floor was made of packed earth, so it didn't matter if I spilled water on it. I moved the bucket over to a chair and sat right down. Then I raised my skirt over my knees so as to keep it dry, shucked my socks and shoes, and plunged my feet into the water. The sweet, cool water enveloped them.

Ahh, this feels so good.

No one was about to come into the kitchen, so I undid two of the buttons on my shirt and started fanning my chest. There was no wind to speak of, but the fanning gave me a very small bit of relief.

For a while I just sat in there, spacing out. But then, just as the water was becoming lukewarm, I heard the sound of the doorknob turning behind me.

"Sei, are you in—"

I whipped around at the sound of the voice to find Albert standing in the doorway. He was staring at me, frozen like a statue.

Eep. I get it. Seeing me in this state was a bit too much for a gentleman like him. How awkward. I hastily buttoned my shirt back up, yanked my feet out of the bucket, jammed them back into my shoes, and stood.

"Hello, Lord Hawke. Were you looking for me?" I said casually, desperately pretending nothing had happened.

At my words, the stock-still knight commander snapped back to his senses. He covered his mouth with his hand and looked away from me, a slight pink in his cheeks. "My apologies," he said in a strained voice.

Please, I'm begging you, don't act all embarrassed. Please just pretend nothing happened, I found myself wishing as I cleared my throat.

"I heard that you have a free day tomorrow," he said hesitantly.

"Oh, I guess I do." I had all but forgotten. I frowned at him, puzzled. *What about it though?*

At last, he let his gaze return to me. “I have a day off as well. I was wondering if you would like to join me on an excursion to the capital.”

“Did you just say go into the capital?!” I exclaimed. In all the time since I’d come to this world, I had yet to leave the palace grounds, let alone go into the adjacent city.

As Albert regained his composure, a smile crept over his face to mirror my own. “You spend even your days off cooped up in here, slaving away. Johan’s worried about you. You need to leave and enjoy a genuine break once in a while.”

“I see, so that’s why you asked,” I murmured. I supposed he wasn’t wrong. I had confessed as much earlier that month. I had nowhere to go, and since I lived upstairs, on my days off I could take it easy in the morning and still wind up working in the afternoon.

“Well, thank you for the offer. Please do take me with you,” I said.

“Excellent. I’ll come to fetch you tomorrow morning.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course, it would be my honor.”

Yay! I couldn’t stop wondering what the world outside the palace grounds would look like. Would it be like one of those traditional European cities? I had always wanted to visit Europe, but I got summoned to the kingdom before I could make it happen.

The rest of that day and the following night, I was overflowing with excitement over the prospect of the trip. However, I had completely forgotten something: the person I was going with was the not-so-icy Ice Knight.

The heart of the capital was a bit far from the palace, so we took a horse-drawn coach from the front gate. It was a plain affair, not one of those fancy things Albert’s family owned. *He must not want to stand out*, I thought. His clothes were also on the plain, common-folk side of things. I thought he might be trying to match the relative non-elegance of my attire.

However, I wished he had called for one of his family’s coaches. A normal one

was quite cramped, you see, and I was stuck inside that cramped coach with the well-built Albert. We were so close we were practically touching! To think a beautiful man was sitting right next to me. It was too much for me to handle, traveling in such close quarters to someone so gorgeous...

My level's not yet high enough for this kind of situation! Let me out! I'm all out of HP! I sobbed inside.

"Look, over there. That's Johan's estate." Albert smiled while pointing out the window.

"Ooh."

D-don't come any closer! Too close! Very too close!

I couldn't bear to face him, so I looked out the window where he was pointing to see an absolutely exquisite mansion. Since this was the royal capital, land prices had to be insane. And yet, Johan's home was enormous. Was his family actually rolling in it? "It's so huge..."

"Yes. His family is quite influential."

Makes sense, I thought as I carelessly turned my head back around.

Ack! Albert's face was so close to mine I thought I'd have a heart attack. Thankfully, he noticed my blushing and immediately put some space between us, but there really wasn't much room in the coach. My poor heart raced the whole ride into town.

To my delight, the capital was captivatingly adorable. It looked just like a historical town in Europe. The orderly red roofs were straight out of a fairy tale.

"Wow! This is incredible!" I exclaimed.

The coach came to a stop, and the door swung open. Albert exited first and held out his hand to me. I took it and descended as well. I drank in every detail in sight, including the crowds of people. We had to be near the city center.

"The marketplace is that way. Let's go," Albert said and then started to gently pull me along by my hand.

Huh? You're not going to let go of my hand?! Wait! Waaaait!

I couldn't help crying out in excitement as I took in the sights.

The marketplace was stocked with a brightly colored assortment of vegetables, fruits, meat, and fish. I even spotted what looked like a shop that specialized solely in mushrooms. Bakeries and stalls hawked bread and pastries, a true variety of goods, including a small white bread. I suspected it was a luxury of sorts, since it was more expensive than the other types on sale.

Mouthwatering smells lingered in the air. The quality of the cooking in this land left much to be desired, but there was an abundance of ingredients to be found. I especially enjoyed the things that I'd never seen before. With the way the marketplace bustled and overflowed with energy, one could call it the kitchen of the capital.

Between the shops, there was enough space in the road for eight people to walk side by side, but there were so many people that it was hard to navigate through them. As we made our way within the crowd, yet another shop caught my eye. While I was distracted, I felt a sudden tug on my shoulder. I realized I had been about to walk straight into the person in front of me.

"Thank you," I smiled stiffly at Albert for stopping me. He gave me the sweetest smile in return.

We had been holding hands since our arrival. No doubt it was because otherwise we would be separated, especially if I kept getting distracted by every other shop. Or maybe I was just trying to escape from reality and avoid the truth again.



I didn't want to think I was being careless, but I had almost walked into someone. And as a result, Albert had casually let go of my hand to draw me toward himself by the shoulder instead...

Ha ha ha ha ha... Was this a form of torture? Was God testing the strength of my heart? Or was Albert just taking my hand again to stop me from bumping into more people? I was scared of getting used to this intimacy. Yet he touched me again and again.

Eventually I managed to reach a point where I could smile—though it was still a bit stiff—and thank him without blushing. I'd say that was pretty good for inexperienced me.

Would it be okay if I stopped letting myself get so distracted by the shops? I wondered. But if I didn't let myself get distracted, then I might end up getting distracted by a certain someone else!

"Are you all right?" Albert asked.

"Um, yes, I'm fine," I said.

"Would you like to eat?"

"Well..."

It was still a bit early for lunch, but in truth I *was* hungry, possibly because we had left so early. Also, my feet were getting sore from all the walking. Albert seemed like he could keep going, but as I basically lived the life of a shut-in, I wasn't really conditioned for all this wandering.

Some stalls in the marketplace had caught my eye, but Albert was a noble. I doubted he was the type to buy street food. Maybe there was a café nearby?

"I, um, I could eat," I confessed.

"Then why don't we visit a food stall and find a place to rest our feet?"

Huh? And here I thought Albert was above this place. I was pleased by his suggestion, but was he sure about this? Sure enough to escort me to a wooden crate near a food stall. After taking my order, he left me behind to go buy it. Was it just me, or did this seem kind of routine for him?

After a few moments, Albert returned with a couple of skewers and two cups of water lightly flavored with fruit. I took one of each, and he sat next to me.

"It looked like that wasn't your first time patronizing a street vendor," I said.

"Johan and I used to come here all the time when we were younger."

"Really?" I was unable to hide my surprise.

Nobles come to the marketplace, too? I thought. I couldn't help pressing him for more details. He confessed that he and Johan would sneak into the city, passing themselves off as the sons of wealthy merchants. That made more sense to me.

"Oh, how much did these cost?" I asked him.

"You don't have to worry about that."

"Oh? But... Okay, thanks." I felt a bit bad about freeloading, and my voice grew quiet at the end of my sentence as I smiled self-consciously. *Well, I guess I'll have to pay him back later.*

The skewer was only seasoned with salt, but it was beautifully grilled. The serving size was just right, and I pretty much inhaled it. I finished it off with a sip of fruit water and savored the gentle taste on my tongue. This was also delicious, especially since I was parched.

"What's wrong?" Albert asked me with a concerned expression.

"Oh, nothing!" I must have been staring at the fruit water or something while I was thinking. I did have a thought, but...

"Really? If you don't like it—"

"No, no, that's not it. I was just thinking that this would taste even better if it were chilled. But I know ice is a luxury."

"I see."

Albert took the cup from me, and I tilted my head, curious. Soon, delicate waves of cold air began to waft from the cup.

Huh? What did he just do?

Albert returned the cup, and I discovered there was now ice floating in it. I

looked at him in surprise, and he inclined his head, signaling that I should drink.

Don't mind if I do!

The iced fruit water was just as lovely as I had imagined. I couldn't help smiling, which brought another smile to Albert's lips as well.

"Wonderful," I said.

"Really? Good."

"What did you do to it?"

"Just a little magic."

That took me by surprise, though I supposed it shouldn't have. In this world without refrigerators, the only way to get ice was to cut it in winter and keep it in ice houses—or to make it with magic. Not many people had Ice Magic strong enough to actually create ice, though, so it was incredibly valuable.

I had somehow forgotten that Albert could use just such magic. To be fair, I certainly never thought he'd actually use it in front of me.

"The ice really does wonders for the taste. Thank you so much!"

It must have been heavenly because before long, I had drained my cup.

"I'm glad you're so pleased," Albert chuckled.

It was hard to imagine that people called him the "expressionless Ice Knight." He always seemed to be smiling when I saw him, and in a way he just seemed to sparkle, you know? Not that any sparkliness had anything to do with anything!

Even dressed in his plain attire, he could hardly be mistaken for a commoner with that radiant aura of his. That morning, I had thought he looked like one merely because he wore those clothes, but now that we were amongst actual commoners, the disparity was readily apparent. Was it just a difference in upbringing? He was terribly pretty even while drinking fruit water. *Maybe* he could pass himself off as the son of a wealthy merchant, but no way could he fool anyone into thinking he was ordinary.

I must have been staring because he gave me a quizzical look. I quickly shook my head, uttered a few words of denial, and glanced pointedly away from him.

Please don't look at me in such a kind way, I begged silently. I'm already too full of emotions I can hardly bear.

After our snack, we left the marketplace and started down a street while browsing the storefronts. The goods on display looked to be of quality make with price tags to match, so I was hesitant to go inside any establishment.

I was steadfastly examining only the outside displays when Albert stopped in front of a certain store.

"Sorry, but would you mind if we stepped into this one?" he asked.

"Sure, I don't mind at all."

He had already followed me around all day, so I had no issue at all with letting him take the lead. I tailed him into the store. While the clientele seemed to be largely commoners, the merchandise was apparently high-end accessories for both men and women.

Albert went all the way to the back of the shop by himself, so I took my time investigating the variety of accessories on offer. Closest to me were hairclips and hairbands. The latter were in a box and layered in a pleasing seven-colored gradation.

At first I had let my hair grow after my summoning because I was too busy with work to get it cut, but it was now long enough to fall midway down my back. The hairbands were a bit expensive, but with my hair at its present length, I definitely wanted to be able to tie it up—especially given the summer heat. Maybe I'd buy myself a hairclip.

Looking over them, I found one I just adored. It was wrought from silver and looked quite elegant, with blue stones that fit into the latticework of the design. It was dainty and pretty, but its price was, let's say, impressive, and made me balk.

Maybe one without stones would be less expensive, I thought to myself as I began searching for alternatives.

Just then, Albert came back. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Did you find anything you liked?"

"Oh no, not really." I loved that hairclip, but it was still out of my price range. I would have felt bad making him wait while I tried to settle on a different one, so I decided to let it go for today and try again another time.

"Shall we go then?" he asked.

"Yes, let's."

I once more followed him out of the shop. When we were outside, he took my hand like it was the most natural thing in the world.

After our leisurely wander through town, it was starting to get late, so we hailed a carriage and headed back to the palace. I must have been exhausted both physically and mentally because the gentle rumble of the carriage soon put me to sleep.

My eyes fluttered open to the sound of someone's voice. The carriage had come to a stop. I gazed absentmindedly up at Albert, who smiled softly back at me.

"Are we there yet?" I asked.

"Yes. You must've been tired; you slept the whole way."

Uh-oh. Did I sleep on him?

I stared, wide-eyed, which only made his smile broaden.

Oh noooo. I definitely slept on him. And he definitely, definitely got to see what I look like when I sleep! My cheeks grew hot, and I turned away, wishing I could actually flee.

To make matters worse, Albert started laughing.

Argh, I think this is the most damage I've ever taken in my life!

I groaned as he studied me from the corner of his eye, amused.

Just like this morning, he stepped out of the carriage first. I supposed we couldn't stay in there forever, but he seemed a little glum as he offered me his hand to help me down.

Together, we walked from the gate to the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora, chatting about what we had seen at the marketplace and in the shops. It

had been a full and exhausting day, but overall I enjoyed it immensely.

It wasn't long before we reached the institute. I turned back to Albert and bowed my head. "Thank you for coming with me today."

"It was a pleasure. I had fun."

People called him the Ice Knight, but if you asked me, he'd been in high spirits the whole time we were together. He always had that shining smile on his face, and even now he was still grinning. I felt like I had dragged him around all day, but he accompanied me every step without a single complaint. What a sweet guy.

"I had fun, too," I said. "I'll see you later then." I turned to go inside, but he stopped me.

"Wait, I wanted to give you this." He held out a box that fit into the palm of his hand.

I wonder what it could be? I took it in both hands for now, simply surprised.
"What's this?"

"Please open it in your room. Feel free to use it if you like it. Good night."

"Huh? Wait, Lord Hawke!" I tried to stop him, but he had already left, making for a rather dashing exit.

I considered running after him but realized I was still totally beat and didn't have the energy for it.

Guess I'll have to head up to my room and open it. If it's problematic, then I can just go and give it back to him tomorrow, right? I pulled myself together, went up to my room, and steeled myself to open the box.

Inside was a lacework hairclip—the one I had loved in that accessory shop.

"How did yesterday go?" Johan asked as soon as I stepped into his office, a teasing grin spread across his handsome face.

"It was fun," I answered casually.

"How wonderful."

From the way Johan was peering at me, I could tell he wanted more details, but I simply placed the documents I had collected from all of the researchers on his desk.

"These are everyone's reports."

"My thanks."

I nodded and quickly turned my back to him. As if on cue, the questions were unleashed.

"So where did you go?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about yesterday, obviously."

I turned to find that teasing grin still plastered on Johan's face. It wasn't like Albert and I had done anything scandalous that I wanted to hide, but the way Johan seemed so amused by the whole affair irritated me to no end. So I fought back by plastering a mirrored grin on my own face. "Are you my dad or something?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Asking me for the details of my day off makes you sound like an overprotective father fretting about his teenage daughter."

"Hey now, you know I don't have a daughter." When he realized I was teasing him back, his smile became wry.

"We went into the capital. That's it."

"Oh?"

"Which reminds me," I said, contemplative, "he told me all about how you were such a wild kid."

"Eh? What exactly did he say?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

In truth, I'd only heard that he and Albert used to sneak out to buy food from the marketplace, but I purposely made it seem like something more dire. From the way Johan's smile now looked forced, I wager he got into plenty of trouble

in his time. Now I felt much better!

I grinned. “We went to the marketplace, ate some street food, window-shopped, and then returned to the palace before it got dark.”

“Is that all? How wholesome.”

Wholesome? All we did was go into the capital. I supposed that was “wholesome”—but as opposed to what?

“So long as you had fun on your date,” he added.

Date...? That bombshell of a word left me stunned.

Johan’s brow creased faintly. “What’s wrong?”

“That was a...date?”

“Hmm?”

“All we did was go into town.”

“You and Al went into town, had lunch, and looked in some shops together, yes?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Isn’t that a date?”

I just kept gaping.

Johan, of course, saw a window of opportunity for another attack. “When a man and a woman go out somewhere together, they call it a date, don’t they?”

Stop. That was a date? Wait! Was that the definition of a date? My head reeled as I thought back. I had never gone out alone with a guy other than my dad—at least not outside school or work. The most I’d done was join a group of classmates to buy materials for our cultural festival.

Huh? So, wait. Was yesterday actually my first date? My face immediately grew hot at the thought.

“But all Lord Hawke did was accompany me into town,” I protested.

“I thought he invited you.”

“He did, but! But I’m sure he invited me just because he didn’t have to work

either."

"Whatever the reason, he wouldn't have invited you if he wasn't interested in you."

"What?!"

"Why are you so shocked?"

"But...interested... *Interested*...?" I was at a loss for words.

That can't be right. There's no way someone like Albert would be interested in someone like me. Though I certainly don't think he hates me or anything... My thoughts whirled around and around as I stared down at my feet.

"Sei," Johan suddenly interrupted my ruminating, his voice quiet and soft.
"Was Al cold toward you?"

"Not at all! He was a perfect gentleman, even when I was getting off the carriage. But I thought that was a normal thing for noblemen to do here?"

"It is, now that you mention it."

"See? And he held my hand while we walked around and even paid for my food."

"Oh, yes?"

"And he even bought me a souvenir on our way home."

"Did he now?"

"Yes."

I withdrew a box from my skirt pocket and handed it to Johan. Inside was the hairclip Albert had given me. When I examined it in the morning light, I noticed the stones in this hairclip were slightly different from those in the one I saw in the store. They were paler than true blue—more a blue-gray color, like Albert's eyes. For some reason, I was reluctant to return it to him.

The hairclip I saw in the store was the kind of expensive I could afford if I saved up for a bit, but as a result, I was reticent to accept it as a gift—it felt too costly. I couldn't make up my mind about whether to keep it or not, so for now it lived in my pocket.

Johan took the box and opened it. For a moment, he looked stunned. But the look was gone so quickly I thought I had imagined it, and he returned to inspecting the hairclip. At last he closed the lid and handed it back to me.

"Sei," he said, "as you know, it's common for nobles to escort women while walking."

"Yeah?"

"But know this, Al has never given an accessory like that as a simple 'souvenir.'" Johan's teasing expression was gone; I had rarely seen him so serious. From his tone alone, I knew then that Albert hadn't given me this hairclip on a whim. I gazed at the box in my hands, and my face started to warm again.

"Is it really all right for me to accept such a precious gift...?" I asked.

"I'd say, if you like it, keep it." A gentle smile teased across Johan's lips.

I nodded wordlessly.

"Good day to you, Sei."

The very next day, I ran into Liz in front of the doors to the library on my way to return a book. It was unusual for us to find each other in the hallway. We never had an agreed time to meet, and I was always coming at different times for my work. As a result, I often didn't see her in the library at all.

"You changed the way you wear your hair," she commented.

"Yeah. I decided to wear it up since it's so hot."

"I see. And that hairclip is simply lovely."

"Th-thanks."

The door creaked as I opened it. Liz went first and immediately swept off in search of the book she came for. Meanwhile, I went to return my books to the librarian before looking for my next borrow.

Of course Liz had immediately pointed out my hairstyle. Her fashion radar had even honed in on the hairclip. I couldn't help feeling self-conscious about it

though, since it was a gift from Albert.

As I was thinking that and staring up in a haze at the front of the herbology bookshelf, Liz came up behind me. “Say, Sei? That hairclip really is elegant. Would you mind if I got a closer look?”

“Sure, I don’t mind...” I trailed off and turned to find Liz wearing a trademark lovely smile.

I really didn’t mind letting her examine it, but it would be a pain to properly restyle my hair after, so I asked if she was okay taking a look while I still had it in. She happily agreed.

To let her get a full eyeful, I moved over to one of the desks and sat in the chair. She followed behind me so she could get a look at it while standing. She didn’t touch it, but I could tell she was studying it closely.

“Such remarkable craftsmanship,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“And those gemstones are exquisite.”

“They are?”

“Indeed... Who gave this to you?”

“Huh? How can you tell?”

“Well, it looks quite a bit more expensive than the sort someone would wear every day, so I thought it must have been a gift. Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re right.”

“Was it, perhaps, from Lord Hawke?”

“H-how did you know?!” I gaped at her.

She gave me an exasperated look in return. “What do you mean how? It couldn’t be more obvious.”

Huh? Why? How was she able to guess so quickly?

When I demanded an explanation, Liz took a deep breath. Then she held her slender pointer finger in front of my face. “First, there have been rumors that

that Lord Hawke has a sweetheart now.”

“Oh my!”

“Of course, I believe that this woman is you.”

Was she for real? I hadn’t heard such a rumor. And what was with the emphasis on “that”?

Liz raised another finger as she continued. “Two, the stones in this hairclip are the exact same color as Lord Hawke’s eyes.”

“You notice everything...”

“How could I not? The stones are a perfect accent to the hairclip.”

“I didn’t mean the stones—I-I meant the color of his eyes.”

“The Hawke family is famous for those very eyes.”

“Ah, really?”

“Anyway, that was how I figured it out.”

“The color of the stones being the same color as his eyes made it that obvious?”

“Yes. Everyone knows that Lord Hawke’s taken a fancy to you.”

“Everyone does?!”

“Also, it is custom in our kingdom for men to give women they are attracted to something of a color that will remind the woman of themselves.”

“How do you mean?”

“Like something the same color as the man’s hair or eyes. Though I hear eye color is the more frequent choice.”

“Is...is that so...” I had no idea.

Which must mean that Albert actually does have feelings for... No way. That can’t be. I can’t even consider the possibility! Ohhh, what should I do? Was it really okay that I accepted such a thing from him? Johan must have known! Why didn’t he tell me?! I thought as I cradled my head.

Liz giggled. “It’s so cute how much you’re blushing right now.”

"I-I'm just not used to this sort of thing, okay?!"

"You're not? Really?"

To think I would end up getting relationship advice from a girl ten years younger than me! Wracked with unbearable feelings, I looked up to find Liz gazing at me warmly.

Argh, I just can't stand how these emotions are making me feel right now! Can I just run away?!

Act 6: Enchantments

ONE EARLY AFTERNOON, Jude said something that took me entirely by surprise.

“It’s enchanted?” I asked.

“You mean you didn’t notice?”

He was talking about my hairclip. Of course I hadn’t noticed! We didn’t have anything remotely like “enchantment” back in Japan. “Can you tell what it does?” I asked.

“No, I can just see that it’s definitely got one. It’s reacting to your magic power.”

“It is? And you can tell that, too?”

“Yeah, though you have to train to do it.”

“Huh, is that so...”

It seemed Appraisal Magic was needed to discern an enchantment’s type. Only a few people were capable of casting such magic, and they were, for the most part, employed by large companies in the capital, though a few court mages could cast it, too. What’s more, Appraisal Magic could assess people of sufficiently high level. However, the magic slid off an unwilling subject, and it simply didn’t work on people whose level was too high.

As for enchantments themselves, they could be applied to weapons, armor, accessories, and even tools. The enchantment was always fixed to a focus, such as a jewel embedded in the hilt of a sword. Notably, the focus could be imbued with magic before it was placed into a given object.

To manifest their effects, enchanted objects drew from a person’s magical power, and everyone had magical power, even if they didn’t have enough to actually use Magic skills. That interaction was how those trained to sense magical activity could tell if an enchantment was present. Jude had studied Appraisal at the Royal Academy and was still honing his skills in order to lend

them to his family business. What a diligent guy...

"That's actually pretty interesting," I mused.

"What is?" Jude asked.

"Enchantments."

"Huh? Don't tell me you want to give them a try." Jude gave me a troubled look.

"Is it that obvious?" I grinned back at him.

What's with that face? Of course I want to play around with it—it's not like I could've done it in Japan.

"Enchanting isn't that easy," Jude said.

"Ah, really?"

"First off, the material components are pretty expensive."

According to him, technically a ton of focus types *could* be used, but most enchantment-ready gems, ores, and crystals were both rare and quite costly, even when they were tiny. Plus, only a few people could actually perform enchantments, since it required skilled Magic. Therefore, the price difference between enchanted and non-enchanted objects was...substantial.

Yup. Huuuuge price difference. And the hairclip Albert gave me—with all those little jewels—was enchanted. Ahhh...

"What are you two chattering on about?" Johan asked as he passed by our station.

"Enchantments," I said.

"Why's that?"

"It seems my hairclip has some, and the practice piqued my interest."

"I see." Johan acted all casual, but he must have already realized what was up with my hairclip. I definitely noticed a slight waver in his eyes when I said the word.

Neither Johan nor Liz had mentioned anything about cost. Maybe this clip just

didn't seem that extravagant to nobles like them? For all I knew, the one I saw in the shop had been enchanted, too, though I doubted it—it hadn't been *that* much more expensive than the other accessories. As I mulled it over, I became increasingly daunted by the thought of how much my new hairclip must have cost. I began racking my brain, frantically wondering how I could ever repay Albert for such a lavish gift.

Johan's next words surprised me. "Want to give it a try?"

"Eh?"

"Enchanting. You just said you were interested, didn't you?"

Jude and I were shocked at the suggestion.

Huh? Is it that simple to just give it a go? I looked at Jude for confirmation. He seemed to guess what I was thinking, because he shook his head back and forth.

But Johan persisted. "I can make it happen. So? Do you want to?"

"Yes!"

I accepted without hesitation, I think because Johan was the one who offered. Besides, I was pretty intrigued.

Johan brought me to the barracks of the Royal Magi Assembly. It was quite far away—even further than the barracks for the Knights of the Third Order—so we traveled by carriage. I was glad we didn't try to trudge the whole way, though I didn't quite understand why we were going there. What did we need from them for enchanting? Some kind of magic tool?

Jude stayed behind on Johan's orders. He was told to focus on his work, which just made me wonder whether it was really okay for me to skip out on my own responsibilities. I didn't really get the standards for who had to do what.

Once we got there, Johan and I kind of stood out among a sea of people swathed in robes. I couldn't help thinking they were dressed just like you'd expect a group called a "Magi Assembly" to be. I remembered suddenly that the people who summoned me had worn those exact same robes. Were these the

people who had performed that ritual?

"Sei, over here." Johan beckoned me further inside from where I stood by the door, drinking in my new surroundings.

"Coming."

There were worktables aplenty, similar to our setup in the research institute. Johan came to a stop in front of one in the center of the room. On the other side of the table stood one of the robed mages, looking a bit nervous.

"I look forward to learning from you today." I bowed my head to him. He quickly bowed his head in return.

Eh? Is it just me, or does he seem scared?

"I shall now explain how enchanting works," the mage began with a bit of a forced smile.

What's up with him? Well...whatever, I guess.

The mage retrieved a partitioned box from the side of the table and set it in front of me. Inside, gems and ores were tidily separated out by type. According to the mage, to perform an enchantment I would first select one of these small foci, and then I would call to mind the effect I wished to bestow.

Effects differed according to the given enchanter's elemental affinity. For example, those aligned with Fire Magic could imbue an enchantment that called forth flame, while those aligned with Water Magic could instill a similar enchantment that summoned water. Holy Magic like mine bestowed what were known as support enchantments, which enhanced offensive or defensive abilities. Finally, some materials were more compatible with specific kinds of magical effects.

"For support enchantments, I recommend these." The mage pointed to a collection of gems. "What manner of effect would you like to instill?"

"Good question..." I murmured, thinking it over. What could I do? Support enchantments, support enchantments... Suddenly, I remembered the salamander—that fire-breathing lizard in the western forest. Could I make something to protect people against its terrible flame? "Is it possible to nullify a

type of magic?"

"Nullify?" The mage thought it over for a moment. "You may not be able to negate a type completely, but you could possibly lessen its power."

Hm. Maybe I could try thinking of a way to reduce magical damage instead.
"Okay, I'll try that lessening thing."

"Then I think this type of stone might be best."

The mage handed me his recommended focus and I pressed it between my hands. The focus was only about three millimeters in diameter, so I completely enveloped it by doing so. I carefully imagined the type of effect I wanted to bestow and called on my magic.

If possible, it would be better to have general resistance to all kinds of magic, not just fire, right? I thought as I channeled my power into the stone. *Yeah, something like that.*

And with that, I felt a small jolt against my palms.

D-did I break it?! Ohhhhh yep. I did. I totally broke it.

Timidly, I peeked into my hands. Just as I thought, the focus had broken in two. Panic flared.

"Did it work?" the mage asked.

"Uh, um, well, i-it looks like I broke it," I reluctantly admitted. I couldn't stay silent—they'd find out sooner or later.

When I nervously showed the mage, shock washed over his face. "What in the...?!"

Other mages rushed over to see what the ruckus was about.

What's going on? This is kind of scary. Don't all stare at me!

But everyone around me remained frozen, including Johan.

"It really is broken," my instructor muttered, stupefied, and also rooted to the spot.

Please, somebody, do something about this awkward situation!

An ethereal voice cut through the dumbfounded silence. “Did you try enchanting it with a resistance to a type of elemental magic?”

A man approached; he had silky silver hair and, behind a pair of glasses, blue-gray eyes that were somehow familiar. He exuded this cool, intelligent, lordly air, and in this moment, he was like an angel from heaven come to my rescue.

Lord Smarty-Glasses paid no attention to my gawping and took the stone from my palm to examine it. “And truly, all you tried to do was enchant it with a resistance to a single type of elemental magic?”

“Um, no...” I naturally straightened my posture under his cold gaze. I felt like a student being scolded by her teacher.

“Then what kind of enchantment did you attempt?”

“Um, uh... I thought it might be better to increase resistance to *all* elements, and uh...”

“This focus is inadequate for that degree of enchantment.”

Lord Smarty-Glasses put my cracked focus aside and chose another from the box. It was a black stone about five-to-six millimeters in diameter. Quite a bit bigger than the last one. Was it really okay for me to use? It had to cost a ton.

I glanced at the mage who was supposed to be guiding me and found that he also looked surprised, as did Johan.

“Is it really okay for me to use this?” I asked, looking from Lord Smarty-Glasses to the focus.

Lord Smarty-Glasses nodded and held the stone out to me. I gingerly took it and held it delicately between my hands, just like before. And, like before, I prayed for an enchantment that would resist all forms of magic as I imbued my own power into it.

For a moment, the stone flared hot in my palms—but then immediately the heat died away.

Did I do it?

I didn’t feel any sustained change, so I had my doubts. As I opened my hands to get a look, the smart-looking mage plucked the focus from my palm.

“Appraise,” he quietly commanded.

Ah, so he was one of the few court mages who could perform Appraisal Magic. I couldn't really say I was surprised. I watched him closely as he worked. His face was impossible to read, a perfect deadpan, and then the corners of his lips curved up the slightest bit. Like the stone's heat, the tiny smile was there for but a moment before it vanished.

“You succeeded,” he said.



The other mages gushed their admiration, but I only felt relief.

Yay, I did it!

But then a third gem was held up in front of me. It was another one of Lord Smarty-Glasses's selections. I frowned at him in confusion.

Huh? He wants me to do it again? Nevertheless, I took the focus; it was about the size of the first one I was given.

"Next, you should make one that mitigates the effect of poison."

"Okay." I nodded without thinking. I kinda doubted I could refuse him anyway.

This time, I tried to imbue the precise effect he asked for. He had once more identified the right stone for the job because I didn't break this one either. When I opened my palms, the man picked it up and cast his Appraisal Magic again. I must have done something right because he nodded with satisfaction and handed me yet another focus. I took this too, and he told me again what effect he wanted it to have. After I enchanted that one just as he asked, he seemed pleased and handed me yet *another* of the same kind of stone.

We did this over and over, with Lord Smarty-Glasses giving me an effect and me enchanting it exactly to order. He Appraised every single outcome and confirmed that they all possessed the correct enchantments. It went on and on and on and on.

It wasn't easy enchanting all that stuff, either—it took a cosmic heck ton of MP. And I mean, what were they planning to do with all of these anyway?

At first, Lord Smarty-Glasses wanted enchantments for countering poisons, then resistance to elemental magics, things like that, but eventually he started to ask for enchantments to straight up void poison and paralysis. Near the end, he even asked me to enchant foci with two different types of reduction effects.

Halfway through, I was running out of magical power like you wouldn't believe, but then one of the observing mages casually plopped a few mid-grade MP potions down in front of me. Five of them, at that. It seemed like a lot, but I found myself downing them all when I took a break. It wasn't that big of a deal

since potions didn't seem to interact with your digestive tract for some reason, so I could keep knocking them back without feeling sick.

Objectively, though, it was still a lot of potions. And all while I was chugging, a certain somebody lurked over my shoulder with the next focus to enchant.

"How long are we gonna do this?" I asked as I finished yet another enchantment. The novelty had worn off, and I was pretty ready to head back to the institute.

The enchanted gems I had produced like some kind of human conveyer belt were lined up all neatly in front of Lord Smarty-Glasses. He looked them over, nodded, and then walked to a locked shelf on the wall. From there, he extracted a remarkably large, clear stone. It must have been over one centimeter. And—that wasn't a real diamond, right?

Some of the nearby mages audibly gulped. Even Johan gaped.

"This will be the last," said Lord Smarty-Glasses. "Nullify all status ailments, nullify all magical attacks, nullify all physical attacks."

Ehhh? Three effects? And all of them nullifying? I wasn't the only one shocked by the command. The other mages' eyes were so wide that I expected their eyeballs to tumble out.

For my part, I wasn't even positive this request was possible. "Hmm, I'm not sure I can nullify magical attacks *and* physical attacks at the same time. However, I think I could maybe increase magical resistance and physical defense?"

"Is that so? Very well, add those."

I listened carefully to his instructions, then envisioned an enchantment that would nullify status ailments, increase magical resistance, and increase physical defense. This time, the heat in my palms was hotter than the previous attempts. The whole thing took longer, too, but when I handed it over to Lord Smarty-Glasses for Appraisal, his lips once more curved ever-so-slightly up. Now that's what I call success!

The mages, who had been collectively holding their breath, broke into an uproar. I let out my biggest sigh of relief yet.

"Good work," Johan said.

I was simultaneously vibrating with nervous energy and more tired than I had ever been. I wanted to get back to the institute as soon as possible and have some tea.

As Johan and I were about to leave the noisy mage barracks, Lord Smarty-Glasses held out a black stone to me. "Your compensation for today."

It was the very first focus I had successfully enchanted, the one with increased magical resistance.

Compensation? But isn't it worth a ton all on its own? Am I really allowed to have it?

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Quite. You certainly earned it."

"Oh." I took it gratefully.

The stone seemed to sparkle in my hand.

One week after I went to learn how to enchant objects with the Royal Magi Assembly, one of the researchers told me that Johan was asking for me, so I made my way to his office. There, I found someone unexpected: Lord Smarty-Glasses.

"Pardon me," I said as I entered the room.

"Sei, you come sit, too," Johan urged.

I did so while he explained the situation. The other day, it got out that the Royal Magi Assembly had acquired a large quantity of enchanted foci, and now the knights were requesting a share. The problem was that some of the requested items were impossible for the mages to make. When I asked why they didn't just say "No, sorry, can't," it turned out they did actually have the items the knights wanted—but they had all been made by me.

At first Lord Smarty-Glasses simply declined the knights' requests, but somehow the knights knew exactly what kinds of enchanted objects the Royal

Magi Assembly had, and they refused to believe any claims that they were impossible to make. After all, the Royal Magi Assembly was composed of the most competent mages in the kingdom. The knights knew there was nowhere else to acquire these items—if the Assembly couldn’t make them, of course a shopkeeper couldn’t either.

Given all that, Lord Smarty-Glasses had no choice but to come to our research institute to request my help in enchanting more gems according to the knights’ desires. “I realize this isn’t something I should be asking of you,” he said, “but would you grant us your aid?”

“I don’t mind, but...”

I mean, I realized it was my fault that this happened in the first place. I was the one who had asked the Royal Magi Assembly to let me enchant stuff. I had no qualms about helping out, but I needed Johan’s permission to leave to do something outside the scope of my job.

Oh, but I guess there’s always the chance that he might tell me to do it after I finish my work for the day? I glanced at Johan and Lord Smarty-Glasses followed my gaze.

Johan furrowed his brow and thought it over for a long moment before finally sighing and nodding. “Just this once. And it goes without saying that you better pay us our due.”

“Thank you.” Lord Smarty-Glasses’s face remained as impassive as ever, but from the way he lowered his gaze, I could tell he felt truly bad for having to ask this of me.

After a bit of negotiation between Lord Smarty-Glasses and Johan, it was decided that starting the following morning, I would spend the next few days working at the Royal Magi Assembly.

The next morning, I readied myself to leave, and once outside, I found a carriage had arrived from the Royal Magi Assembly. Johan told me that Lord Smarty-Glasses had arranged for a carriage to bring me back and forth from the palace each day. Their barracks were pretty far from us, so I was grateful for the

ride.

The carriage shook and jostled the whole way to my destination. Lord Smarty-Glasses was waiting for me at the entrance.

"Good morning!" I said.

He took in the box I was lugging in both arms and gave me an inquisitive look.
"That's a sizable chest."

"And it's all MP potions. I figured it would be better if I brought a bunch."

Lord Smarty-Glasses nodded in understanding and reached to take the box from my arms.

"Oh, that's all right. I can carry it myself," I insisted.

"There is no need for a lady such as yourself to carry such a heavy thing."

It really wasn't all that heavy, but he took the box anyway and immediately turned on his heel to go inside. I jogged to catch up. He brought me to the same workroom that I visited the other day, where mages were already knee-deep in enchanting.

"Do you mages start your day so much earlier than we do?" I asked, a bit flustered to see them all getting down to business. I had hoped to arrive before the time we usually started at the research institute.

"Not typically." Lord Smarty-Glasses went on to explain that since the knights requested so many new foci, the mages had to pull longer hours than usual. I asked if it would be better if I made a point to arrive earlier the next day, but Lord Smarty-Glasses insisted that I should come at the same time, since my assistance had been specially requested.

"Are we coming up on a deadline?" I asked.

"They asked us to have them properly equipped by their next expedition." A slight vein popped out on Lord Smarty-Glasses' forehead as he said that, but I was a little anxious already, so I pretended I didn't notice it.

My table was in the very back of the room. Another mage had set everything up for me before I arrived, and I found all of the foci I'd need readily available. We placed my box of MP potions by my feet, and then I quickly began

enchanting.

At first, Lord Smarty-Glasses stood by watching me. They only needed one type of enchantment from me, so after I finished the first few, it became mindless routine and I was able to do it while chatting without making mistakes. A part of me thought I should be quiet while I worked, but it felt kind of awkward having someone standing over my shoulder, so I decided to ask something that had been on my mind: “Was it the Knights of the Third Order who requested these?”

Yesterday, Lord Smarty-Glasses had only mentioned vaguely that “knights” requested the enchantments, so I had been wondering just which Order was due to receive the fruits of our labor.

“No, it was the First Order.” I glanced at Lord Smarty-Glasses’ profile as he answered and found he wore a sour expression.

Maybe he didn’t get along well with these fellows?

“I apologize. We ordered our people to maintain strict silence with anyone outside the Assembly, but there was a leak,” he growled lowly between gritted teeth, and a chill ran down my spine.

I wasn’t alone. All the nearby mages paled at his tone. It strangely felt like the temperature in the room had actually dropped, but surely that was just my imagination.

“Or maybe it was someone from our institute?” I offered. “I do have a colleague who knew I was coming here to learn about enchantments.”

“And they also knew exactly what variety of enchantments you cast?” Lord Smarty-Glasses asked.

“Oh, no, he wouldn’t...”

I had tried to lighten the mood, but my words had the opposite effect.

Jude was the one other person at the institute who knew about my enchanting adventures, but Johan stopped me from giving him any details. Johan was also the only person from the institute who knew exactly what I had done and, therefore, it was highly likely that it was indeed one of the mages

who had watched me enchant who leaked the information to the knights.

I suspected Johan's grim look yesterday, when Lord Smarty-Glasses visited the institute, was because he also knew about this intentional leak.

The mood of the room continued to drop by several degrees, so I concluded that I should probably shut my mouth and focus on my work in silence. Before long, Lord Smarty-Glasses seemed to decide I would be okay on my own because he stepped away.

The tension in the air immediately relaxed.

However, I continued on without speaking to anyone, picking away at this high-volume order one enchantment after the other. Before long, it was lunchtime. I was so focused that I didn't hear the noon bell ring. It wasn't until Lord Smarty-Glasses interrupted me that I realized what time it was.

"Are you not going to the dining hall?" he asked.

"Huh?" I looked around to find that everyone had already left. "It's noon already?"

"Yes."

It was a bad habit of mine to get so fixated on my work that I didn't notice what was going on around me. But I had brought some sandwiches from the institute, so I decided to stay in the barracks to eat. Lord Smarty-Glasses said he intended to take his lunch there as well, so we ended up eating our meals together.

The first time we met, he barely said anything more than what was strictly necessary, so I was worried that lunch would be one big awkward silence, but he actually talked to me quite a bit. Thankfully we focused our chat on work, so our conversation went a lot smoother than it would've if we were discussing the latest fashion, or sweets, or something else you'd normally expect a woman to want to talk about.

Lunch came to an end without a hitch, and it was time to get back to work. I kept at it until the end of the workday, taking breaks here and there to pop MP potions. I managed to complete about eighty percent of what I had been asked to make, so I figured it would take me one more day.

As I sighed, Lord Smarty-Glasses came over to see how I was doing. He looked a bit surprised as he took in the piles of enchanted foci. “You managed to make this many today?”

“Yup.”

Lord Smarty-Glasses picked up a handful and cast his Appraisal spell. It was important to make sure I’d successfully met the request, after all. Once he confirmed that they were properly enchanted, I was done for the day.

“Excellent work. I’ll see you again tomorrow.” His entire expression softened as he smiled. I was surprised by how different that smile made him look. It seemed his colleagues were taken aback, too, because for a moment I heard some kind of commotion. That sound made his smile instantly vanish. Too bad.

The next day, I returned to the Royal Magi Assembly to help finish the Knights of the First Order’s enchantment order.

I knocked on the door to Johan’s office. He immediately responded to bid me to enter, so I went inside with an apology for the interruption. Johan was at his desk reading a document.

“Excuse me, but there’s something I would like to discuss. Can I borrow a few moments of your time?” I asked.

“Sure, what’s this about?” he asked as he looked up from the document.

“I was wondering if it would be possible to order some things for me?” I handed a note to him.

He wore a puzzled look as he read over the contents. I wasn’t surprised; they had nothing at all to do with work. “Sugar, honey, and lemon? What do you want with these?”

“I thought I could bake some sweets.”

“Sweets?”

Truth be told, I was initially worried these ingredients didn’t exist in this world, but I had asked Jude and he confirmed they could be found, so I decided that I wanted to bake something sweet for the first time in a long, long while. I

used to make sweets all the time when I was a kid but stopped once I grew up and had to be a working adult.

"I want to make them for myself, so I am willing to personally pay however much these ingredients would cost. Would you mind adding them to the next inventory order for the dining hall?" I asked.

"For yourself? You mean you'll be the only one eating them?"

Aha, it wasn't the special individual order that was the problem, but the fact that he wanted some for himself.

Well, between him and the chef, I guess I'll just have to make some for everybody then.

"If you're interested in having some, then the amount I wrote on that note won't be enough," I told Johan.

"Just add however much we need to the order and bring it to me."

"Are you sure? Aren't sugar and honey expensive?"

"Don't mind the cost."

"Just so you know, I'm only going to pay for myself."

"Who said you were going to pay anything?"

"Don't tell me you're going to borrow from the research funds..."

"As if I would!" Johan gasped in shock.

Jude had told me that sweetening ingredients like honey and sugar were quite precious in this world and had a cost to match. I couldn't even imagine how much we would have to pay to get enough of such expensive ingredients to make sweets for everyone in the research institute. The dining hall had its own budget to worry about, so I doubted we could borrow off that. Of course I had assumed he was thinking of the institute's research funds, but wait a minute... What if he was planning to pay for it with his own money?

"Anyway, don't worry about it." Johan smiled subtly, as if he could read my thoughts. With that, he waved me off, signaling me to leave.

A few days later, we received all of the ingredients I asked for. I spent my day off camped in a corner of the kitchen from the wee hours of the morning, dealing with the enormous quantity of ingredients. It would've been way too hard to make enough for every single person in the research institute all by myself, so I got help from the chefs. It was good timing, as they had recently asked me to teach them a sweets recipe.

Speaking of which—though we had started with only the one chef, we now had five. They rotated shifts in such a way that there were three on hand at any given time. Word of the delicious food at the research institute dining hall had spread all the way to the palace, so people from the palace dining hall had been dispatched to ours to study under the chef.

Together, the chefs and I poured our energy into baking simple cookies with honey and lemon pound cake. I only vaguely remembered the recipe, but it felt like it came together. What a relief.

When we took the pound cake out of the oven, it was well baked. The other chefs were in the middle of lunch preparations, but they kept glancing at the oven while they were cooking because of the sweet smell wafting out of it. There was no way I could deny them the chance to try it first. The taste test seemed to go well, so I waited for the rest of the cake to cool before cutting it into slices and placing them in baskets.

I left it up to the chefs to distribute those baskets to Johan and the other researchers, and then I set off on my merry way to the barracks of the Knights of the Third Order. I was pretty hyped because I could finally do something I'd been needing to: I was going to repay Albert for the hairclip.

Ever since Jude told me how much the clip was really worth, it'd been bothering me. I felt like I had, had, *had* to repay Albert for such a valuable gift even if it was because he, uh, apparently, um, fancied me.

That was why I used the black gem I had enchanted to fashion an accessory to give him as a gift. It took me a while to choose what to affix the focus to, but I decided on a necklace. A ring might impede his swordplay, and I didn't think he wore earrings—and a necklace could be kept out of the way.

I didn't know what necklaces were typically like in the kingdom, but I made a

dog tag since those weren't unusual menswear in Japan. I engraved a cross on the flat and embedded the focus at the center. It was a safe enough design, if I do say so myself.

Granted, there was no way that I could have actually made such a necklace all by myself, so I had outsourced some of the work to a store Johan introduced me to. He wore an awful smirk the whole time.

Anyway, I still felt kinda embarrassed just bringing the necklace to Albert, so I was going to give him cookies and the pound cake, too. And I thought it'd be the most charming thing to hand it all to him in a basket.

When I arrived at the knight commander's office, the knight posted at Albert's door beamed as he smoothly announced me. What did it mean that I got to be announced as soon as I said, "Hi, how are you?" I couldn't have been expected; I came on a fast horse and didn't remember sending a messenger out ahead before I left or anything.

It probably had something to do with that rumor about Albert and I always riding together. I knew it wasn't really good for him, but whenever he asked me, I just couldn't refuse him, and we totally ended up riding together all over again.

Ahhh...

The knight opened the door before I had a chance to put my jumble of thoughts back in order.

"Pardon me for the interruption," I said as I went inside.

I found Albert at his desk dealing with documents as usual. High-ranking soldiers like him had to deal with mountains of paperwork on top of expeditions and practice.

"What brings you here today?" Albert asked me.

"I made some cookies and a cake, and I hoped we could share some." I recited the words I had come up with ahead of time, and they caused his expression to immediately brighten. Oh nooo...

Yep. I can't look you in the eye right now. Sorry. Please don't ask why!

I handed over the basket. He removed the cloth I had draped over it and examined the contents. They were arranged in such a way that at a glance, he could only see the cookies and pound cake. I had buried the box with the necklace under the goodies.

"This looks divine. Let's enjoy them right away."

It was validating to get that response, but as he stood up with the basket, I couldn't help but wonder if he was really in the middle of a break or if I had interrupted. In any case, now that I had handed over the basket, I could flee.

Then he had to go and speak just as I tried to excuse myself, saying, "Would you like some tea to go along with these?"

Nooooo, I just want to go home before you notice the necklace... But I just couldn't win against the hopeful look he shot my way... Aaahhh, I surrender!

I gave up and plopped down on one of the reception sofas at his suggestion—and then he sat right next to me. *There's a whole other sofa over there!*

Three entire people could have easily sat on it without getting in each other's way, but nope. Still sitting right next to me. I was a little bewildered by his proximity, but the impulse to flee softened—I guess I was kind of used to this now thanks to riding on the same horse so often?

That familiarity frightened me. How should I put it... Recently, I felt like I was rapidly running out of places to run.

A few moments later, a maid brought in some tea; the gentle fragrance floated through the room. An insightful play by the guard at the door—he must have called her to bring some for us.

The amber drink placed before me was the kind of high-quality tea I hadn't been able to enjoy since my summoning. I took a sip. It was perfectly astringent and easy to drink. Just what you'd expect tea to be like from the royal palace's reserves.

For some reason, the maid also thought to bring us two plates, so I took the cake and cookies from the basket and handed them to Albert.

I suppose that knight noticed I brought sweets? Oh, he must have smelled them!

"I don't generally enjoy sweets, but this is quite delicious," Albert's mouth fell into a smile as he took a bite of one of the less sugary cookies.

"I'm glad you like them."

Of course it made me happy to see him enjoy them so much, and I was lured into returning his smile. At that, his own smile deepened and—ack. The attack power of a beautiful man's smile is way too high. My face began to burn a little.

Crap. Eye contact is too dangerous!

"Say, there's something I've been wondering about..."

Just as we were enjoying our tea after the treats, Albert pulled the box containing the necklace out of the basket.

I choked. I should have been praised for not actually spitting out my tea just then.

How did he notice it so quickly?! I thought I hid it!

"Why is this in here?" he asked. "It looks like an enchanted accessory."

"Uhhh..." I glanced here and there, everywhere around the room, trying to figure out how to explain myself.

Ahhhhhhh! I can't think at all!

I let myself send a fleeting glance in Albert's direction. He was gazing at me with a mix of happiness and anticipation.

In the end, I reached the limits of my brainpower, so I just went with the truth. "That's also for you. To express my gratitude for the hairclip."

His smile grew even deeper and more intimate. "Is it all right if I open it?"

I nodded. It was bitterly hard just sitting around waiting for him to do so, so I ended up telling him all about it. "The other day, I learned how to do enchantments with the Royal Magi Assembly. That's a focus I made that day."

The moment Albert silently removed the lid and looked inside, his eyes widened.

"I enchanted it with magical resistances. I was thinking it might be something you'd like to take with you when you go on one of your expeditions." As I explained, the temperature of my face steadily increased. I was so self-conscious that I couldn't look at him straight. Because I was staring so hard in any direction but the here and now, I didn't realize what was happening next until it was already upon me.

My gaze snapped to my right hand when I felt something touching it—Albert's fingers. He slowly and deliberately raised my hand and then everything felt like it was happening in slow motion.

He has such long eyelashes, I thought recklessly as I gazed down on them, transfixed. This line of thought was absolutely an attempt to ignore what he was doing and escape from reality.

The next thing I felt was something softly brushing against my fingertips.

The last thing I remembered was the passion with which he gazed up at me.

As for how I got back to the research institute, I don't remember that at all.



Behind the Scenes II

“THIS IS THE ONE, Your Majesty.”

Deep within the palace lay the king’s office. Erhart Hawke, the magus of the Royal Magi Assembly, presented a tray draped in black velvet to the king. Upon the tray lay a large diamond. It was the one Sei had enchanted to nullify all status ailments, increase physical defense, and increase magical resistance.

The prime minister, who stood beside the king, was an impassive, unreadable man, skilled at political trickery, yet at the sight of this enchanted stone he audibly gulped. None could blame him.

The enchanted gem Sei had created was by all rights something that should have been unobtainable, except as a prize from a monster-slaying expedition or from an archaeological excavation in the deepest part of an

ancient ruin. During a monster-slaying expedition, there was a rare chance that upon slaying a monster, it might drop an enchanted tool. The quality of these items depended on the strength of the beast. The stone Sei had produced was as potent as the kind of item dropped by a demon that required every single knight in an Order to defeat. It was the stuff of legends—a legendary-class item.

There were, in fact, a few objects with similar properties kept safe in the royal treasury. However, those had been painstakingly collected over the course of centuries, and the kingdom possessed only a small number of them. This was the first time the king or prime minister had ever seen such a rarity outside of the scrupulously guarded treasury.

“I understand now why you requested we speak in private,” the king said with a deep sigh.

Erhart had communicated discreetly with Johan, the head researcher of the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora, in order to arrange this sequestered meeting. Aside from the king and prime minister, Erhart and Johan were the only other people in the room. As Sei had already freely performed

enchantments in plain view of the Royal Magi Assembly, they ordered the mages to silence, but they couldn't dismiss the possibility that her skills would leak, and so were limiting any further disclosures as much as possible.

As Erhart and Johan described Sei's legendary feat, these two people, who kept order in the kingdom, were dumbfounded. They also began to grasp the necessity of keeping the truth concealed. As the word implied, the legendary item Sei had enchanted would be exceedingly useful to military operations. If sold on the market, it would go for an astronomical sum. The woman who could create such objects was a golden goose.

If word of her ability got out, there was no doubt people would devise nefarious plots to use Sei for their own ends.

Erhart told the king in detail of the events leading to the creation of the enchanted gem. When Johan had contacted him and spoken of Sei's interest in magic, Erhart decided to use the opportunity to investigate her abilities. Since the only person who could Appraise Stats was the grand magus, and he was still in a coma following the ritual, they had yet to determine whether Sei or Aira was the Saint. However, half a year had passed since the summoning, and there was no telling when the grand magus would awaken, so the ministers had begun discussing how to test Sei and Aira's magical gifts.

As Aira was attending the Royal Academy, they had been able to examine her powers from multiple angles. Meanwhile, Sei had been placed in the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora. There, she performed the same tasks as any other researcher, and as a consequence, tests of her skills were progressing more slowly. The officials had been reluctant to press her due to the unfortunate events following her summoning, so her request to experiment with enchantments had been a true lifesaver. At the time, the king had accepted Erhart's report, and it was decided they would study Sei's magical power through enchantments a few days later at the Royal Magi Assembly.

The ensuing investigation made plain that Sei possessed astonishing magical ability.

At the Royal Magi Assembly, Sei's tests were planned in advance. The effect of an enchantment depended on the enchanter's elemental affinity, level, and

reservoir of magical power. More powerful effects cost greater amounts of magical power and required a higher level of Magic skill. Therefore, to an extent, the relative power of an effect could reveal the enchanter's ability.

First, they would use enchantments to determine Sei's elemental affinity, and then they would attempt to gauge her level by gradually increasing the difficulty of the type of enchantments she cast. If possible, they would also have her perform enchantments until she exhausted her magical power, then estimate her maximum MP based on how many MP potions she drank after.

Since Sei had been summoned to be the Saint, there was a high likelihood that she possessed Holy Magic, so they began her test with support-type enchantments. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, Erhart was compelled to take over her testing, though thankfully he was able to see their plan through to completion. He led Sei step-by-step through enchantments for damage reduction, resistance, and finally nullifying effects, gradually increasing the difficulty of his orders.

The maximum skill level for Magic was typically thought to be ten, though only one or two people in history had managed to achieve it. Most of the mages in the Royal Magi Assembly were only Level 3. Damage reduction was an effect anyone could enchant so long as they possessed the minimum level of Holy Magic. Resistance enchantments required Level 3, and nullifying enchantments demanded at least Level 5.

That was why, when Sei suggested a nullifying enchantment for her first try, the mage overseeing her recommended she begin with the easiest type, reduction, instead. However, she mentally changed her enchantment right before she performed it, so the attempt failed and the gem broke. Nevertheless, her second attempt to enchant a focus with increased magical resistance was successful. From this, they were able to deduce that her level was likely higher than Level 3.

Notably, after half a year, Aira was currently at Level 4 in Holy Magic, though she was at Level 1 when she first began attending the Royal Academy. It was easy to imagine the surprise of the mages when they realized that, despite never having taken a lesson on magic, Sei was at least Level 3.

In order to test her further, Erhart began ordering Sei to perform numerous different kinds of enchantments. He gave his orders in an incredibly businesslike manner, so everyone was on edge while they watched, wondering when Sei would lose her temper with his demands. Thankfully, she performed all of the enchantments as instructed without incident.

While a base reduction effect required at least Level 1, some effects required a higher level to produce. For example, Level 1 was sufficient to cast a poison-reduction enchantment, but paralysis reduction could only be cast once one reached Level 2. Erhart gradually and meticulously increased the difficulty and variety of effects he asked from Sei, and eventually she proved able to cast nullifying enchantments as well—an effect available only to those higher than Level 5.

It was at this point that the researcher in Erhart got the better of him. The next thing he ordered was one focus with two effects—a feat that had never been successfully achieved, even in historical record. He knew it was likely impossible, but he wanted to see her try. He instructed Sei to enchant a focus with two of the simplest types of reductions...and Sei was able to do it just as she had the rest.

By then, the whole Assembly was extremely curious to test the limits of Sei's magic. Up to that moment, the other mages had been watching surreptitiously, but at that point it was evident they were all focused on her.

As they were about to take a break, Erhart gave one final order just to see how far Sei's magic could go: nullify status ailments, nullify magical attacks, and nullify physical attacks. It was a definitively impossible request. Two simultaneous enchantments had been infeasible enough, let alone three of such a powerful type. Yet Erhart asked it of her all the same.

Sure enough, Sei was unable to perform that final test exactly to order...but in its stead, she enchanted a stone that could nullify status ailments, increase magical resistance, and increase physical defense—a legendary object in every respect. Consequently, Erhart determined that Sei's Holy Magic skill must be the maximum at Level 10.

The truth was that this wasn't her level at all, but this wouldn't become clear

until much later.

"I believe that her Holy Magic must be Level 10 and her base level exceeds Level 40," Erhart said in a hushed tone.

The king and prime minister went wide-eyed at his words.

A person's Stats included a base level in addition to their Battle skills, Production skills, and the like. Base level affected fundamental stats such as HP, MP, physical attack, and magical attack powers. The base level of an ordinary person was usually between Levels 5 and 10. A graduate of the Royal Academy might be between Levels 15 and 20. Knights and mages employed by the palace were around Levels 30 to 35. Only the commanders of the Orders and the grand magus were above Level 40.

Given the amount of MP potions Sei drank during her enchanting, Erhart estimated Sei's maximum MP to be around 5,000. Only the grand magus himself had that much MP, and his base level was Level 45. Erhart had estimated Sei's own base level by working back from there.

"That's quite high," the prime minister let slip.

As for Aira, the crown prince regularly had her check on and report her levels. According to her, her base and Magic skill levels when she first started at the Royal Academy were both Level 1, but over the course of the past half-year, she had reached Level 16. Considering that other students reached anywhere from Levels 15 to 20 during their three years at the Academy, the ministers determined that Aira was able to level up with unbelievable speed. It wasn't just her base level either; her Magic skills increased from mere consistent use. With potion brewing, she was able to proactively level up, and now, at Level 4, her Holy Magic rivaled that of any mage in the Royal Magi Assembly.

However, these levels still fell far short of Sei's.

"If her level is so high, can we not confirm she's the Saint?"

"It's too early to say. My mages have been combing through our archives for the specific Stats of the Saint, but we have yet to find anything that describes them in detail."

"If only we had just a few more records..."

"Perhaps the important thing to identify is not her Stats but whether she is able to purify the miasma and wipe out demons. We have found a number of books describing those aspects of her abilities."

The royal library was brimming with stories of the Saint's monster-vanquishing feats, as well as romances between past Saints and historical royalty or knights, but nothing was written about their daily lives, such as Sei's success in making potions and casting enchantments.

Of course, there was a reason why the books were more focused on certain aspects of the Saint. Previous Saints had indeed been able to perform enchantments like Sei. None produced legendary-class enchanted gems like she had, but they were still able to produce magical items beyond the strength of common people.

The king and his advisors were ignorant of this fact because of the wisdom of prior generations. Those past leaders had realized that if the Saint's true skill set became known, some people would inevitably try to manipulate her to ends outside her most critical purpose. As such, they prohibited the chronicling of anything other than her ability to eliminate monsters.

The current king was likely thinking along similar lines. Since the beginning of the secret meeting, Erhart had watched the king's expression gradually grow darker and darker.

The mere existence of the Saint was categorically a marvelous thing, and regardless of whether Sei actually was the Saint, her talents would greatly influence the nation's strategies. However, if her abilities became public knowledge, in all likelihood, people from both inside and outside of the kingdom would make attempts to possess her for themselves, and the kingdom would fall into chaos.

The king had a duty to consider how to protect Sei from such people. He couldn't allow himself to be simply happy they had found the Saint when he thought of what was to come.

"We must strengthen her guard," he said.

They all understood what the king meant. Recently, though more people had been coming into contact with Sei, few actually visited the Research Institute of

Medicinal Flora where she worked, seeing as it was so far removed from the palace. Guards had quietly been installed to watch over her since she moved to the institute, but because of its location, it was easy to spot any suspicious people. Furthermore, Sei usually kept to the institute, so they didn't need to post as many guards. But given that the results of her tests had been leaked, the current guard was insufficient.

They would increase her protection immediately. However, this need for increase brought to light yet another problem. Johan had made clear that Sei desired a normal life. Therefore, they couldn't have guards dogging her footsteps like they did Aira. They had to maintain a small enough squad to ensure that Sei remained ignorant to their presence.

In the end, they decided to have the new guards pose as chefs in the research institute dining hall and as additional researchers in the institute so that there would always be several protectors near her at any given time.

Act 7: Magic

IN THE SEVENTH MONTH after my summoning, the sun's rays were as strong as ever, but the tyrannical daystar itself felt like it was gradually starting to set earlier and earlier. I continued to water the herbs as part of my daily morning routine, but as the sunrise also began to grow later, I could sense fall approaching.

"Morning, Sei."

Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, Jude moseyed over to me as I was sprinkling water over the roots with my watering can.

Obviously, there was no way I could water the whole garden by myself. The garden had been expanded, too, so the only part I took care of was the corner for my personal use. Many of the researchers had their own plots, so we each took care of our own, and we employed a handful of gardeners to tend the rest.

"If you'd told me you were out here, I could've helped." Jude frowned at my watering can.

When he found out I watered my herbs daily, he offered to assist me with his Water Magic, with which he was able to water a wide swath of plants all at once. However, I would have felt bad begging for help every single day, so I only asked for his assistance if I bumped into him when I was headed out to do the chore.

"Thanks, but the sentiment alone is enough for me." I smiled at him.

He smiled back as if to say "I tried!"

I was finished anyway, so we headed back to the institute together. Jude didn't have his own plot; he usually just came outside to help me out. On our way, I confirmed the day's schedule.

"Are we getting the herb delivery from the store this morning?"

"Yup. And it's a lot more than usual, so Johan said we need to help move

them all into the storehouse.”

We were planning to brew a whole bunch of potions for the Knights of the Third Order, but we would've exhausted our garden for want of ingredients, so we had to procure some from elsewhere. The store happened to be the one run by Jude's family, so Johan was pleased that we were able to obtain the extra supplies with a friends and family discount.

According to Jude, his family's store in the capital was rather large and dealt in a variety of products. I had also learned that they supplied the ingredients we ordered for the dining hall. I felt a bit bad about that though, since I thoughtlessly requested so many ingredients for the sweets I made before.

“What time will they deliver?” I asked.

“Probably around the third morning bell.”

“Then we should head over to the storehouse right when it goes off.”

There were clocks in this world, but they were extraordinarily expensive, so only a few people actually owned them. Consequently, commoners used the bells rung by the churches to tell time. These same bells rang at the palace as well. The third morning bell was about 9 a.m. in the morning. Because the storehouse was next to the institute, we'd be there in time so long as we headed over there the moment the bell started ringing.

We went as planned, but in the end, I didn't get to do anything. All the other researchers and servants unloaded the vast quantity of boxes containing the herbs from the cart without me. I would be the one using most of the herbs, so I wanted to help, and I tried, but for some reason everyone firmly turned me down.

Well, to be honest, it was nice to see my colleagues showing off their strength, which they rarely did, but I felt a little guilty just watching. Ultimately, I gave up and decided that I'd be the one to deliver the potions to the Third Order instead. The potions would be ferried by a cart and donkey, so no one could consider that objectionable heavy labor. However, the servants still did all the loading for me.

That's right, I had learned how to drive a cart all on my own. At first I was

worried about not being able to guide the donkey, but it was surprisingly easy. That was probably because the donkey was such a very good donkey, yes he was. He quietly and earnestly obeyed all of my directions. It occurred to me that this was yet another thing I never would've learned how to do back in Japan, just like making potions.

“Huh? Sei?”

As the servants were unloading the potions at the side entrance to the Third Order’s barracks, I ran into some knights who had just finished training. Because they were in practice mode, they weren’t in their usual uniforms but rather clothes that were a bit more casual. After joining them on that expedition, having them test the effects of food with me, and other stuff like that, I was on pretty good terms with all of the knights. At least, good enough that they would come talk to me whenever we saw each other.

“Ah, did you bring us potions?” one of the knights asked.

“Yup.”

“Fantastic. The potions your research institute makes are unbelievably effective. They’re bona fide lifesavers on our expeditions.”

“I’m happy to help.”

With training finished across the board, I soon found myself surrounded by a ring of knights. They were all taller than me, and many were rather well built. It kind of felt like I was surrounded by a literal wall of flesh.

“We always order a ton, but it must be tough, huh? And they’re going to ask for double this amount next time, right?” the knight continued.

“Huh? Really?”

“No one told you?”

I hadn’t heard anything of the sort from Johan. To tell the truth, I could make three times the amount of the current order with magical power to spare, so I didn’t think it would be a problem if they ordered double next time.

According to the knight, both the Second and the Third Orders were due to go out on an expedition together. Therefore, they wanted enough potions from

the research institute to cover the larger force. There would be a ton of problems if only one of the Orders had my especially effective potions, so Johan and the knight commanders concluded they would need to double the typical inventory.

No wonder we got more herbs than usual.

"If you're deploying so many knights at once, is it because you expect to face powerful monsters?" I asked.

"Not necessarily. But we're headed to the Ghoshe Forest next, so it's more that both Orders are going just in case."

"I see."

Ghoshe Forest was where that salamander appeared. They had managed to slay that fiend, but a large-scale mission would hopefully protect them from suffering as many injuries.

"Is the First Order going?"

Second Order, Third Order—I figured a First Order must exist as well. Hadn't Lord Smarty-Glasses mentioned it? But my casual question was met with a round of bitter looks between the knights.

I tilted my head in confusion, wondering if I had said something I shouldn't have.

"The First Order has to protect His Highness," one of the knights answered reluctantly.

"The prince?"

"Well, Prince Kyle and his men are heading to the eastern forest to level up. The First Order is under orders to escort him, so they won't be joining us this time."

Kyle, Kyle...? Oh, yes, that redhead prince. It took me a moment to put the name to the face.

"The crown prince is already at Level 15, though. I doubt he'll be able to level up much in the eastern forest at this point," one knight said.

"Yeah. The southern forest would make more sense," another agreed.

"Especially if he has guards," said another.

According to the knights, the eastern forest was for novices. There, Academy students could easily increase their base level to Level 12. As such, since the crown prince and most of his company had already reached Level 15, they had little to gain from the excursion. The southern forest had stronger monsters, so it was preferable for leveling up from Levels 12 to 20. Furthermore, the crown prince had apparently been to the southern forest before, so it was strange to see him going back to the eastern one.

"But isn't it because the Lady Saint is with him?" one knight said.

"Ah, yeah, probably."

"Lady Saint?" I inquired without thinking.

"That's what the crown prince and his company call the girl he's been taking care of."

I had guessed as much—who but Aira was under care of the crown prince and called the Saint?—but the knights proceeded to tell me everything they knew about the situation. To summarize, Aira was attending the Royal Academy, where the crown prince and his close companions were always by her side to watch over her. As the crown prince called her the Lady Saint, these kids were motivated to level her up as fast as possible for the sake of the kingdom.

Since Aira entered the Academy later than her classmates, and since the crown prince was of a higher level than she was, he was taking her to the forest to increase her level at a faster speed. Of course, the prince and his companions were all royalty, or the scions of noble families, and the Knights of the First Order were escorting them to ensure their safety. In other words, the prince was planning to power level Aira, but he chose the eastern forest over the southern one because he thought the latter would be too dangerous.

"He sure takes good care of her." I was a bit relieved to hear that nothing bad had happened to Aira. I hadn't heard much of anything about her after our summoning, but she was younger than me, so I was a bit worried for her.

For some reason though, the knights were sharing odd looks with each other.

Huh? Is there something on my face?

“If you ask us, you’re more Saint-like than she is,” one said.

“The prince has gotta be blind,” another said.

“If you ever need anything, feel free to let us know. We’ll gladly help you out.”

It kind of felt like they were pitying me as they offered me words of comfort, but I was fine. They didn’t need to try to console me. I was living a peaceful life doing what I wanted to do, after all.

“Ha ha ha. Thanks, guys. I’ll be sure to come straight to you next time I’m in trouble.”

They called me “Saint-like”...and to tell you the truth, it troubled me. But only because my Stats suggested that I was, in fact, the Saint. However, I didn’t have any intention of declaring with certainty that I was—or telling anyone anything about my suspicions either.

Though, I also had no intention of denying it if someone finally figured it out. I was still a little wound up about what happened the day I was summoned and wasn’t ready to meekly accept all that rude treatment yet. Therefore, I intended to live a carefree, normal life until someone figured out who I really was.

Ugh, I couldn’t stop thinking about what I learned at the barracks of the Third Order. More specifically, I couldn’t stop thinking about *her*—the other girl who had been summoned with me.

She, who the prince had whisked away, was attending the Royal Academy. I had no problem with that, given she was probably still of school age. What bothered me was the fact that her base level was apparently lower than that of her classmates when she started.

After I left the knights and got back to the institute, I asked Jude, and he told me that first years at the Academy were usually about Level 7 or 8. According to the knights, most third years were around Level 12 to 16, like the crown prince was. Talented students usually passed Level 15. If Aira had caught up to her

classmates, that meant she was about Level 15 at most.

That was when I remembered my own base level. I checked again and it hadn't increased at all since my summoning. I was still Level 55.

You heard me. Level 55.

Aira was Level 15 and I was Level 55... Even if she was higher than Level 15, she was still probably at a lower level than me. I asked out of curiosity, and Jude was Level 20. I also asked the knights, and a lot of them were above Level 30. I couldn't imagine Aira's level being higher than theirs. Why in the world was there such a disparity in our levels?

I felt like I knew the reason, but I didn't want to acknowledge it. It probably wasn't the difference in our ages. Ahhh, I really didn't like the idea that I was the Saint...and Aira wasn't.

If I were the only Saint, then I wouldn't be able to keep living a peaceful, everyday kind of life anymore. And I was sure Aira wouldn't be happy to learn she had been summoned and turned out to not be the Saint after all.

"Whoa. You're really going all out today, huh?" I turned toward the speaker to find Johan wearing a stunned expression.

Being so absorbed in my thoughts, I had accidentally made way more potions than necessary.

Because the Third Order asked for such a huge batch, I had optimized the process to be able to make several at once. Next to the pot I was currently stirring were half again as many potions as a regular medic would be able to brew in a single day.

"My apologies. I had something on my mind, and it seems this got away from me."

"You look like you're able to keep going. Think you can make double this amount today alone?" Johan asked with a dry smile.

"Yes, I believe I do have enough magical power for that."

His smile stiffened when I said as much. When I first started working at the institute, they used to get worried about me draining my MP with all those low-

grade HP potions, but recently they were more worried about their rapidly dwindling herb reserves. We had the ingredients for high-grade HP potions now, but I was prohibited from using them because they didn't want me to deplete their stock any further.

My Pharmaceuticals skill didn't seem likely to increase any further than it already had, so recently, when I procured the herbs for high-grade HP potions from a store, it was only to make potions for the Third Order. As those kinds of potions were both conspicuously over-effective and pricy to boot, and most expeditions went to the safer regions of the eastern and southern forests, the majority of my high-grade potions would likely go unused and we'd only end up stockpiling them.

But if the Third Order was headed to the western forest, I thought it might be best if we had high-grade HP potions on hand just in case, so I had decided to make a few.

If I wanted to pose as an ordinary person, the most I could do publicly to help the Third Order was make potions, but I had gotten too enthusiastic about it, and by Johan's expression, I could tell I definitely made too many.

With that, I had accidentally reached the quota that was supposed to take me all day by the early morning, so I decided to go to the palace library. I wanted to research herbs that might make high-grade HP potions even more effective. I had been reading up on herbs for some time now, but I had yet to find anything on this topic. I asked Liz about it once, and she told me that there might be something in the Forbidden Depository, but, of course, not just anyone could waltz into a section with that kind of name.

I had no choice but to keep working through the available herbology collection. I still had a ton of books to get to. However, on that day I was just looking for any book that looked like it was related to herbs as a means to kill time, so I ended up grabbing a completely different kind of book that suddenly caught my interest.

The title included the words "Holy Magic."

My weird base level aside, the weirdest stat of all was the one for my Holy Magic. What the heck was ∞ ? "Level Infinity"? That made no sense, but maybe

it had something to do with being the Saint?

I had learned about base levels from recent conversations, but I hadn't heard anything about levels in Holy Magic, so I had no idea what the average level was. Even though I was curious, I was afraid to ask anyone in case they started prying about my own level. I was even a bit nervous asking everyone for their base levels, but thankfully no one had asked mine in turn.

Anyway, as for my Holy Magic level, I highly doubted it was going to increase any time soon—or ever—but it wasn't like I had particularly studied it before or anything, either. I don't know if I would've minded studying...increasing my levels in Pharmaceuticals and Cooking was pretty fun, after all.

However, I'd been wondering about my levels more since I heard about Aira's situation. We were both summoned at the same time, yet her base level was far lower than mine. From that, I figured it was likely that her Holy Magic skill level was lower than mine, too. I really, really hoped not. I wanted to live a carefree life, and I could only do that if Aira's Holy Magic was on the same level as mine.

And also, I mean, if I were to be labeled the sole Saint, I'd probably have to spend more time with that crown prince, and that was something I wanted to avoid with a burning passion.

But I digress. After hearing about Aira's studies and the knights' expedition into the western forest, the very same one where that salamander appeared, I started wanting to study magic, too. I had heard from the knights that the number of monsters was decreasing, but I still worried for them. What if they got badly injured and needed magic—not potions—to save them?

That one high-grade potion hadn't been enough to completely heal Albert, and I faintly remembered that, at the moment, someone wished someone could use healing magic. If such a thing could be the lynchpin of someone's survival then I wanted to study it, even just a little bit, before attempting to use it. That was why I was so immediately intrigued by this book about Holy Magic.

"Are you interested in magic?" I suddenly heard someone say.

I was surprised to find a man standing directly behind me. The contents of the book in my hands were actually terribly difficult to parse. I was prone to getting especially absorbed in complex reading, so I hadn't even noticed him until he

spoke.

"Though I believe that book may be on the denser side of the subject," he said.

"Ah, yes, you're right. I was just thinking I'd like to find something a bit easier to read."

"Perhaps this one would suit your needs."

He picked a book from the shelf and handed it to me. As I flipped through it, I saw that it was way, way easier to understand. It looked like something even a beginner like me could grasp.

"Thank you very much," I said.

"Don't mention it."

That was all he said. He looked at me closely, though.

Yep, I was definitely getting weird vibes from this guy. Why, you ask? Because he looked a whole lot like *him*.

This man seemed older than me, but *that* guy would probably look just like this man when he was older. Meanwhile, this fellow was much taller than me, if not taller than Albert. His hair was a brilliant copper color, and the gentle way his eyes closed while he smiled made for exquisitely well-balanced features. He really did look like *him*, if not quite the same. You'd probably say that he was blessed in the looks department as well.

Overall, because of his age, this man was way more able to bowl me over than *he* ever could be. His sex appeal was on a completely different level.

I must have been visibly perplexed, because at last he spoke. "Forgive me for not introducing myself sooner. My name is Siegfried Salutania." His smile turned serious as he gave a graceful bow. That elegant manner and his name had to mean he was a member of the royal family. "Your name is Sei, I believe?"

"Um, uh, yes."

Crap. In my surprise, I forgot to introduce myself in turn. He had already confirmed my name, but I figured it would be better late than never to actually go through the motions.

"My name is Sei," I said politely as I held a corner of my skirt like a noble lady, and—what is it called—curtsied? Yes! A curtsy. Since he was most likely royalty, it only seemed proper. When in Rome, do as the Romans do! In that moment, I was thankful Liz had taught me some manners. I never knew who I'd run into when I came to the palace.

Lord Siegfried quickly put a hand on my arm, forcing me to straighten. "No need to be so formal. If anything, I owe you my most sincere apologies."

I wasn't sure what he meant by that. I gave him a questioning look, and he put that sober expression back on his face as he bowed his head.

"I heard my son was terribly rude to you. Please, allow me to apologize for his appalling behavior."

"Your son?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Wait, do you mean Kyle...the crown prince?"

"That is correct."

Wait, Kyle was his *son*? Which meant that Lord Siegfried...was the *king*!?

"Pl-please don't bow like that!" I exclaimed.

"But..."

"I'm not bothered at all!"

That was a lie, but seeing a king bow to *me* of all people nearly gave me a heart attack.

But he was insistent. "I should have apologized to you sooner, and in a more proper setting. Please forgive the location."

"That's quite all right! Please don't worry. I—I *prefer* this kind of setting!"

The king persisted in explaining himself, telling me that his formal apology had been postponed due to some political issues. However, he still felt it was problematic that he hadn't yet said anything directly to me, and when he heard that I frequently came to the library by myself, he started dropping by to try to meet me in person. We had just never run into each other until now.

Formal or not, though, I didn't want such a grand apology.

"Furthermore, you have performed numerous meritorious deeds since your arrival. I was thinking you deserve a reward. Is there anything you desire? Land, perhaps, or a title in court?"

"No, no, that's all right," I insisted.

"Is that so? Then how about your own estate in the capital?"

"No, thank you, not that either. I wouldn't be able to manage it myself."

"I could employ some servants to assist you?"

"Servants?!"

I turned down every single one of his ideas. He even got into dresses and accessories, which I have to admit I was more genuinely interested in, but I just didn't have the space, so I politely declined that offer as well.

At length, the king smiled sardonically. "Johan was right about you."

Apparently, the king had tried to offer me rewards before, but Johan had stopped him on account of how I'd probably refuse them. And he was right. Good job, Johan!

"Very well, I shall acquiesce—for the moment. I beg you to think it over, though. I shall grant you anything you wish so long as it is in my power."

He still had that seductive smile on his face, but then he excused himself, stating he had another appointment, and my abrupt audience with the king was at an end.

The whole thing was bad for my heart in more ways than one.

"Ow!"

Today wasn't my usual day for home ec with the chefs, but I felt like cooking, so I was helping out anyway. The lunch menu had already been decided, so I was cutting vegetables when I accidentally cut myself. It wasn't deep, but a trickle of blood oozed from the injury.

I surreptitiously glanced about. The other chefs were busy with their own

preparations, and no one was looking at me.

“Heal.” In my smallest indoor voice, I cast Healing Magic on myself. The cut vanished like it had never been.

Magic sure is something else.

I was studying how to use magic from that book I had borrowed from the palace library. But classroom learning alone won’t carry you in a crisis, so I was using it every chance I got. It was practice, so to speak.

And it was a good thing I was putting in the work, since at first I wasn’t able to cast magic that well. Book in hand, I tried again and again until I finally managed to invoke it, so I thought I was at least okay now. When the knights returned from the Ghoshe Forest, I would be able to call on my Magic skills to help them, if necessary.

After we delivered the rest of the potions to the Second and Third Orders, they set off to the forest as planned. We didn’t have much time to prepare, but I bulldozed through all of my magical power and somehow got the whole order finished in time. After that, I could only pray for their safe return.

Before I knew it, their expedition was over and both the Second and Third Orders were back. The Ghoshe Forest in the west was a bit further from the capital than the eastern and southern ones, so it was almost two whole weeks before we saw them again.

About a week into the expedition, I was relieved to hear the potions were helping as we’d hoped, and there hadn’t been any casualties. However, there were still some injured, and they were taken to a place kind of like a hospital to be treated.

Albert told me he would be swamped with expeditionary reports on their return, so I waited a few days before going to the hospital to check on the knights who were under care. I was well acquainted with the Third Order fellows, and I’d heard some of them were among the injured.

I also decided to bake my usual cookies as a “get well soon” gift and brought those along.

“Hello!” I called out as I arrived.

"Oh, hey, is that Sei?" said one of the knights.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Doing great, thanks."

Another knight snorted. "Yeah, right. You were half-dead when we got here."

"Shut up!"

The building the knights were in really did feel like a hospital. They were set up in rooms large enough to fit ten beds apiece. The room I first entered was filled with knights who had deep lacerations and stab wounds that had yet to heal.

The knights explained that as it had been so long since the last expedition, a large quantity of monsters had amassed in the western forest, so the injury rate was high. Things were rough, seeing as they only had so many potions, but they managed to make the most of each so that, in the end, they made it out with everyone still alive.

As a result, everyone in the room had drunk potions to stop their bleeding and returned to the palace. Most of them expected to be doing better within a week or so, but to tell the truth, all of them could have used more rest.

For the time being, with so many hospitalized, no more expeditions were planned, but the patients had been instructed to return to their Orders the moment they could move properly. The more practical training they missed, the more time it would take for them to fully recover their strength.

I couldn't criticize, given my own habits, but I got the feeling the knights were also workaholics.

"It must have been really tough going out there," I said.

"I'm just glad I made it," the knight replied.

"Yeah, we're still here because of your potions," said another.

I blushed a little at the praise. "Thank goodness they helped."

I was even more relieved there weren't any casualties.

I would've liked to talk to them about other stuff, too, but I heard there were

more knights from the Third Order in other rooms, so I said my goodbyes and went to visit them as well. I was showered with thanks in all of the rooms I came to. It made me grateful that I worked so hard to brew all those potions. My heart lightened as I moved from room to room until I spotted a knight who left me speechless.

“Oh, coming to see how we’re all doing?” He smiled as if nothing was out of the ordinary, but the fact was that he was missing his left arm.

I somehow managed to nod. He seemed a bit troubled by my odd behavior and scratched his cheek with his right hand.

Sure, something that was usually there now simply wasn’t, but I’d never thought I’d be so shocked to see...nothing. I was at a loss for words. “Your arm...”

“Ah, yeah, I got clumsy.”

The knight laughed as he told me how a monster took off with his limb. When I asked if potions would be able to heal him, he explained that while high-grade potions could regrow a missing fingertip, a whole arm was out of the question.

That meant the knight commander got really lucky with that salamander.

“Well, if potions don’t work, do you need Healing Magic?” I had heard it was more effective.

“Yeah, supposedly,” the knight said. He wore an awkward expression and spoke hesitantly.

“Is there some kind of problem?”

“Well, you see, it’s difficult to recover missing limbs even with Healing Magic.”

According to him, the caster needed to be at least Level 8. The problem was that currently, there wasn’t anyone in the palace with Holy Magic above Level 6.

“Really?”

“There have never been that many mages who can use Holy Magic.”

There weren’t many mages in the first place, and even among them, their

elemental affinities varied, and most types didn't include Healing Magic. And of those, only mages with an affinity for Holy Magic could use Healing Magic powerful enough to regrow missing limbs. If elemental affinity varied that much, there really were only a small number of people who could help him.

"I'm just glad I was able to use a potion to stop the bleeding. If it weren't for that, they would've had to cauterize it."

It hurt just to imagine.

"Thanks for stopping by today. I'm glad I got to see you one last time," he added.

"Huh? What do you mean last?"

"Once I can walk again, I'm quitting the Order and heading back home. There's no way I can continue being a knight with a missing arm."

It made sense, I guess, but I didn't want to accept such a grim thing as truth. I stared at his arm, which had been cut off above his elbow. Thanks to the potion, the severed flesh had cleanly knit back together, and I couldn't see any bone.

It was missing. Gone. And because of that one missing thing, I'd never be able to see him again.

If I remembered correctly, he was a commoner who had joined the Order after graduating from the Royal Academy. Once he left the Order, he'd go back to that distant life outside the palace and never again return. When I thought of that, my heart sank.

I gently touched his shoulder. He started in surprise.

"If...if you could have your arm back, would you want it?" I asked.

"Well, I..." His smile disappeared as his face scrunched up. Of course it did. No one would choose to *lose* an arm.

The regrowth of a missing limb required Level 8 Holy Magic. That meant I was more than able to do it.

But if I heal him, it'll be hard to insist that I'm an ordinary person, I thought. If I didn't know him personally, I might've just pretended I didn't see anything and

walked away. No...I'd probably end up healing anyone I saw who was in need, no matter who they were.

I had a feeling that even if I initially walked away, I'd end up going back to help them anyway.

My heart churned with an uneasy melancholy. I was such a coward.

I focused my magic into the palm of my hand that was touching his arm. I could adjust the degree of healing based on the amount of magic I gathered. Since I was regrowing an arm, I called up more than usual.

I prayed for him as I cast the spell. "*Heal.*"

As I spoke, the knight's body was enveloped in a thin layer of pale light. A thick white mist gathered at the site of his missing limb and gradually took on the shape of an arm. The white of the mist slowly became one with the light enveloping his body, until color was the only difference between flesh and haze. Golden particles that reminded me of the glint of lamé shimmered out of the white, and for a few seconds the knight himself glowed. When the light receded, his left arm was once more whole.

For a moment, the knight gaped at his arm. Tentatively, he opened and closed the palm of his restored hand.

"Does anything feel weird?" I asked him, a bit worried because of how he just kept opening and closing his palm.

"No," he said after a long moment.

I did it. Thank goodness. I smiled, happy that I was able to help him.

He stopped with the flexing and just kept staring at his hand. "Sei," he said in a quiet voice.

"Yes?" I looked at him curiously.

He took me by surprise then, seizing both of my hands, which I had since settled on my lap. I let out a yelp, but he didn't let go.

"Thank you." The knight's usual bright demeanor had gone oddly fragile; his brow was scrunched up, and he looked like he was about to cry as he thanked me.

"Uh, you're welcome?" I felt a bit self-conscious and my voice went up by accident.

His shoulders sank, and he was back to his normal self. "Why are you asking that like it's a question?"

"Um, I don't know."



I was a bit, ah, relieved. It had made me nervous to see him behave so differently—especially since normally he was such a carefree kind of guy. I guess he felt the same way, as we chuckled humorlessly at each other for a moment.

Suddenly, I felt like I was being watched. I looked around to find all the other patients in the room staring directly at us. Each of them wore a look of astonishment and hope.

Ah, okay, right. It made sense. I had just grown this guy's arm back.

It occurred to me that there might be others with similar issues in this room, and I was right—they were all missing an arm or a leg. Their status probably depended on what exactly they were missing, but the room was filled with people who would likely have to quit being a knight once they were discharged.

They had to be thinking that I'd be able to heal them, too. And since I had healed one, there really was no escaping it now—I had to heal them all.

I took a deep breath and asked the knight I just healed to bring me MP potions from the research institute, regardless of their potency. I mean, the only thing he had been missing was his arm—it'd be fine to ask him to run an errand for me, right? And I had a lot of magical power, but I might just run out while healing the whole room.

The knight readily accepted and after taking a few steps out of his bed, he made a sound of surprise.

"What's wrong?" I asked with concern.

He didn't answer me at first. Instead, he stamped his feet where he stood and started bending and stretching. After going at it for a long moment, I heard some weird creaking sound as he slowly turned to face me.

"You even healed my old injuries," he said.

"Huh?"

Apparently, I had healed not only his arm but an old bum knee that bothered him from time to time. The lingering pain had completely vanished.

"Wow, Healing Magic can even address old injuries? That's great!" I said.

He shook his head. "No, that's...that's not normal."

Oh no. Was my fifty-percent-bonus curse at work again? Or did I pour too much magic into him? But I didn't like the idea of possibly failing to heal someone by skimping on magic, so I didn't let myself dwell on it too much. I'd think about this scar-healing stuff later and focus on fixing the others for now.

I went to everyone in the room, healing them one after the other. From small scrapes to large gashes, my magic mended all injuries, whether external or internal.

Magic sure is handy.

Every time I healed someone, at first they were blown away, and then they thanked me, on the verge of tears. Though, there were some who did actually cry. I had never seen a grown man cry before, so I felt kind of flustered by it all.

When I was finally finished and ready to head home, I found a crowd of people at the door. Realizing I was done, some of the crowd filtered into the room and started checking in with my patients.

I asked what was going on, and someone said they heard the commotion in this room and came to see what was up. I supposed they must have heard some of the men actually crying out with joy.

The people coming into the room seemed to be the knights' friends, so of course they had known the gravity of their injuries. Though, everyone here was hospitalized due to wounds from the expedition, so they all knew one another to an extent.

Everyone was overwhelmed to see their fellow knights fully healed. Gleeful shouts rose up across the room. Some of the knights even thanked me on behalf of their friends.

I felt quite pleased with my good deed, but it really was time to return to the institute. Right when I was going out the door, I bumped into a knight carrying MP potions—the very ones I had requested in case I ran out of MP. Surprisingly though, I had had enough MP to heal everyone in the room. I had assumed I'd need a ton of magic for the spells, but Heal didn't seem to require that much.

However, since this guy had actually brought the batch to me, I felt bad not

using them.

I guess I could heal everyone else for practice...? Yeah, sure. Why not?

I was already at the point where I couldn't keep claiming I was just an ordinary person anymore, after all. It was time to get serious. I would heal the patients in the other rooms as well.

I had planned to carry the MP potions myself, but the knight who brought them and the others all firmly refused and wound up carrying them for me instead. Together, we went into the next room with curious onlookers trailing after us. It reminded me of those scenes in medical dramas where the main doctor strides down the halls with an entourage of nurses and doctors in their wake.

For my part, I felt incredibly awkward to have so many people watching me, but there was no getting rid of them, so I did my best to ignore them.

Once again, I went from bed to bed, healing one person after another, all the while drinking the potions. There sure were a lot of people hospitalized here.

After a bit I was starting to get really tired of healing them all individually, which was when I remembered an area-of-effect healing spell I'd read about in my book. It was the right time to make a go of it. I had already healed everyone who was missing limbs, so all that remained were the patients who were still recovering. I figured that if I messed up and didn't fix someone completely, or if the magic just didn't work, then I could fall back on my individual Heal spells.

In the next room, I walked to the center of the floor and stopped. There, I released the magic I had been concentrating into my palm, thinking of myself as the center as my magic filled the room. Though, it wasn't like I could actually emit magic power from my whole body, so it was more like I focused my mind on the image of pushing the magic within me to flow outward? Something like that.

"Area Heal!"

The moment I cast the spell, I finally felt a wave of magic rush out of me. A magic circle appeared, centered under my feet. It was drawn in lines of white light, and that same misty white haze with gold-lamé sparkles hung in the air

within the circumference of the circle, just like it did when I cast regular Heal.

For the few seconds it lasted, it was a wondrous sight, just like a scene out of a fantasy story.

When it faded, I looked around, wondering if it worked. Indeed, it seemed everyone who had been in the circle had been healed. They tentatively checked their injuries, and then smiles began to bubble to the surface.

Yes! I wanted to strike a victory pose.

But then I heard a familiar voice behind me. “Did you just use an area-of-effect healing spell?”

I turned to find Johan and Albert.

“Y-yes, it seems so. What brings you here, Johan?”

“Is that such a mystery? It was late, and you still hadn’t returned, then a knight from the Third Order came to get MP potions. I had a feeling you might be involved, so I came to see just what was going on,” Johan said, though he still seemed a little shell-shocked.

“I’m sorry...”

My apology made that old sly smile of his return. “You sure know how to show off.”

“Ah, I wasn’t trying to do anything like that!”

“Speaking of, you even managed to heal those who had lost a limb? I can barely believe it,” Albert said.

Okay, I admit that I overdid it a bit, but what else was I supposed to do? I couldn’t just ignore those hopeful looks. I had to help.

And...I couldn’t deny that a part of me wanted to use my magic. I cast my eyes down a bit guiltily.

“Ah, well, but we’re grateful for your efforts,” Johan said.

In a show of appreciation, Johan and Albert clapped me on either shoulder.

"Hi, Sei."

I was walking down the hall of the palace when someone called my name from a little distance away. I turned to see one of the knights I knew from the Third Order. He smiled and waved at me. We left it at that simple greeting, since we were both in the middle of work.

Since my summoning, the only ones I had been on friendly enough terms with for that kind of calling out were my colleagues at the research institute, but recently, the knights had started saying hello to me as well.

After that day in the hospital, I suddenly knew a whole bunch of the knights a lot better. They all stopped to say hi now, even if I was just making a trip between the institute and the palace library like I was today. It felt like my world had suddenly widened; up to that point, it had more or less been limited to the Research Institute of Medicinal Flora.

I entered the library, handed the books I was returning to the librarian, and then heard a small "oh."

I glanced in the direction of the voice and locked eyes with a man wearing a robe. He looked like he belonged to the Royal Magi Assembly, but I didn't recognize him. I looked at him questioningly with an awkward smile on my face. He gave me the same kind of tentative smile back.

The librarian finished checking the books I returned, and I took that chance to flee.

I had only noticed the guy because he spoke, but recently it felt like every time I looked up, I was staring some new person straight in the face. I was afraid if I mentioned it, people would tell me that it was just my imagination, so I kept the thought to myself.

Having returned all those books, I wandered between the bookshelves in search of my next borrow. I already knew where to find the books I wanted, seeing as I had been to the library so often. I pulled out one after the other until I spotted the final book I wanted on the very top shelf. I reached up to grab it, but someone pulled it off the shelf before I could.

"Here you are." The man who had taken it smiled as he handed me the book. I

figured he was an official of some kind as he wasn't dressed like a knight or a mage.

I could have reached the book, but it was pretty thick, so he *did* do me a favor.

"Thank you," I said and headed back to the librarian.

There sure had been more people in the library as of late. Before, hardly anyone but me came in. I had only ever seen Liz and a few officials. However, recently, I'd started running into people I'd never met before, and there always seemed to be someone puttering around.

It was nice that the library was being used more effectively, but it was a bit unfortunate, since I had liked being able to read in silence with a whole library to myself.

I was carrying my newly borrowed books out of the library when yet another person called for my attention. "Hello, Lady Sei!"

I could tell without even looking at him that he was from the Second Order. They were the only ones to address me in such a formal manner. Being referred to as a "Lady" kind of felt like being in a period drama, so I had asked them all to stop...but they had yet to show any sign of listening.

"Please, allow me to carry your books for you," he said.

"Oh, thank you."

"Do not mention it. It's no trouble at all." The knight smiled genially and effortlessly scooped the heavy books out of my hands.

This sort of thing had also become pretty commonplace for me as of late. At first, I tried really hard to brush off the offers, but they just wouldn't budge. Eventually, I had to admit defeat and let these guys carry the books.

After what happened at the hospital, the Knights of the Second Order seemed to start worshipping me or something, what with their calling me "Lady" and waiting for me to go home from the library just so they could carry my books. I couldn't say I didn't appreciate the help. It was no fun walking home from the palace to the research institute with my heavy hauls, but I seemed to run into

one every single time I left. I didn't think they were stalking me or anything, but it was awfully suspicious how there was always a knight from the Second Order waiting for me to go home.

It wasn't like they were taking turns posting themselves nearby, right? Right...?

Along the way, the knight and I chatted about this and that, and I was at the institute before I knew it. I thanked him again and returned home, just as I always did.

Some of the books I borrowed had been for Johan, so I handed the rest to another researcher and went to his office.

"Johan, I brought the books you asked for," I announced with a knock at the door before going in.

"Thanks. You can leave them there." He was in the middle of writing something, so I did as he told me and put the books down. "Did someone bring you home again today, too?" He looked up then, grinning.

I gave him a weary look. "Yup." He had spotted one of the knights from the Second Order carrying my books before. I admitted that it was now happening every time I went to the palace. "I said no, but he wouldn't give up, so I just let him carry them like he wanted."

"I see. Well, I guess it's no surprise."

"What do you mean?"

"Because of your grand performance in the hospital, the Knights of the Second Order are already calling you the Saint. And I think they're not the only ones."

"Oh, I bet you're right." In my mind, I heaved a sigh.

It seemed like I was getting further and further from the label of ordinary person because of what I did that day in the hospital. And this wasn't just about the knights of the Second and Third Orders either. Rumors being what they were, people outside the palace were bound to be spreading their own about me.

I knew it was only to be expected, and there was no way I *couldn't* have helped the knights, but it just made me want to melt with exhaustion. I had really been hoping to just live a quiet, peaceful kind of life.

But maybe it wasn't so bad. When I healed those people, some had cried, yelled, even hugged one another, bursting with joy. It made me happy that I'd done something.

Those thoughts managed to soothe me, but what Johan said next took me by surprise. "It's probably best if we figure out whether you're the Saint or not soon, once and for all."

"Huh?"

"I just received a message from the Royal Magi Assembly. They want to Appraise your Stats."

That bombshell of a statement was super effective on me.

Afterword

HELLO, it's nice to meet you. My name is Yuka Tachibana.

Thank you so much for purchasing this book. I would like to use the afterword to make some special thank yous.

This book was published thanks to the following: First, the website *Let's Be Novelists*, where I published this novel. Without this site, I never would have been able to post my work publicly. A family member introduced me to it, and after reading all sorts of different stories, I was inspired to write as well, and one day, I began this novel.

Second, the readers of *Let's Be Novelists*. I initially posted this story wondering if anyone would even bother to read it. I was so grateful that there were people who read it from the very first day it went up and that my novel even entered the top daily ranking at the end of a long break. All of your comments and ratings were incredibly encouraging. Thank you so much.

And then, approximately one month later, as I was slowly adding to the story, I got a message from an administrator at *Let's Be Novelists*. It was titled: "Inquiry About Publishing Your Novel." I had to do a double take because I thought I had read it wrong. I was on my way home from work at the time and wound up refreshing the browser on my phone three times to make sure it was real.

The message was sent by the third person I would like to thank: Editor W from Kadokawa Books. Editor W was incredibly helpful every step of the way to getting the book published. I am incredibly grateful to them. So much so, that I don't have enough words in this afterword to thank them. Thank you so, so much.

The fourth person I would like to thank is Yasuyuki Syuri, the illustrator for the book. Thank you so much for the incredibly beautiful illustrations for my book. I adored the character designs and the cover artwork you came up with. I nearly skipped on the train home from work as I looked them over on my smartphone.

And last, I would like to thank all of you who purchased this book. Thank you

so much for reading up until this point. I wrote this book hoping to heal the hearts of those who read it. I hope I managed to bring a little bit of warmth and joy into your daily lives.

There were many others who did an incredible amount of work to help get my novel published. I am so deeply grateful to you all. Thank you so much.



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