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

As Keith continued bawling, I could only sit next to him in a daze, unsure of what to do.

“...Katarina. What... Exactly. Have you done?” a low, almost gravelly voice graced my ears from the entrance of Keith’s room. Turning around, I saw none other than my mother, her features contorted in an almost demonic rage.

“Katarina... Do you not remember how you promised you would rest quietly in your room until you were recovered, just yesterday...? What exactly is the... pathetic state of affairs in this room? You have even made your adopted brother cry... What, exactly, is going through that head of yours right now, I wonder...?”

“Ah... Um. Mother, this is...” I felt my blood freeze in my veins — as if I had been lowered into a cage filled with circling lions.

“Katarina. Come. To. My. Room.”

“...Eek!”

Grabbing me by the collar, my mother comforted Keith in a soothing manner. “Oh my dear Keith. You must have been so frightened. Don’t worry... I will take this one... away from you. Everything is all right now.” Then she turned to me with an expression that could only be described as the polar opposite of soothing.

“...M-Mother. Wait. This is...” Although Keith himself tried to raise his head and say something in my defense, he had cried a little too much, and could not find the words.

Before I realized what was happening, a wall of servants had assembled outside Keith’s room. But it would appear that my father, who loved his daughter more than anything else in the world, was not present.

And that was how I ended up being forcibly removed and dragged to my mother’s chambers, with my only allies unable to defend my actions. For the next few hours, I was continuously lectured by my mother, who seemed nothing less than a demon as she doled out my psychological punishment.

When I was finally released from my torment a few hours later, I made my

way back to my room, exhausted from such exertion. Anne already had a pot of tea ready for me; I could feel the gentleness of her actions soothing my heart. *I suppose I should forgive her for having reported the axe incident to my mother.*

I drank deeply from the cup, heaving a final sigh of relief. *Come to think of it... is Keith all right, having cried that much?* I turned to Anne, hoping for answers.

“After a while, he seemed to have calmed down.”

“Is that right? That’s a relief. But why would Keith suddenly start crying like that...?”

“...With all due respect, young miss. Given that you had suddenly destroyed a previously locked door with an axe in your hands, before approaching the person within while still holding the weapon... How do you think Keith would react?”

“...Ugh... Th-That was...”

“If it were me, young miss, I would be screaming, crying in fright.”

“...I suppose I should apologize to Keith.”

“Yes, I suppose so. But do take care, young miss. Perhaps he would start bawling again at the very sight of you.”

Anne’s cool stare quickly caused my relief to dissipate. Thinking about it calmly, I supposed breaking down his door with an axe was indeed a little too much. *I was too afraid of the Catastrophic Bad End... Why didn’t I think of just picking the lock with a needle?*

But of course, I could not undo what was done — and with my head hung, I trudged over to Keith’s room, once again with the intent of making amends. Unexpectedly, however, Keith welcomed me with a big smile on his face, before going on to say, “You aren’t scary at all, Big Sister. Let’s stay together from now on!” Really, he was the cutest thing.

In fact, Keith even begged my mother for clemency on my behalf. Thanks to that, I was allowed back at the dinner table that night. My adopted brother is the absolute best — not only was he cute, he also had an exceedingly gentle soul.

And with this, the “Keith locked himself up inside his room?!” incident ended on a peaceful note. I made a mental note to spoil him and ensure that he would never be alone again in the future.

In the aftermath of this incident, however, my mother decided to send me for lessons on social etiquette...

With that, I avoided yet another Catastrophic Bad End, but was forced to attend stuffy lessons on the manners of nobles by my demonic mother.



On my eighth birthday, in the season of spring, my name became “Keith Claes.” This was the second time I had my name changed in my short life.

The first time it happened was when I was three years of age. Until then, I was told to keep quiet and sit in a tiny room. If I were ever just a little loud, I would be punished physically, or have my meals taken away. And that was how I spent my days quietly in that tiny room.

One day, however, a man I had never seen before took me away on a grand horse carriage before bringing me to a beautiful mansion. On that day, I met my father, along with my adoptive mother and brothers. Although I was still very young, I could tell from their cold stares that I was not welcome in the least.

From the rumors I had heard from the servants later on, it became clear to me that I was an unwanted child — my mother, who was a prostitute, pushed me into the hands of my biological father.

I could not ever refer to my parents as “Father” or “Mother” — I did not have that privilege. Similarly, I had to speak in a formal tone of voice to my brothers. In the beginning, I did not know how to speak formally, and as such was punished many, many times. I did not have a seat at the familial dining table either — I ate alone in my room.

My so-called parents largely ignored me and pretended I did not exist — that much was acceptable to me. My brothers, however, saw me as something that should be bullied, and persistently stuck to this belief. They would punch me, kick me, and occasionally even lock me up in the storage shed for an entire day.

As such, I tried as best as I could to avoid my adoptive brothers, and this was

achieved by staying in my room for most of the day.

After a while, however... *that* happened.

I remember the day well — the weather was fair. From the window of my room, I could see some small birds building a nest on a nearby tree.

Becoming somewhat engrossed in watching the bird on account of its nest-building fervor, I forgot my own place and slowly wandered out of the house to get a better view. Soon, I found myself beside the tree outside.

Unfortunately for me, my brothers chose that moment to exit the house as well. My adoptive brothers soon surrounded me, verbally and physically abusing me. “You son of a whore!” they taunted as they kicked and punched me. I curled myself up as usual, enduring the pain as I waited for it to pass.

That was when it happened: one of my abusers noticed the small birds nesting on the tree.

“Hey. There’s a bird there, see.”

“Oh wow, yeah I see. Who gave it permission to build a nest on our land? Cheeky little bugger. We’re knocking it down!”

My adoptive brothers started hurling rocks at the bird. Soon, the nest that the birds had worked so hard to build was destroyed in a shower of pebbles. The birds themselves also fell victim to the projectiles, emitting a pained series of chirps.

“...Stop this!!” I shouted without thinking. As the words left my mouth, something hot and searing seemed to pour forth from the depths of my heart and body.

Without warning, some large objects fell from the sky — before I knew it, my adoptive brothers were on the ground, their arms and legs pinned.

Scattered across the ground were some oddly-shaped pieces of packed dirt, approximately the size of an adult fist. I supposed these bits of compacted earth were the objects that had fallen from the sky earlier on.

The bits of earth were quite hard — they had left small craters where they had landed. It would appear that my adoptive brothers had been hit by some of

these hard pieces of earth, and were injured.

What was all this? I could only stand there, shocked.

After a while, my brothers were carried to their rooms by some servants who had come out to check on them. A doctor was called. From his diagnosis, it was discovered that my brothers suffered from multiple impact wounds across their bodies, along with some terribly broken bones.

The one who had injured them was none other than me. To be more precise, it was my earth magic that had awakened, and I had used said magic.

From that day on, I became even more isolated and ostracized in this mockery of a home that I lived in. Unless it was absolutely necessary, I was prohibited from leaving my room, and my adopted brothers gave me a wide berth. They were, in fact, absolutely terrified at the sight of me, running away with screams of “monster!” and the like.

This not only applied to my brothers — even my adoptive parents and their servants avoided me. While they did not run away like my adoptive brothers did, their fear was reflected in their eyes.

I was tormented by their gazes — and so I kept myself cooped up in my room, being as quiet as possible. Days, months, and eventually years passed. Then, another man I did not know came to my room.

“In recognition of your high magical aptitude, it has been decided that you will become the adopted child of Duke Claes’ household.”

And just like that, I was packed into yet another horse carriage, to be brought to yet another place. Although I had lived at my previous abode for five years, not a single person came out to say goodbye.

As soon as I arrived at my destination, it became evident to me that this manor was in a class of its own — it was bigger and grander than my previous abode ever could be. From the intricate vases to the carpets and rugs lining the hallways, the very manor itself exuded an air of refinement.

My new father was none other than the master of the manor, Duke Claes.

“Hello, are you Keith? Welcome! Welcome to the Claes family,” he said,

addressing me with a smile. I had never been welcomed in such a way in my life — caught unawares, I stood, perplexed and at a loss for words.

Almost immediately, the duke set about introducing me to the rest of his family. Madam Claes seemed somewhat aloof as she regarded me with a cold gaze. And then there was her daughter, the Duke's only child — Katarina Claes.

My adoptive brothers in the past bullied me on an almost daily basis — honestly, the very concept of having siblings terrified me. If possible, I wanted to give my new adoptive sister a wide berth, or at the very least just stay out of her way.

After a short exchange of introductions and pleasantries with Katarina, I was brought to my new room, and told to have some rest. Due to my sudden journey from my previous abode, I was terribly tired, and soon fell asleep on this large, foreign bed.

The very next morning, I sat at the breakfast table with the Claes family. This was the very first time I had partaken in a meal with other people at the same table. The food was impossibly delicious — more delicious than anything I had ever eaten in my life.

My heart was filled with a strange sense of warmth. After my meal, I made to return to my room when...

Unexpectedly, Katarina approached me, offering to show me around the grounds. If possible, I would have wanted to steer clear of her... I did not expect her to approach me instead.

"I will show you around the garden, Keith," she said.

Instinctively, I responded formally. "Thank you very much, Lady Katarina."

"Keith, we are brother and sister, you know. You should call me Big Sister! Also, you can drop the formalities with me," she said.

I was overcome with surprise. Up until now, I was not allowed to refer to any of my family members in such a manner — not even my siblings. Then, as if to reinforce her point...

"Ugh, we're siblings, Keith! It's fine! Also, I've always wanted a younger sibling

to call me Big Sister. It is one of my many dreams!”

It would seem that Lady Katarina wished for me to address her as “Big Sister,” and so I obliged. Katarina, seemingly greatly satisfied by this, responded with a happy smile.

With that, the two of us stepped out into the manor’s gardens. Katarina, deciding to take advantage of the pleasant weather, led me around every corner of the gardens.

After speaking with her for a while, however, I came to realize that Katarina Claes was a little... *different* than most noble little ladies.

“I’m pretty good at fishing, you know? We should try it together next time!” she said, extending me an invitation. Before long, she was off on another tirade, explaining passionately how she had tilled the earth and planted crops in some fields.

Although I had been cooped up in rooms all my life and had never fished or tilled the earth before, I did not recall seeing my previous adoptive brothers do anything of the sort. In fact, it occurred to me that most other noble children did not engage in such pursuits. All I could do was maintain a somewhat surprised expression as these thoughts raced through my head.

“I’ll show you my favorite place next!” Katarina grabbed my hand, running off in one direction or another. Before long, we were standing before the tallest tree in the garden.

“The scenery you see from up there is the best!” Katarina said, her eyes sparkling with excitement. She then went on to tell me about how she was particularly skilled at tree-climbing.

I, in turn, told her that I had never done anything like it.

“Well then! I will teach you all I know. First, observe my movements...”

Katarina kicked off her shoes and hiked up her dress. Before I could respond, she was off, climbing the tree earnestly.

I could only stand, still shocked at what I was seeing. Katarina was making good progress, though the mental strain of being almost able to see up her

dress as she climbed took a bit of a toll on me.

Katarina, however, paid this no heed, continuing to quickly scale the tree's trunk — and then, right as she was in the middle of her journey, she turned to me, waving with a big smile on her face.

And then... it happened. Katarina lost her balance and swayed dangerously.

"Watch out!" I shouted as I ran up to the tree.

With a sudden thud, Katarina landed — right on top of me. The impact of her fall passed through my being, and for a while, my consciousness seemed to fade.

After a while, however, I came back to reality, only to find myself in Katarina's arms.

"KEEEEEEEITH! DON'T DIE!!" Katarina wailed, over and over again, until she finally noticed that I was all right.

"Keith?! Y... YOU'RE ALIVE!!" she shouted, hugging me with incredible strength.

I froze up on the spot. It was the first time I had been embraced by anyone.

"Wha— Does it hurt somewhere, Keith??" Katarina asked, concerned at my behavior.

It was the first time anyone had been worried about my well-being. Again, I was perplexed... Bewildered. Honestly speaking, I was not seriously injured, and did not suffer from any excruciating pains. I was, however, unsure of what to do in such a situation.

Katarina, however, seemed to have mistaken my confusion for some sort of severe injury. "Wait here, Keith. I'll get some help and bring you back to the manor right away."

And with that, Katarina ran, not bothering to put on her shoes as she hiked up her dress. She raced towards the manor at an incredible speed. Looking at her rapidly shrinking silhouette, I was somehow filled with a strange warmth, just like I had been at breakfast.

That very same night, Madam Claes called us all into her room and asked the

duke for a divorce. After some conversation, it became evident that she had misunderstood several things, and the two were soon lovingly together again.

After that incident, Madam Claes' disposition seemed to change — indeed, she was gentle and kind towards me. Of course, Duke Claes himself was kind and loving too.

My adoptive sister, Katarina Claes, taught me many things. I was taught, for the first time in my life, how to fish.

“Keep this a secret from mother, all right?” she said as she taught me how to climb trees.

When I was praised by our tutor for my skill at the sword, Katarina was happy for me — as if she herself were the one being praised.

Every day was vibrant and enjoyable. I felt truly blessed... and so I forgot. I forgot that I was a monster who had hurt others with my magic — dangerous magic that could not be controlled.

That day, Katarina and I visited the fields after our swordplay training session. The various plants that Katarina had cultivated were finally starting to grow. As we spoke about the various aspects of fieldwork, the conversation shifted to the topic of magic.

“Yes! I'd like to try controlling an Earth Golem!”

An Earth Golem... The infusion of magic into a figure made of earth, and to subsequently control it — such was the nature of this specific ability. It was also the kind of magic I used.

I had, in fact, discovered it coincidentally. I was playing with some dirt, shaping it into dolls while cooped up in my room. In my previous abode, I hardly interacted with anyone. To compensate for this, I made these dolls and sat next to them as I had my meals.

I had, however, promised Duke Claes to not use my magic. Although I had strong magical aptitude, I did not yet have the skill to control it. Due to my history of having injured my previous adoptive brothers, the Duke said that he would find a suitable magic tutor who would in time teach me to control my own abilities.

Katarina, however, stared at me with such expectant eyes that I gave in — I decided to show her just a little bit of my magic. She, for her part, was greatly pleased with my little walking golem, and immediately asked if I could make it bigger...

And so I did, only to find that I could not control a golem of that size.

Swept up in her excitement, Katarina approached the golem despite my warnings, and was soon sent flying by the golem's fist. Katarina's small body soared through the sky.

This time, I could not catch her — she fell head-first onto the cold, hard ground.

After she was transported to her chambers by some servants, a doctor was called to give Katarina an in-depth check-up. I heard that she had just hit her head and passed out, but otherwise she was fine.

I looked at Duke Claes, who was watching over his unconscious daughter with a concerned expression on his face.

"I broke my promise to not use magic, and I also hurt my big sister with it. It's all my fault, so I will accept any punishment. I am really, really sorry. Please feel free to chase me out of the household if you see fit..."

Duke Claes looked at me, visibly troubled. "About this incident... we should really wait to hear from Katarina after she has woken up. We will discuss it then. More importantly, Keith... You look really ill, as if you would fall over at any moment. Katarina will be fine for now. You should rest in your room."

With that, the duke led me out of Katarina's room. That night, I heaved a sigh of relief as I heard that Katarina was none the worse for wear. Although I wanted to go and meet her right away... I could not. I... I was afraid.

The very next morning, I could not leave my room. For the very first time since I had lived in this manor, I missed breakfast.

About when the family's breakfast service had ended...

"Keith! It's me, Katarina! You weren't at breakfast... Are you perhaps unwell?"

Katarina's voice called to me from beyond the door.

"Big Sister..." Without thinking, I responded to her.

"Yes, it is I, your big sister. What's wrong, Keith? Does your stomach hurt? Are you all right?" Although Katarina was the one who was injured by what I had done, she seemed more concerned about my well-being.

"...I'm fine... More importantly, how are your injuries, Big Sister?"

"Those? Ah, yes. I'm fine. It's just a little knock on the head! It doesn't matter. Keith... I'd like to speak to you. May I come in?"

I was relieved at how cheerful Katarina was. Honestly... I wanted to see her. I wanted to see her right away. But...

"I'm sorry. I cannot let you in."

"Wh... Why?"

"...I can no longer be by your side, Big Sister."

I wanted to see her. But no matter what I did, the image of Katarina passing out stayed anchored in my mind. I wanted to see that she was well and happy... But I could not do that. I could no longer be by Katarina's side.

I, being the monster I was with my magic that was perpetually out of control, would only hurt Katarina if I remained here. Gentle, kind Katarina, who taught me many, many things. And yet, I hurt her.

Although Katarina continued talking at the door, I buried my head in the pillows, curling up into a ball on my bed. To begin with, I was all but used to living alone in a small room... So I would continue living like this on my own, and thus never hurt anyone important to me ever again.

After a while, I could no longer hear Katarina's voice. I suppose she gave up on me, and I deserved it, after not having once responded to her voice. That was all I could think about as I remained alone in the darkness.

"...Keith. Step back from the door."

I had thought she had given up — but there was Katarina's voice again. In spite of myself, I turned to look at the locked door, only to see it suddenly

splinter and fall to pieces before my very eyes.

At the entrance, silhouetted by the light, was Katarina, with a resolute expression and an axe in hand. Again, I was stunned. Katarina had destroyed the door to my room... and had now stepped into it.

And then...

“I’m sorry for yesterday!!” Katarina was on her knees before my bed, and had lowered her head so deep that it touched the ground. “I’m really sorry for forcing you to use your magic, and for being unreasonable...! And for not listening to your warnings about not touching the golem!! I’m so so sorry for having worried you!!”

I slowly got off from my bed, kneeling next to Katarina. “...Why? Why are you apologizing, Big Sister...? I... I am the one at fault...”

“What are you talking about?! I am the one who was wrong! I asked you to do something you didn’t want to do, Keith!!”

Why did this person approach me again? Why was she saying what she did? I had thought that she would be afraid of me, as I had hurt her with my magic. Even so...

“...A-Are you not... afraid of me, Big Sister...?”

“Afraid?”

“...In my previous abode... I ended up hurting my brothers with my magic. This time, I hurt you, Big Sister... Even though I have strong magical aptitude, I cannot control it well, and I end up hurting people... Even so, are you not afraid of me, Big Sister?”

I told her of the incident that had happened before. With this, I was sure that Katarina would never show herself before me again.

I was... scared. That I would hurt Katarina... but even more so, the possibility that everyone would stare at me with those eyes again. Those eyes filled with fear — just like my previous family’s.

I was... scared. Afraid... of being labeled a monster once more. This was why I refused to meet Katarina’s gaze, even as she stormed straight into my room. If

her eyes were filled with fear, I...

I held my breath, awaiting Katarina's next words.

"Ahh. You meant it that way, I see..."

Those were not the words I was expecting. Confused, I slowly raised my head. My eyes met with hers — Katarina's aqua-blue eyes.

"If you can't control your magic... you just have to work hard from now on, right? Soon, father will appoint a magic tutor, and we can be adequately taught! We can even practice our magic together!" Katarina did not have the slightest hint of fear in her eyes. Instead, it was filled with a gentle warmth, accentuated by her slight smile.

"...You will... stay by my side, Big Sister?"

"Of course! I'll stay with you forever!"

Being alone was painful and sad. I wanted... to be with someone. But no one would stay by my side. If I approached them, they would shout at me, calling me "son of a whore" or "monster."

I had all but given up and thought that no one would want to be with someone like me.... But there she was; the face of a smiling young girl, saying that we'd be together forever.

"So... even if anything bad happens from here on out, you can't lock yourself in your room— Keith! What is it?! Does it hurt somewhere?!" Katarina raised her voice in alarm as she looked upon my face.

Wondering why she was so worked up, I raised a hand to my cheek... only to find that it was wet. Tears were streaming from my eyes. *Ah, I'm crying.* Like I did before, silencing my voice as best as I could, cooped up in those tiny rooms. The tears would flow when things were difficult, or when I was lonely. As they did, my chest would hurt, and I would continue to suffer.

But then... what were these tears? The more I cried, the more my heart was filled with a deep warmth. For the first time in my life, I discovered that people could cry when they were happy, too.

Katarina, apparently worried about me, started to pat me on the back. *Such*

gentle, warm hands. That was all I could think as she continued to console me.

I want to be stay by her side — by Katarina Claes' side. If possible... I would like to stay forever.

I resolved to master my magic, and be able to control it well — and then I would stay by Katarina's side and protect her with all my might.

Chapter 3: My First Tea Party, and Some New Friends

And so the seasons passed — soon, it was summer. I, Katarina Claes, was now nine years of age. For my birthday, I received a cute-looking dress from father and a bouquet of flowers from Keith. From my mother, however, I received a mountainous pile of books on manners and social etiquette.

Jeord, for his part, came to me bearing a luxurious gift — a necklace with all sorts of expensive-looking gemstones in it. Of course, there was no way I could accept something like that, and so I refused it as best as I could.

The prince then asked what I would want instead, and after some thought, I decided to ask for watermelon saplings. It would be most fitting for my fields to have some fruit.

As usual, Jeord froze up and remained unmoving momentarily after hearing my request for saplings, but true to his word, did deliver quite a few impressive-looking plants the very next day. Not wanting to waste any time, I quickly had the saplings planted. If the watermelons did bloom and bear fruit, I would be sure to share some with Jeord.

On another note, my father, who doted on me as usual, suggested holding a lavish birthday party for me. Personally I did not want the attention, and so I refused. My mother, agreeing with me on the grounds that I would make an embarrassment of myself, convinced my father to listen to me... for once.

Even so, a party did have to be held when I turned fifteen — a social debut of sorts to maintain the family's reputation.

My mother, claiming that she would “do something about me by then,” seemed a little too enthusiastic about the process. The very thought of my mother's already spartan etiquette lessons struck fear into my heart.

I had started training with my long-awaited magical tutor, who claimed that “communicating with one's origin” was not quite what I was imagining. With

that, I realized that tilling the earth and planting fruit was not going to increase my magical powers. Even so, I continued my fieldwork as a hobby.

A few months into our magic training, Keith began to develop a greater sense of control over his magical powers; as expected of my adopted brother. My Earth Raiser, on the other hand, had improved from a two to three centimeter bump. It was now as tall as seven to eight centimeters.

Yes, yes. A great achievement, at least for me. Perhaps I would soon be able to control Earth Golems, just like Keith.

While not exactly perfect, my life continued on peacefully, until...

"...Ahh. Why is it, I wonder?" I said, kneeling down on the field.

I was flanked by Keith, my cute adopted brother, and Prince Jeord, who was now visiting the Claes manor once every three days or so.

"What is it, Big Sister?"

"What is wrong, Katarina?"

Keith and Jeord both piped up, apparently curious.

I pointed out a corner of the field to them in response. "Look at that."

The plants in that specific corner were terribly wilted, to say the least. Soon, it would be harvest season — the plants in that corner, however, didn't seem like they would make a very good harvest at all.

"I've been taking care of the plants in that corner over there..." I sighed once more, feeling somewhat down at what I had seen. Why did the plants I care for, and those alone, wilt and die?

To tell the truth, I was not that good at taking care of plants in my previous life either. From morning glory flowers to cucumber plants, anything I touched would eventually wilt.

Even so, I had been reborn! Surely I would be able to raise plants perfectly this time... or so I thought. I gazed upon the plants sadly.

"Big Sister, are you not tired from your field work? Perhaps you should rest here for a while..."

“Yes, yes. It is best that you rest your body, Katarina.”

Both Keith and Jeord spoke to me as I hung my head, both extending their hands, offering to help me up. Their gazes met.

“Prince Jeord. I will lead my Big Sister to shelter — also, it is quite all right if you do not show up for social visits so often.”

“I am Katarina’s future husband, Keith. I will lead her to shelter. In fact, it is quite all right if you do not insist on sticking to Katarina all the time.”

While the two never did meet in the game, both Keith and Jeord now got along very well. They were both smiling, and seemed to have quite a bit of fun throwing the occasional jibe at each other. At the sight of these two cheerful boys before me, I looked towards the corner and sighed once more.

“Oh, my Katarina. We have received an invitation to a tea party. Would you like to attend?” my father asked.

“Tea... party?” I asked, responding while stuffing my face full of bread.

My mother, however, shot me a murderous glance — and with a big gulp, I swallowed the bread as quickly as I could.

“Yes, a tea party. You are now nine, a good age for attending such a function, I would think.”

It was apparently common in this world for nine-or ten-year-olds to attend tea parties, in preparation for their eventual social debut at age fifteen. The main aim, of course, was to let the children of nobles intermingle.

“I suppos—”

“Out of the question! My dear husband, Katarina is hardly armed with the prerequisite manners for such an affair!” my mother snapped, seemingly agitated by my response.

“Well... there is a bit of that, yes, but would she not learn a little if exposed to it? Also, the invitation comes from a relative of mine, you see. They are not exactly outsiders — I think it is a good opportunity for Katarina,” my father said as he shot a sideways glance at me.

Hmm? Did you mean what you said, father? Why the sideways glance?

“...Yes, I suppose you are right... Perhaps she would learn the importance of it all, should she see it in person...” my mother said, turning to me as she did so. Her eyes were blank and hollow.

Why the eyes, mother?!

“Yes, Keith shall attend the party with her as well. We can all rest assured if Keith is with her,” my father said, nodding his head in satisfaction. His expression seemed to suggest that he had come up with a breakthrough of a solution.

My mother readily agreed with him. “...Yes. Yes, that’s right. It’ll be all right if Keith is with her...”

Come to think of it, my adoptive younger brother, who had been working hard at bettering himself, now had great favor with my parents.

“Keith, would you go with Katarina to the tea party?”

“Yes father. I will be most pleased to go with Big Sister.” Keith responded, a refined smile on his face.

Eh? But... But I’m the Big Sister here! Why am I being treated as a no-good problem child who has to be babysat by Keith?

And so, while I had quite a few things to say about these developments, I ended up going with Keith to my very first tea party.

After even more lessons on manners and etiquette with mother, and an endless barrage of tips and warnings, the day of the tea party finally arrived. On this day, my father had me wear a newly-tailored dress. I accompanied Keith to the home of Marquess Hunt, the host of the party.

“Lady Katarina, Master Keith. Thank you very much for attending our family’s tea party today.”

These words were delivered unto us by none other than Lillian Hunt, the eldest daughter of the Hunt family. With her honey-colored hair and eyes, she was a young girl of fourteen, almost ready for her social debut.

Standing behind her were three young girls, whom I assumed to be her

sisters. If memory served, there were four daughters in the Hunt family roster.

Lillian's sisters introduced themselves in order of seniority — the second, then the third. Both of these two girls resembled their oldest sister. I returned their curtsies and bows as best as I could, recalling what my mother had so desperately taught me.

After three of the four sisters had greeted us, a fourth girl with a somewhat shy and hesitant demeanor came forward. "...H-Hello... It is n-nice to meet you. I am the... fourth sister, M-Mary Hunt..."

The girl introduced herself with an impossibly soft voice. Unlike her sisters, her hair and eyes were a deep shade of red — almost a burnt sienna. She was, however, beautiful in her own right — with her big eyes and well-shaped pink lips.

Mary did her curtsies and bows, prompting me to respond in kind. Immediately after, however, she retreated behind her sisters, disappearing from view.

...Is it because of my face? Because I look like some sort of villainess? True, perhaps I do look like a villainess, but that doesn't mean I should be treated in such a fashion!

I felt a slight tinge of sadness in my heart as the Hunt sisters excused themselves, apparently off to greet their other guests.

A few rules for this tea party had been drilled into my mind by mother. For starters, I was not to talk too much, and should instead maintain a slight smile at all times. In addition, I was also not supposed to stuff my mouth full of snacks and candies, nor should I make uncouth slurping sounds when drinking my tea.

That wasn't all — above all else, I could not hike up my dress and run about, even if I could not execute any of the above. My mother made it a point to stuff as many of these rules as she could into my ears.

This was why I, on this day of all days, tried to smile as elegantly as possible, and to sip my tea in a most ladylike fashion. After all, this tea party was a simulation of the formalities involved in the great social debuts we all had to eventually attend.

The Hunt sisters, still making their rounds and issuing the appropriate greetings, did not sit down for tea. Similarly, Keith and I had to do the same thing — before I knew it, we had walked around the room in many, many circles, and I was starting to get somewhat tired. Only then did we stop for tea.

Personally, I felt like I had put in quite the effort, so surely a single cookie would not hurt? I reached out to the tray.

Oh? What is this? This is a most delicious cookie.

Hmm. One more wouldn't hurt.

And another.

Oh ho? Do I spy a muffin on that tray?

I shall try one.

In fact, there seemed to be quite a lot of snacks left — the other guests, seemingly lost in conversation, had hardly touched these trays of treats.

What a waste! I should have brought along a small box of sorts, so that I may take home some of these snacks with me. Perhaps I could borrow one from the Hunts?

“Big Sister.”

“...K-Keith?!”

Out of nowhere, my adopted brother materialized behind my back. Adequately surprised, I jumped in response. We had become separated while making our rounds, but before I knew it, Keith was standing right behind me.

“You surprised me, Keith! Are the introductions all over now?”

“Yes, they are mostly done. More importantly, Big Sister... why are you just standing here?”

“Umm...”

“You would not, perchance, be thinking of bringing back these leftover snacks in a small box of sorts, would you?”

“?!”

How is he so amazing?! What are you, some sort of esper? A psychic perhaps? Truly amazing. How did he know exactly what I was thinking?!

“That’s amazing, Keith! You know me so well!”

“...It is not a matter of me knowing you well, Big Sister. If you really went and did something like that, the class and upbringing of the Claes family would be severely called into question... Also, Big Sister, mother would surely ban you from eating any and all sorts of snacks for quite a while in retaliation.”

“...Ugh. You’re right...”

In fact, my mother had reacted this way a few days ago, when I picked up a fallen cookie from the ground and promptly ate it during an etiquette training session, citing the three-second rule. My mother, of course, prohibited me from eating any and all snacks for three entire days.

With that in mind, I could only imagine what would happen should I ask the Hunts for a box and come home with leftovers — a week-long ban, perhaps?

That... would be most regrettable. As unfortunate as it was, I had to dismiss the idea of taking these snacks home. In response, however, I stuffed my face full of whatever snacks I could get my hands on, having long forgotten the promise I had made with my mother.

Keith did try to warn me many times. Each time, however, the exchange went the same way. “Have you not had enough, Big Sister?” — “Oh, just a little more...” I would say as I continued gorging myself.

After all, it would be a tremendous waste to simply leave these snacks sitting around. And they were such delicious snacks!

Ah, truly delicious. This one over here too, just one more...

Predictably, a familiar pain soon invaded my abdomen — a telltale sign that I had eaten way too many cookies, candies, snacks, and the like. After reassuring the worried Keith that I was fine, all the while with a laughable expression on my face, I took off running to search for the washroom.

Upon locating a servant, I asked them for the location of the washroom. I had to turn down their offer of guidance, however, running off in another direction

on my own. I would never make it in time if I were elegantly guided by a servant.

While I was relieved that I had located the washroom in time, my mad dash towards it had left me not remembering the way back to the reception area. Although the Marquess Hunt's manor was nowhere near as large as my father's, it was, for all intents and purposes, a large dwelling. It didn't take me long to realize that I could not possibly hope to return by my own ability.

I suppose I could find another servant and ask. So I wandered the halls, only to stop dead in my tracks. Before me was... an impossibly beautiful sight.

A sea of flowers stretched out before my very eyes. A central, indoor courtyard of sorts, perhaps? Drawn in by the breathtaking landscape, I found a door leading downwards, and eventually walked slowly into this floral garden.

As soon as I had stepped foot into it, however, a girl stood up, seemingly surprised at my entrance. Although I should have called out to her as a gesture of courtesy, I hesitated, surprised at the encounter. She was the first to speak.

"...L-Lady Katarina. Why are you in... a place like this?" The girl was none other than Mary Hunt, fourth daughter of the Hunt family. We had exchanged pleasantries a short while ago.

"...Um. For a ch-change of pace, yes?" I could not possibly tell poor Mary that I had stuffed my face full of snacks, dashed to the bathroom, and became lost on the way back. In fact, I had no obligation to do so — and so this little white lie would do just fine.

"What are you doing here yourself, Lady Mary?" Having eaten too much and needing the washroom aside, I found it even stranger for one of the Hunt daughters to be hiding here on such an important occasion.

"...I... I am not very... good with crowds..." Mary replied, in that same soft, almost inaudible voice that she had greeted me with earlier.

She's such a beautiful girl! What a waste for her to be shrinking away like this, hiding her face from the public!

Hmm. Or perhaps... is it really my face? Do I really look like a scary villainess?

Even if I did do my best to smile, there was a high chance that this villainess-face of mine would simply scare the beautiful yet fragile girl before me. In any case, I had to let her know that I was completely harmless!

“Th-This... This is quite the impressive garden. All these blooming flowers... stunningly beautiful, truly.” I tried my best to dispel my villainess-like aura, delivering my lines with a slight smile on my face.

I really did feel that way about the garden, however, so the compliments were sincere. Although the Claes manor’s gardens were respectable in their own right, this little garden had a unique charm of its own. The flowers in particular were especially prominent. The Hunt’s gardener must be a skilled individual indeed.

Hmm... That’s right!! What a great idea!

If this mystery gardener was so skilled at growing flowers, perhaps they would be able to provide me with some gardening advice, and even revive my wilting crop corner.

With that in mind, I quickly posed the question to Mary. “Say... Lady Mary, could you please introduce me to the gardener overseeing this magnificent garden?”

“...Huh...?”

“After all, these flowers are blooming splendidly! I would very much love to discuss certain matters with this amazing gardener of yours.”

Despite Mary’s increasingly uncomfortable expression, I inched steadily closer, my excitement causing my nostrils to flare as I heaped praise upon this unseen gardener of mystery.

Finally, Mary responded, in an almost inaudible voice. “...That... would be... me.”

“Eh?”

“I... I am the one who takes care of this garden...”

What?! Mary is the caretaker of this wondrous garden?!

“All of it, Lady Mary?! You take care of this entire garden all by yourself?!”

“Well... Not all of it, just this the plants in this little corner here...”

In other words, Mary was responsible for the sea of blooming flowers in the corner that I had been staring at all this time.

“...Incredible.”

“Huh...?”

“It’s incredible, Lady Mary! That you have cultivated such an impressive garden! How is it? What is the secret? How do all the flowers bloom like that? There must be some trick to it! Soil? Is it the soil?!”

“...A-Ah... Um. Lady Katarina.”

I was now dangerously close to Mary, having forgotten the concept of personal space in my excitement. Before I knew it, I had cornered this poor, fragile young lady, and was breathing on her very skin.

No good. I had gotten far too excited. With a quick but deep breath, I took a small step back, assuming as elegant a smile as I could. “W-Well. I would very much like to discuss the particular details of how you have managed to cultivate such an impressive garden, Lady Mary.”

“...Discuss? Particular... details?”

“Yes. Very much so.” If possible, I wished to hold this discussion with Mary before this summer’s harvest season.

Although Mary seemed surprised at the fact that I had tilled the earth and seeded the fields, she listened carefully to my description of the problem. At the very least, she no longer seemed frightened — and at that, I heaved an internal sigh of relief.

Eventually, I concluded my explanation.

“...If someone like me could be of use, I would give it my all. However, Lady Katarina, I have never cultivated crops or vegetables before. I cannot make any assumptions on words alone... I deeply apologize for being unable to help.”

“W-Well then! Could you not... visit? Perhaps?” I said somewhat desperately to Mary, who was hanging her head.

“Ah, but...”

Although Mary seemed somewhat reluctant, I continued pleading, even suggesting that I arrive with a horse carriage and escort her to the manor.

The life of my crops is on the line! This is of utmost importance! I recalled the cruel fate that my morning glories and cucumber plants had faced in my previous life.

Finally relenting under my continued assault, Mary agreed to pay a visit to the Claes manor and have a look at the crops herself.

Mary, however, fervently refused to be picked up, apparently willing to make the journey herself. With that, I was once again in a somewhat jovial mood, and was safely led back to the reception area by Mary.

Keith, however, let me have quite the earful, having been worried all this time at my sudden disappearance. For some reason, it felt like our big sister-younger brother relationship was now somewhat reversed...

And so it came to be that the first tea party in my life came to an end — relatively plainly, as opposed to a huge social embarrassment.

A few days after the tea party, Mary paid a visit to the Claes manor, as promised. To address the problem my crops were facing, Mary had even read up on crop cultivation in advance. *Ah, what a kind, gentle girl.*

After some conversation, I found out that Mary and I were the same age, and we became fast friends. Although she was somewhat afraid of me at first, Mary was now all smiles. And my crop corner would also eventually recover, albeit after countless visits from Mary.

“Mary... thank you so much! Because of you, the crops are doing well again!” I cheerfully said, gazing at the now-restored crops as I did so.

“No, you worked hard too, Lady Katarina.” Mary replied, that same gentle smile on her face.

Ah, to be smiled at by such a lovable, beautiful girl. A feast for the eyes.

“I was sure they would all wilt and die... But now look! You’re really

something else, Mary.”

“... Th-That’s not true...”

Despite her humble demeanor, Mary really did have quite the talent at cultivating plants. It almost seemed like her very hands breathed life into ailing plants of all kinds.

Yes — Mary’s hands are special. Come to think of it, isn’t there a term for this sort of thing?

“You have quite the green thumb, Mary! Maybe even green hands too, ha!”

“...Green thumb?”

“Yes, a green thumb. It’s a term used to refer to those with a particular talent for cultivating plants, you see. Of course, it refers to more than just your thumb... Special hands, maybe!”

“...Special hands...”

“Yes! By your talented hands, you breathe life into dying plants! You’re really quite good at it!”

I held Mary’s hands strongly in my own. Mary, however, had her eyes wide open, and was preoccupied with staring at her own hands, now clasped in mine.

“...My hands are special...?”

“Yes! Green thumb, hand, you know! You’re a special and wonderful person!” I said, laughing. Mary smiled ever so slightly in response.

Ah, her smile is a true blessing. Like a blooming flower...

“Lady Katarina... your fields have now recovered, but... if it is possible, may I visit you again?”

“Of course! Come visit anytime!” I declared, laughing wholeheartedly as I responded. Although Mary had asked the question in a reserved manner, she seemed pleased by my response.

“A green thumb is really quite remarkable, isn’t it?” Keith, who had been standing quietly next to me this whole time, said.

“Quite. Especially if they are on hands like Mary’s! She works wonders on

plants.”

“Yes. A long time ago, I read a book called *The Girl with the Green Thumb*, and so I know of the phrase. Did you read that book too, Big Sister?

“Hmm... I don’t think so, Keith. At least, it wasn’t from a book... Somehow it just floated to the front of my mind.”

I remembered the phrase as I looked upon Mary. Did I learn of the phrase from some other place?

“That aside, Big Sister. Lady Mary has sure become more cheerful as of late.”

“That’s right! Although... she was quite afraid of me at first.”

“Eh? Afraid of you, Big Sister?”

“...Yes, unfortunately. It has to be this villainess-like face of mine.” I replied, in a self-deprecating manner. *I really hate this villainess-like face that I’ve inherited from my mother.*

Keith, for his part, seemed surprised. “...I don’t really think you look like a villainess, Big Sister... Also, Lady Mary did not act that way towards you alone — she was like that with everyone at the party.”

“...Eh? Really?”

“Yes. She has a somewhat shy and shirking demeanor regardless of who she is speaking with. Perhaps there are certain circumstances in the family that have caused her to lose her confidence.”

“...Circumstances? What do you mean?” I asked, puzzled.

Keith could only stare back with a look of exasperation. “What exactly were you doing at the Hunt manor, Big Sister? Were you not listening to the conversations at the tea party at all?”

“...Ugh...” Come to think of it, I had immediately busied myself with attempting to take leftover snacks back home as soon as we had finished our social greetings. And after Keith had caught me in the act, I had responded by... stuffing my face with more snacks.

In the end, I hardly participated in any conversations at the tea party. *In fact,*

that was why my lack of noble etiquette was not exposed! Yes, that was my plan all along. Yes, yes. Let's leave it at that.

As if giving up on me, Keith sighed deeply. *Ah... Well. I do apologize, my dear adopted brother.*

Keith slowly explained what he had heard at the tea party to me, his hapless sister. From his words, it would seem that of the four Hunt sisters, only Mary looked different. The reason for this was simple — Mary, the fourth sister, was born of a different mother.

Marquess Hunt's previous wife had died of illness, and after he remarried, he had a child with this new wife, said child being Mary. However, due to the fact that Mary's mother was not of high noble status, she was not exactly welcomed in the Hunt family, with family members on both sides protesting their marriage.

To make things worse, Mary's mother had passed on when she was still five, again due to illness. While the marquess did what he could to care for Mary, her sisters did not feel positively toward her at all.

They would torment her with verbal abuse daily, claiming that the "stench of commoners oozed from her being," or that she "had no class."

"...So that was why Mary acted in such a fashion..." I could hardly fault her for it — it was plain to see how one could lose confidence in themselves when subjected to such treatment on a daily basis. Thinking that she was somehow inadequate, Mary slowly became afraid of appearing before others.

"However, she is very much changed, now. I do believe Lady Mary will be all right," Keith said, an empathetic expression on his face.

Is there something else about the matter that my hardworking adopted brother knows about? Although I had tried asking him about it, Keith deflected the question without much effort.

While Keith himself had been somewhat reserved and afraid when he had first come to the manor, he had matured significantly these past few months. Giving his all at etiquette and magic training sessions, he became more and more dependable.

Although I told him there was no need to rush towards adulthood, Keith claimed that he was doing it so he could protect what was important to him. He even told me those very words with an air of maturity about him — alas, it made me feel incredibly lonely. Attempts to find out what exactly Keith was trying to protect were deflected, as usual, and I could only sulk in response.

“On another note, Big Sister. Is Lady Mary not soon to be engaged to Prince Alan?”

“...Eh? Is that right?” I responded, halfheartedly agreeing with Keith. While I would have liked him to remain my cute little adopted brother for a little while longer, it seemed like Keith was quickly maturing into quite the young adult.

And again... what is this thing he wants to protect? What if... Wait. Is there a girl he likes?! Hold on, wait up! You should at least introduce this mystery girl to your Big Sister! I won't allow any strange girls into this... Hmm? Keith seems to be saying something.

“...Keith. Could you please repeat yourself?”

“...Big Sister...” Keith stared at me, exasperation plastered across his face once more.

Ah, brother of mine. I do apologize.

“As I was saying, it will soon be time to announce Lady Mary's betrothal to Prince Alan.”

“...Eh? Who's Mary getting engaged to again?”

“Prince Alan. You remember, yes? Prince Jeord's twin brother, the fourth prince in line to the throne?”

“?!”

“As she is now, there is a high chance that Lady Mary will be announced as Prince Alan's future bride, yes.”

“...Engaged? Future bride? Prince Alan?”

“Well... it has not been confirmed yet, but now would be a good time for it. The Hunt family is known for its riches and high social position, even amongst the other marquesses. A most fitting candidate for the prince, as they are of the

same age as well... Big Sister, where are you going?!"

After listening to a little over half of Keith's explanation, I ran off, heading straight for my room. *Prince Alan... Alan Stuart. He's one of the possible love interests in the game!*

Rushing back to my room, I quickly retrieved the "Archive of memories on the game I played in my past life" and cross-checked its contents.

After laying out the archive on my desk, I flipped through its pages rapidly before eventually coming to a stop at Prince Alan's entry.

Alan Stuart

Jeord's twin brother, and fourth in line to the throne. Up until age five, he had a considerably weak constitution, and his caretakers were not sure if he would survive. As a result, those around him did everything they could to ensure that he would live, eventually spoiling him in the process.

Due to this, his personality is a little twisted as well — although nowhere near Jeord's level. Feeling a massive inferiority complex due to Jeord's savant-like capabilities, he hardly spoke to his older brother, seeing him as an arch-rival.

At the age of fifteen, Alan would enroll in the academy with his brother, and often compete with him both academically and magically. When the results of the academy's first test are published, however, Alan came in third, with Jeord in first place, and the protagonist in second.

While Alan had resigned himself to the fact that he could never outdo his brother, he takes great offense to being bested by a commoner girl, and in turn views her as a rival too.

After some interaction, Alan would eventually fall for the protagonist, charmed by her optimistic nature. As the game progresses, the protagonist would tell him that "You are perfect as you are, Alan." This declaration, in turn, brought some measure of peace to his heart, and eventually Alan's bitter sense of rivalry with Jeord would diminish as well.

In this scenario, Katarina Claes, all-time villainess, was nowhere to be seen. Although she did attempt to bully the protagonist due to her good grades (despite being a commoner), she did not have much screen time in this route at all.

In Katarina's place was another rival: none other than Mary Hunt, daughter of Marquess Hunt. Although she respects Alan from the bottom of her heart and is somewhat jealous of the protagonist, she does not engage in any bullying or mean tricks.

Instead, Mary conducts herself as a noble lady with excellent upbringing, being skilled at social etiquette and dancing, unlike the commoner-born protagonist.

Although Jeord and Katarina hardly care about Mary's existence, Alan is fond of her, although not in a romantic sense. Instead, he views her as a lovable little sister, and the two get along well.

In fact, even the endings of the game were different. Should the protagonist obtain a happy end and succeed in romancing Alan, Mary would give them her blessing, asking the protagonist to "take care of Prince Alan from here on out." Her eyes, however, would be filled with tears, and her heart filled with sorrow.

In the bad end scenario, Mary and Alan live happily ever after instead, and that was that.

I thought intensely about the information I had just processed.

Why is it only Katarina that suffers?! Isn't Mary a rival character too? You don't see her desperately escaping Catastrophic Bad Ends!

To begin with, why is Mary such a gracious character even though she's a rival?! Katarina is the only one who's a villainess, apparently?

What were the staff behind this game thinking?! Why do they only subject Katarina and no one else to these terrible scenarios?! That's just too sad of a character design! You people should try being reborn as Katarina Claes just once, let's see how you like that!

And then there's Alan! Why does he get a nice ending either way? Look at

Jeord, or Keith! They end up becoming murderers and disappear into the wild! This is completely unreasonable! I'll never forgive you, Fortune Lover staff!!

If I ever find my way back to my old world, I have a good mind to storm into their offices and tear them a new one!

...For now, I suppose I should put away my heated monologue.

I turned to the page once again. There was no mistaking it; “Mary Hunt” was my gentle, cute, and lovable friend. The Mary in the game of *Fortune Lover*, however, was the perfect image of a noble lady. This did not match the somewhat shirking and shy Mary that I currently knew.

Come to think of it, Mary and Katarina were not exactly friends in that setting. If anything, Katarina, who had a tendency to do as she pleased due to the Claes’ social standing, didn’t like Mary Hunt all that much.

To think that Mary was a rival character like me all along... Even so, I didn’t recall the word “Alan” ever leaving Mary’s lips. I could only assume that they had not yet met, given how their engagement was soon to be announced.

From what I could recall of the game, Mary had spoken of her encounter with Prince Alan during a confrontation between her and the protagonist. It went like this:

From a young age, Mary had been bullied due to the fact that she was born of a different mother than the rest of her sisters. Her older sisters would verbally abuse her at every opportunity. This would eventually lead to Mary losing all of her confidence, believing that she was as useless as her sisters claimed she was.

Prince Alan was the one who appeared before Mary in her despair, praising the plants that she had raised in her garden. “You’re amazing, Mary. Quite the green thumb you’ve got, no?”

A manner of speech, of course — it referred to individuals who had a particular talent at raising plants and other flora. Alan, suitably impressed by Mary’s garden, had praised her and told her that she was an amazing individual.

This would cause Mary to regain her lost confidence over time, and before she knew it, she was hopelessly in love with the prince. To become a woman that could one day stand at the prince’s side, Mary worked hard daily, and

received nothing but praise when she had enrolled into the academy.

Katarina, on the other hand, spent all her time chasing after Prince Jeord, and as such lagged terribly behind on her academic and magic studies. She was nothing compared to Mary.

Ah, truly, Mary is indeed an amazing person. The amazing Mary with the green thumb! Prince Alan sure has a way with words.

...Wait a minute. Green...? Ah?! So this was where I had come across the phrase before!

Ah, yes. I finally remember. Right, right. It was the famous line that Prince Alan said to Mary... that she had a green thumb, that her hands were special, and all that.

...Hmm? Why do I somehow remember saying something similar to Mary? Uh-oh. This is bad!! Did I end up using Alan's line before he had a chance to say it?!

How could this be? What was I thinking? I can't just go about spouting famous lines like that before the rightful user says it!

What should I do?! With this, Prince Alan's line would be a rehash! With as much impact as an already-brewed bag of tea leaves! Surely such a line would only have half as much meaning the second time it is used!

Ahh, Katarina Claes, you absolute fool! If only I'd noticed this sooner...

Although I did spend some time reflecting in my room by my lonesome, I eventually cheered up, under the justification that what was said could not be undone.

After all, Prince Alan is a pretty good prince in his own right! I'm sure he'll be fine; it was just a single line. In fact, I'm sure he'll come up with an even better line, one that would steal Mary's heart! Yes, there was nothing wrong with me taking one of his lines! Nothing at all.

Having reached this irrefutable conclusion, I was overcome with relief. I packed up the archives and headed out of my room, making my way back to Keith, whom I had so unceremoniously left behind a short while ago.



Mary Hunt is my name. I was born as the fourth daughter of Marquess Hunt's family. Although my mother was a beautiful and gentle person, she was not accepted in the Hunt family due to her low social standing. I, her daughter, was treated the same way.

Even so, Father really did love Mother. He loved her very, very much. With her unfortunate death, however, great changes crept into my life. With father being away from the manor most of the time for work and my mother now gone, I felt like I did not belong anywhere in this manor.

While they were cold and distant to me when mother still drew breath, now that she was gone, my older sisters wasted no time before viciously bullying me. They would hide my things, and sometimes even break them... or say terribly unpleasant things about me.

Examples of what they would say include: "Look at that red hair of yours! How filthy!", "The stench of commoners oozes from your being!", "You have absolutely no class!", "Know your place!", "You are nothing but a bringer of misfortune!", and so on.

Assaulted with all these words day by day, I felt my heart crumble, and slowly started to fear interacting with others. This sense of fear permeated my being. Eventually, I started to believe what my sisters said — that I was no good, that I would never really amount to anything.

My only escape was the small garden in the courtyard. My heart only felt at ease while caring for the plants there.

One day, however, I met her — amidst a tea party that the Hunt family had organized. Although I was fearful and timid, she spoke openly and cheerfully to me. Her name was Katarina Claes. She had responded to my fearful greeting with a bright one of her own — it was as if she were a being from another world.

Unable to get over my fear of people, I left the tea party halfway through, having reached my mental limit. I quickly escaped to the small garden... but there, amidst the blooming flowers, was Katarina Claes. Having gallantly ventured into the garden, Katarina had nothing but praise for what she saw. She praised the garden I had been taking care of all this time.

I had not been praised in this manner by anyone — not since mother's death. Caught unawares, I withdrew into myself once more. It was then that Katarina suddenly asked for a favor. She wanted me to have a look at the fields she tended to, on account of their ill condition.

Honestly speaking, I was surprised at hearing that the oldest daughter of a duke would tend to fields of any kind at all. But I couldn't help but find Katarina's sparkling eyes and plainly visible passion lovable.

One thing led to another, and soon I found myself headed to the Claes family manor to help Katarina with her fields. I dedicated myself to learning about crops as much as I could so that I would be better able to assist her.

Unlike me, Katarina was bold and optimistic — she was a most admirable person. With Katarina's praise, I soon started regaining what confidence I had lost.

"You have quite the green thumb, Mary! Maybe even green hands too, ha! Yes! Green thumb, hand, you know! You're a special and wonderful person!"

I had thought that I was nothing more than a weakling, a no-good girl who could never accomplish anything. However... Katarina said that I was a special, wonderful person.

I was really, really happy. I felt that now, more than ever, I had to become someone who was fit to stand next to Katarina. I had to be a worthy friend.

And so... I would bid farewell to the cowardly, weak Mary Hunt. One day, surely, I would be able to stand next to her proudly. Yes — I would work hard to become such a person.

Chapter 4: The Outcome of a Thrown Gauntlet

A few weeks after the fields had been so magnificently resurrected, we entered the height of summer. At long last, news of Mary and Prince Alan's formal engagement reached the Claes manor as well.

Having invited Mary over to the manor today, I promptly decided to ask her the question myself. "I heard about your engagement announcement, Mary. Congratulations!"

"Yes, thank you very much. I have been formally engaged to the prince. Like you, Lady Katarina, I am very much pleased."

While Mary did seem somewhat happy, I couldn't help but notice that she was not exactly pleased at the engagement itself.

"Um. Ahem. Have you met with the prince yet, Mary?"

"Yes, I have indeed met him."

"...Well? How was it?"

"How was... what, Lady Katarina?"

"Um... well, you know. What was he like? And all that."

For the record, I was guilty at having unintentionally used one of the prince's famous lines. Would Alan be able to adequately charm Mary without that line of his?

"He is a most handsome person. He praised my garden as well, Lady Katarina — much like how you had done."

"O-Oh. And then...?"

Yes, this was all correct, scenario-wise. The second half of Mary's response caught my attention, however.

"And then? What do you mean, Lady Katarina?"

"Umm. What happened after he showered praise on your garden?"

“Well, that was all there was to it...?” Mary replied, tilting her head slightly in apparent confusion.

WHAT?! That’s all there was to it? Well, well what about that famous line?! Did he not say it?

“Um. Ahem. Did he say anything about your green hands— um, thumb?”

“...Green thumb, ah! Have you heard about it, Lady Katarina?!”

“...I mean, he did say something like that, right? He did! Right?!”

Mary, who was now positively blushing, seemed to offer up a token resistance as I continued questioning her, before eventually giving in.

“My, how embarrassing... To think that you would hear of the affair yourself, Lady Katarina...”

“Hmm. Yes, as I expected, he did say tha— wait. What do you mean by “affair”...?”

“Ah. Well, it is as you may have heard, Lady Katarina. I told Prince Alan about how you had praised me, saying that I had a green thumb...”

“EH?! You said it to him?! And you told him I said it to you?!”

“Yes... Well. I was really happy that you would praise me — my hands — in such a way, Lady Katarina... So happy I was, that I had to tell Prince Alan about it too...” Mary said, her voice becoming gradually softer as the crimson hue on her face deepened.

So... how should I summarize this?

Before Alan could even claim that Mary was a special girl with a green thumb, I said it to her? Not only that, Mary went on to tell Alan that... “Ah, Lady Katarina mentioned that I had special hands... a green thumb, yes...”

Faced with such a spectacle, there was no way Alan could say his line. After all, I said it first... or at least, a variant of it.

Ah, Prince Alan. I am truly sorry.

After my continued interrogation, Mary claimed that she was fond of the prince — but it was plain to anyone present that she didn’t really feel that way.

Ah, Prince Alan. I am deeply sorry.

Well... in any case, they're engaged to each other, so... I'm sure she'll learn all about the prince's charms from here on out!

...Work hard, Prince Alan, I thought, my eyes glazing over as I continued my internal monologue. Mary, apparently worried about my faraway gaze, even asked if I was hungry. *You really are the very image of a noble lady, Mary.*

Although it was unintentional, I had somehow gotten between the two of them! This would not do. If anything, the two should live happily ever after!

As much as I hoped it were possible, I didn't think I had the capability to bring the two together. All I could do was cheer for them... from the depths of my heart.

The incident happened a few weeks after my conversation with Mary. Harvest season was also nearing its end — now was a good time for the vegetables to be harvested and eaten.

“Young Miss! The Prince is here, saying that he requires your presence!” Anne said, a notable tone of panic in her voice.

“What is it, Anne? Prince Jeord always marches in here on his own volition either way.”

While I had made an effort to formally receive Prince Jeord on his visits, the prince himself eventually claimed that he needed no formal welcome after the frequency of his visits increased.

Nowadays, the prince showed up every three days or so, and would often just walk into the gardens where I was working in my overalls. He was, of course, used to my overalls and gardening gear — and as such, there was no real reason for me to change into any finery. Basically, the prince visiting me was nothing out of the ordinary, and hardly a reason for panic.

“No, it isn't that, Young Miss! Your visitor is not Prince Jeord!”

“...Hmm?”

What's Anne going on about? Unless there's a social party of sorts, the only

prince that frequents the manor's grounds is Jeord, I thought, giving one of the cucumbers I had cultivated a good pull.

“It isn’t Prince Jeord, Young Miss!! It’s Prince Alan, fourth in line to the throne!”

“...Eh?” I responded, stunned. The cucumber that I had held moments ago slid out of my gloved hands, falling onto the ground. “...Why?”

“I do not know the reason, Young Miss. In any case, you really should meet with him.”

For some reason, I feel like this is the beginning of yet another troublesome incident...

After dashing back into the manor at full speed, I promptly got dressed with Anne’s assistance, and soon headed off to the guest parlor. I hurried all the way to the parlor’s doors, then I threw them open. I found within a somewhat haughty youth, standing with his back to me.

“You’re late,” the prince said, turning his head to glance at me without offering any semblance of a greeting or introduction.

What an arrogant young man! Before I knew it, my cheeks started puffing out. *First he suddenly marches into my house, and now this?*

I had a good mind to lose my temper — but he was, after all, an eight-year-old boy. *I, however, am an adult! Of seventeen or nineteen years of age.* I reminded myself of that fact as I offered the prince a formal greeting.

“I offer my sincere apologies. I was caught up in some other affairs. I am Katarina Claes.”

“Alan Stuart,” the prince responded haughtily, in spite of my smile and formal manner of speech.

Alan Stuart... A potential love interest in Fortune Lover — but ah, he sure is one pretty prince.

He bore no resemblance to Jeord, his twin, however. While Jeord was much like a fairy-tale prince with his blonde hair and blue eyes, Alan had silver hair and eyes of glinting emerald — a more wild and dashing image, if you will.

Dashing though he might be, he was still impossibly arrogant, even for a prince. In fact, his behavior reminded me of Katarina Claes herself — at least, before I suddenly regained all of my previous life's memories.

Even Jeord, who was a prince in his own right, did not behave in such a manner. While he was twisted in his own way and certainly had questionable thoughts of his own, he was at least calm and humble... on the surface. With those thoughts in mind, I continued observing Prince Alan.

"Katarina Claes. I am here because I have something to say to you today," the haughty prince said, turning a steely gaze towards me.

"...Um. What is it?"

Honestly speaking, I had no connections whatsoever with Alan thus far. Well... I was engaged to Prince Jeord, and so that would make for some sort of connection. From what I recalled of *Fortune Lover's* gameplay, however, Alan did his best to avoid his brother at all costs. As such, he should have no special reason to pay me a visit in person.

"You know Mary Hunt, right?"

"Eh...? Ah, yes." *Hmm? What about Mary?*

"Mary said that you are... close to her."

"...Yes? I suppose we are close friends."

Alan's gaze sharpened.

What is it with this prince? What is he trying to say?

"Did you know that Mary Hunt is now my fiancée?"

"Well, yes... I do know of that."

"So you do know. Stop seducing her, then!"

"...S-Seduce?! What?!"

I could feel Alan's gaze digging into me — I swallowed in spite of myself. *Wait wait wait. What is he even saying? Is this prince right in the head?*

Me, seduce Mary...? But we're both girls to begin with! Well yes, Mary is gentle, cute, and I am very fond of her. I want to get along with her from here

on out... but at no point in time have I thought of taking Mary as my bride! I... I don't swing that way!

Alan, however, clenched his teeth at my stunned silence. “Don’t play the fool! Even if I ask her out, she declines! Going all, ‘Oh, today I have an appointment with Lady Katarina.’ In fact, YOU are all she talks about when she is with me! Mary may be pure of heart, but you are clearly at fault for seducing her! There’s no doubt about it!!”

“Wh-What is that supposed to mean?! I’ve had enough of these baseless accusations of yours!”

Alan, who had apparently wanted to pick a fight with me from the very start, had succeeded in riling me up. I started shouting, despite of my station.

“What baseless accusations? This is the truth! With that face of yours, you’ve corrupted my pure Mary!”

I see this full-of-himself prince here has quickly decided that I’m a villainess simply because of this face of mine. Ah, if there’s one thing he’s good at, it’s getting people mad.

“What is wrong with you?! There’s no such thing! In fact, it’s YOUR fault for asking Mary out when she already has plans to visit my manor! To begin with, if you really were charming, no girl would turn down your invitation! You’re CHARM-LESS! Mary keeps talking about me?! Well of course she would! It’s because you’re BORING!!” I shouted, filled with a righteous rage.

I soon regretted my outburst, however.

“...No charm... Boring...” Alan’s expression was now stony.

...This is bad. I’ve finally gone and done it... I’ve said something terrible to the prince.

Considering that this all started because I had accidentally used one of his lines... well. What was said could not be taken back.

I felt beads of cold sweat flow down my back.

“...Ha. Haha. This is the first time I’ve been ridiculed to my face...” Steam seemed to be coming out of Alan’s ears — he was positively livid.

“...Um. That just now was...”

Ah, this is what I get for giving in during the heat of the moment. Now I can't take back what I said!

“Prepare yourself, Katarina Claes. I shall take your train of insults as a thrown gauntlet.”

Wait, wait. I have thrown no gauntlets whatsoever! I'm not going to challenge anyone to any duels! It was just a slip of the tongue...

“I challenge you! To a duel!” Alan said, his nose held high.

“...So. How did we end up like this, again...?” Anne said, with something between confusion and exasperation on her face.

We were now standing in the gardens of the Claes manor. To be specific, we were standing before two tall trees, conveniently located side by side.

“Well, Master Alan did so proudly proclaim that ‘I shall let you, the woman, decide on the contents of the challenge’... and so I did.”

“...Even so! You are the daughter of a duke, young miss! And he is one of the princes of the kingdom! The two of you... climbing trees? This is going too far...”

“Well, Anne. I couldn't think of anything else I would do better in, so...”

“B-But young miss! Master Alan does not climb trees! Did you not see how he froze when he heard your suggestion, Young Miss?”

“...But he was the one who accepted the terms, you know...”

It was as Anne said — Alan had frozen up the very moment the words “tree climbing” had left my lips. In fact, his expression was akin to that of a gape, and there the prince stood, unmoving for approximately ten seconds.

Out of concern, I had asked after the prince. “*Are you perhaps unable to climb trees, Prince Alan?*” His response, however, was curt — “*Nonsense! I accept your challenge!*” And with that, he finally snapped out of his previously frozen pose.

This was how both Prince Alan and I had ended up standing before a pair of

tall trees in the gardens of the Claes manor.

On another note, my ever-wise and gentle adoptive brother, Keith, was currently keeping mother busy — all so that she would not notice this spectacle.

The rules of the challenge were simple — the first to reach the top wins.

Although he had stood gaping at the tree for a good while, he eventually rolled up his sleeves, as if steeling his resolve. If anything, the prince's entourage seemed to be in more of a panic.

The servants pleaded things like, "Oh, my prince, it is most dangerous!" and "Please, please stop this at once!"

I, on the other hand, had changed into an outfit with pants — in other words, I was fully prepared.

"Well then, Prince Alan. Are you ready?"

"...Yeah. Right. Anytime."

"Well then. We shall begin on the count of three. Anne, my personal maid, shall do the honors."

"Y-Yeah."

And so it came to be that I managed to drag a reluctant Anne into my so-called challenge. With her count, the bout began — and then promptly ended... with my overwhelming victory.

To begin with, I climbed trees very often, and was already all the way at the top in a matter of minutes.

Alan, however... *Come to think of it, has Alan ever climbed trees in his life?*

While I had finished my ascent, he was still stuck on the lowest branch of the tree in question. With this, the challenge ended in my complete, utter victory.

"Prince Alan. We have a clear victor in this contest — could we draw this to a close?" I called down to him.

Hmph. Don't think you can defeat me, the wild monkey of the back hills, little boy. Have you even climbed a tree before?

I turned to Alan with a victorious smile. Alan, however, stared at me once

more, visibly unwilling to accept defeat. “One more time! I challenge you again! This is the first time I’ve climbed a tree — I was simply not used to it!”

Ah, there it is. So the prince himself admits that he has never climbed a tree before. Maybe you should have said so from the very beginning, you show-off.

“That is quite all right. But don’t think you can win so easily, prince.”

“Bring it on!”

Alan would go on to challenge me again and again — the result hardly changed, though. This was perhaps to be expected. Eventually...

“I’ll win next time! Just you watch!” Alan said, spouting lines typical of a defeated rival character. Threatening to show up for another challenge sometime in the future, Alan and his entourage finally left the grounds.

While I didn’t know it at the time, I would continue entertaining Alan’s challenges over and over again in the near future...

Prince Alan showed up again the very next day, shouting about yet another challenge. I, of course, defeated him easily. The prince would show up again from time to time, challenging me to yet another match. He would then be defeated, and for a while these silly days repeated themselves.

As the days passed, we ended up striking up an odd friendship of our own, and it became somewhat customary for Alan and me to have some tea after the inevitable challenges. As of late, the prince seemed a little happier despite his long history of losses. Perhaps I was just imagining things.

With this, I thought that the crisis between the prince and me was over... But then eventually, the day came.

“Jeord?! What are you doing here?!”

It was bound to happen over time — Jeord and Alan had run into each other on the grounds of the Claes manor. Jeord showed up every three days or so, sometimes a little more. Alan, on the other hand, visited once a week — with such timings, it was inevitable that they would eventually meet.

Mary, who visited twice a week, had already introduced herself to Jeord. Although I had told Jeord in passing about the contests between Alan and me, I

did not mention to Alan that his twin visited every three days.

While my engagement to Prince Jeord was public knowledge, I also knew of the open hostility which Alan displayed whenever the conversation shifted to his brother. As such, I had hesitated to speak to him in detail about Jeord's visits.

This was how the two twin brothers, who hardly ever spoke to one another, both met on the Claes manor's grounds.

"You sound as if me being here is a most mysterious thing. This is the home of my fiancée — my presence here is hardly out of place," Jeord said, regarding his twin brother with a smile.

Perhaps that's true — even so, Jeord's visits seem awfully frequent. Is everyone just this way in this world?

"...In any case, I'm here for a challenge with her today. Don't get in the way." For some reason, Alan seemed to have lost most of his edge. Whatever happened to his unbearably haughty attitude?

While Alan was acting somewhat stranger than usual, Jeord seemed to respond in kind. The ever-present smile on his face was a lot more suspicious, perhaps even a little malicious.

"About those challenges... I heard that you have failed to achieve victory, time and time again. Would it not be best to simply give up...?"

While I did have similar thoughts, I would never have said it to Alan in such a blunt way. I looked on somewhat fearfully, afraid that Alan might snap and respond with rage. This was not the case, however — his expression was hardly one of anger, but one of pain.

"...No! NO!! We still need to settle it! I can win this! I... I know I can...!" Alan shouted, desperation evident in his voice.

It seemed like Alan could only see Jeord. A strange atmosphere slowly filled the Claes manor. While I was pretty good at ignoring unpleasant developments of all sorts, this was on another level. This was... bad.

All right then, clearly the solution is to change the subject at hand. I had to —

to clear away this miasma that hung in the air. I had just the thing for it... something that had been on my mind for quite some time.

“...Ah. Prince Alan. If you would accept, perhaps we could change the terms of the challenge itself? My mother will surely be greatly displeased if we keep climbing trees.”

To be honest, it was a bit of a miracle that Mother had not noticed up until now, but I didn't intend to push my luck any further. Mother, of course, had long given up on me — if I climbed trees, then so be it. Inviting a prince to do the same, however... mother's rage would surely be fearsome.

Due to the fact that Keith had kept my mother occupied on every single one of Alan's visits, it was perhaps inevitable that she would become suspicious of what exactly I was up to. If I didn't change the contents of the challenge, I might soon find myself in trouble... once again.

“...If you say so... then. What will the new challenge be?”

“...Hmm.”

At last, Alan was looking my way. The unpleasant atmosphere from just now, too, had slowly started to disperse. *Good, good.*

Even though I was the one who came up with the suggestion, I was not quite sure what to replace the venerable sport of tree-climbing with. Honestly speaking, both my magic and academic abilities were average at best, and hence not good candidates for a challenge.

There was, of course, the option of me allowing myself to lose to him — perhaps then would the prince be content. I would be left with a bad taste in my mouth, however.

As I continued scratching my head and pondering on a potential replacement, one of Alan's entourage humbly presented a potential solution.

“Pardon me, Miss Claes, but would a board game not be safe? No one would be hurt that way.”

Alan's servant was right — if we really did play a board game, no one would be physically injured, and any differences between the genders would not be

relevant. I, however, was notoriously bad at these games. Chess, Othello — whatever it was, if it required thinking, I was bad at it.

In this world, chess was apparently the most popular board game, but of course I wasn't a fan of it. While I could play it, I felt somewhat bitter if defeated. Upon seeing my expression of displeasure, Alan's servant provided yet another suggestion.

"Ah. Well then, how about a musical contest? A contest of instruments, perhaps? The better performer would win, yes?"

Hmm. A refreshing change, if nothing else. In this world, being able to play an instrument was seen as a status symbol amongst nobility — as such, I was made to learn the piano and violin from a young age.

In my previous life, I had participated in concerts and the like with my recorder and piano. At the very least, I could still play the piano somewhat reasonably. As for the violin — I was unfortunately... not all that suited for it.

"I don't mind playing the piano," I responded, somewhat cheerfully. Alan readily agreed.

With this, the challenge between Alan and I was no longer that of tree-climbing, but a musical competition. It had suddenly taken on an aristocratic air when I wasn't looking. At the very least, I was sure that mother wouldn't be upset even if she witnessed us competing.

The servants were united in relief, with most of the prince's entourage saying something along the lines of "Ah, what a relief that all this tree-climbing business is over and done with..." In fact, the servant who had suggested the musical idea was currently being fervently praised by their peers.

And so, all of us present headed towards a room with a piano in it, for the purposes of this safe and aristocratic musical bout.

The piano in the Claes manor was considerably large, befitting its status as the main piano of a duke's family. It was certainly on a much grander scale than the smaller one I used to play in the school's music room.

As it was a musical competition of sorts, the servants of both our families were to be the judges. Jeord, who was also present, was called on to rate our

performances as well.

With this, the stage was set — I would be first to play, followed by Prince Alan.

I sat down on the bench and turned towards the piano. While I could only play “Der Flohwalzer” in my previous life, I was made to practice from a young age as Katarina. The score sheet was a practice song aimed at beginners and young children.

Although I made some minor mistakes here and there, I felt like I played reasonably well. In fact, Jeord was surprised at my performance — or more accurately, at the fact that I could even play the piano at all. *...Should I take that as a compliment?*

Next up was Alan, who turned to the piano and promptly started playing. For the sake of fairness, we were both using the same score.

Although it was the same song, a definitively different sound flowed through the halls of the manor. Everyone present, me included, collectively held our breaths — Alan’s performance was truly splendid. I’d simply assumed that he was a spoiled prince who was full of himself — to think that he possessed such amazing talents!

At the end of his performance, all the servants present burst into applause — something that didn’t happen at the end of my session.

“Amazing! Prince Alan, that was really amazing!” I burst out. While I was pretty tone-deaf when it came to music, I could at least discern between a good performance and an average one.

Alan himself, however, didn’t seem too impressed — he had a hard expression on his face. “...It’s no big deal.”

“That’s not true! You have an amazing talent, Prince Alan!”

“...I don’t have anything that deserves to be called a talent.”

The more I praised him, the harder his features became. *What’s wrong with him?*

“As Katarina said, that was most impressive,” Jeord said, praising his twin’s

performance.

“...But you don’t really think that, do you?” Alan muttered. His expression was one of pain — akin to the one I had seen earlier. Then he shouted, “What is this, pity? I don’t need any of this! I know you simply think of me as a failure who is good for nothing!”

Then, as if running away from one thing or another, he bolted straight out of the room.

While I had no idea what was going on, I felt that such a dramatic escape warranted an equally dramatic pursuit. Disregarding the stunned expressions of the gathered servants, I chased after Alan, much like the heroine in a Shoujo Manga.

It would seem that the adage of people running away to familiar places was indeed true. Alan was standing under those very same trees where we had held our contests. He looked up at me slightly as I approached, but the sight of me did not seem to be of any comfort — he soon hung his head once more.

“...Have you come to laugh at me, too?” Alan said, somewhat suddenly.

“Eh?” I had no idea what he meant. *What am I to laugh about? Nothing about this was particularly enjoyable or pleasant!*

“...You’re here to laugh, aren’t you? ‘Don’t think you’re all that just because you can play the piano’... something like that, right?”

“...Whatever do you mean, Prince Alan? Just because you can play it? That’s hardly a ‘just’! You have quite a remarkable talent, you know.”

Having witnessed such an amazing performance, I would have assumed that Alan would at least be a little proud of himself. *Modesty is the last thing I expected!*

Having been exposed to his magnificent playing, I could not help but realize that my own performance was greatly lacking. Compared to Alan’s captivating performance, my self-assessment had slipped from “acceptable” to “not very good at all.”

“I don’t need your pity, Katarina. I’m not good for anything, after all. I’m just what’s left behind after Jeord takes all the glory.”

While I had assumed Alan was haughty and full of himself, it seemed like he was actually a prince with quite the negative outlook.

“It’s not pity! Prince Alan... why is it that you have so little confidence in yourself?”

“Ha. I’ve been compared to Jeord ever since I entered this world, see. I’ve never won against him in any category. I bet Jeord took all the good stuff for himself when we were still in mother’s womb. So if you think about it... how can leftover dregs such as I have any kind of confidence?”

Hmm. Is that what it is? Come to think of it, *Fortune Lover* did have such a setting for Alan. Ever since the day he was born, Alan had been constantly compared to Jeord, and yet could never best his twin brother in anything. No matter how hard Alan worked, Jeord would accomplish whatever he sought to do before he did — all the while remaining cool and collected.

I suppose simply telling Alan, who has been in such a situation for all his life, to suddenly have confidence in himself and work hard would be somewhat callous. After all, Mary, Alan’s cute fiancée, was the one who healed his heart in the events of the game.

Alan was by no means unskilled, however. In the setting of *Fortune Lover*, Alan’s grades in the academy were top-class. The problem here was hardly Alan’s capabilities, but rather Jeord being too much of a savant at everything he did.

Even so, Alan’s previous performance was really something else; perhaps he had an innate talent for music. If I recalled correctly, Alan did play the violin for the protagonist on several occasions. Yes, if I had to guess, Prince Alan must fare better than Jeord in one field — music. At the very least, he had the talent for it.

In other words...

“...Personally, I think it is more that each of you have your own particular strengths. Your own... fortes.”

“...What do you mean?”

Uh-oh. I accidentally blurted it out! To make things worse, Alan's looking right at me now!

“Umm... Well. I think that Prince Jeord has things that he's suited to and good at, as well as things that he can't really handle well. The same goes for you, Prince Alan — I do believe that you have skills you can be proud of, too. It is just a matter of... individual strengths and weaknesses.”

Quite a long winded explanation, but one that somehow managed to convey what I had wanted to say.

“Individual strengths... and weaknesses, you say? So are you claiming that even Jeord has something he isn't good at? I've never heard of anything like it, from then till now.”

I suppose Alan had a point — Prince Jeord, who could seemingly do anything and everything without breaking a sweat, hardly seemed fazed by anything. He was fairly intelligent all around, and his skill at the sword was admirable... despite the fact that he spent much of his time visiting me at my manor. In fact, he had recently offered to help with the harvest, and was gathering crops at a much faster pace than I ever could.

Surely there was nothing he was bad at, or had difficulties with. Even I had thought the same way, until...

“Fufufufu. Well, Prince Alan, I suppose I should inform you that Prince Jeord does have a... weakness.”

“?!”

A bold smile lit up my face. After all, I wasn't making it up. I had noticed it recently: the one thing that Jeord simply could not come to terms with.

More accurately, I would say it was a discovery of sorts. True to his image, I had originally thought of Jeord as a picture-book perfect prince through and through, with no faults or weaknesses.

However, as the days passed and Jeord continued helping me with my harvest (and being given a share), I could not help but notice it. Yes, much like the kind

old lady in the neighborhood that most children knew, I had grown close to Jeord, and now I understood.

“Well... the thing that Prince Jeord absolutely cannot stand is...”

“Is...?” Alan continued staring at me, frozen in surprise and anticipation. On my face was a most malicious smile. Fitting, perhaps, of a villainess.

This had happened a few weeks ago. On that day, Jeord and Mary were visiting the manor, planning to take home some of the crops that I had cultivated.

Jeord, Mary, and Keith were kind enough to offer to help with the harvest — and that was when it appeared. It darted this way and that by my legs, and seemed headed for Mary. They could be most unpleasant — not wanting it to surprise her, I decided to catch it instead.

However... it promptly changed course, making a beeline for Jeord, who was watching warily nearby. For the very first time in my life, I saw the usually calm Jeord... cowed. Afraid. Disturbed, at the very least.

And then I knew — perhaps, just maybe... Jeord really did not like what he had just seen.

Recollecting the events with that malicious smile still on my face, I spotted Jeord himself — he had come searching for us, I suppose, on account of how long we were taking.

The perfect chance. Yes, this was the perfect chance to confirm my theory. Up until now, all we had were assumptions... Now was the time.

With those thoughts in mind, I reached into my pocket, grabbing onto the object that I had been carrying around with me, hidden, for the past few days. I pulled Alan behind some trees and shrubbery, and we hid as I waited for the perfect moment, observing Jeord the whole time. As Jeord approached our hiding place, I yanked it out of my pocket, tossing it right before his feet.

“Uwaargh?!” A strangled cry rose from Jeord’s throat at the sight of the sudden object. Gone was the calm and collected expression he usually had — in

its place was surprise, confusion, hesitation.

“Ah, yes. There’s no mistaking it now!” I giggled, still hidden in the bushes.

“Hey, hold up... so what exactly was the thing that Jeord isn’t good with? What did you toss at him?” Alan asked, apparently not entirely convinced.

I decided to quickly remedy that, filling Alan in with the sordid details. “It was a SNAKE!”

“A snake?!”

“...Well, more accurately, it’s an imitation of one. I can’t exactly keep a real snake in my pocket now, can I?”

“...I don’t think most people put snakes of any kind in their pockets, anyway. Well? Why did you toss it at him then?”

“As I said, Prince Alan, I’m showing you what Prince Jeord has difficulties with...”

“Difficulties... you don’t mean?! Is it SNAKES?!”

“Yes indeed! It was but a suspicion at first, but looking at how he just reacted, I can now say so with certainty! Prince Jeord is afraid of snakes!” I declared, impossibly proud of what I had discovered and achieved.

Ah, truly, this is an amazing discovery. At long last, we have discovered the singular weakness of the picture-perfect prince.

On another note, the “snake” that I had thrown was a toy, handmade by yours truly with rolled and balled up paper — a tool I had made in my efforts to discover Jeord’s true weakness. Of course, it looked nothing like the real thing, but judging from Jeord’s reaction alone, it had quite the notable effect.

“Difficulty... with snakes. Snakes, huh? He does look cowed, I’ll say... but that wasn’t what I was talking about. But snakes. Ah, he REALLY does look intimidated by the thing...”

Alan, who had been muttering to himself all this time, seemed oblivious to the fact that I was doing a little victory dance next to him. I was exuberant! Elated! I had discovered Jeord’s one true weakness! With this, even if I were confronted by a Catastrophic Bad End, I would have one last trump card! I

continued my celebratory dance, unaware of the fact that a deep, dark presence had slowly approached me from behind.

“Katarina... It would seem like you are in a most delightful mood. I wonder what has brought about this... joy?”

“?!”

Turning around, I came face to face with Jeord, who was standing with quite the radiant smile on his face. In his hand was none other than the toy snake I had just tossed at him moments ago.

Ah, yes. He's smiling so brightly... but for some reason, this smile strikes fear into my heart. Slowly but surely, I became aware of a dark aura rising from his being.



“P-Prince Jeord...”

“To think that I was worried about you both, since you had gone off chasing after Alan and did not return... what then, may I ask, is this?” Jeord said, holding up the toy snake before my eyes.

“Ah... Um. That... That is... Uh...” I could only stare on helplessly, unable to say a single word in the face of Jeord’s tremendously intimidating aura.

This is bad! I’d thought to just test out my theory with a little prank, but Jeord is angry! No, he’s definitely, positively livid!

Actually, I’m sure that he didn’t see a thing... how is he so sure that I was the one who threw the toy snake, then?!

“Katarina... did you not turn nine just this very last month?”

“...Yes.”

“Nine years of age, Katarina Claes. The oldest daughter of a Duke, and my very own fiancée... one would think that she would hardly throw a toy like this, yes...?”

“...Ugh.”

Jeord’s already brilliant smile rapidly intensified.

This... Ah, this is true fear. What if... I were exiled from the kingdom for the crime of “Assault by Projectile Snake on His Highness the Third Crown Prince?”

Ah... How could this be? A Catastrophic Bad End? In a place like this?!

“Come to think of it, Katarina. I have not met with Madam Claes today. Perhaps you would know of her whereabouts?”

“...Ah, yes. Mother is having tea with Keith at the moment.” Caught unawares by the sudden change of subject, I bluntly and honestly answered Jeord’s question.

Jeord’s smile hardly faltered as he processed my response. “I see. Well then, Katarina. I really should greet her myself. After all, I have much to say to her — on certain peculiar incidents, such as your tree climbing competitions with Alan, and the fact that you threw this... toy. At me.”

“?!” *What?! Is Jeord going to sell me out to Mother, simply because I sent a projectile toy snake in his general direction?! As expected of the black-hearted prince. Jeord, an embodiment of true primal fear.*

As much as I begged and pleaded with Jeord, who was currently now marching straight towards Mother, all he did was smile. A radiant, brilliant smile... with an obvious sprinkling of intense distaste. *I have angered the black-hearted prince — the one person I should not have crossed!*

Still wallowing in despair, I barely noticed a faint voice from behind me as I haplessly chased after the still-fuming Jeord. Turning around in curiosity, I saw that the source was none other than Alan, who had been forgotten all this time — and he was laughing. He was laughing his heart out, as if a great dam had burst within his being. To be more accurate, he was hugging his stomach and laughing in a positively explosive manner.

Damn you, Alan! How could you laugh at the misfortune of others?! Though I will concede that this incident is entirely my own doing...

For now, however, I could hardly bother with Alan — I needed to chase Jeord down! And so I ran. But it perhaps goes without saying that someone like me could not possibly contain Jeord’s rage...

And so it came to be that mother found out about my tree climbing contests with Alan, and my projectile snake tossed at Jeord. I sat through a great many insufferable hours of lectures that day.

In retrospect, this incident was more than just a disaster — I also made tremendous gains towards my goals. For starters, I had discovered Jeord’s one true weakness! In the event of a Catastrophic Bad End where he threatens to cut me down with his sword, all I had to do was give a projectile snake a good toss and escape while he was in a panicked state.

Truly a perfect, flawless plan. *Ah, Katarina Claes. You are such a remarkable strategist.* All I had to do was improve on my projectile snakes in the time between this day and my enrollment into the academy. I would make them more lifelike, more convincing — and then make sure to hide one in my pocket at all times!

With this, I had come up with a superbly ingenious method of avoiding a

Catastrophic Bad End.

On another note, Alan no longer challenged me to any more contests or competitions. Even so, he continued visiting the Claes manor, and I was surprised to find him speaking normally with Jeord after some time had passed — though I didn't even know when that started happening.

Hmm. Why did things change like this? While I was indeed curious, now was not the time for such considerations!

I had to prepare myself adequately for the days ahead. Katarina Claes must take bold steps towards the creation of a realistic projectile snake. All in the name of defeating Prince Jeord, should the need ever arise!



I was born as the fourth crown prince in line to the throne, receiving the name of Alan Stuart. My older twin brother, Jeord, is in turn the third crown prince.

My constitution was weak for the first few years of my life. In fact, I spent most of my time bedridden. As a result, I feel that my mother, the nursemaids, and my caretakers did a good job of spoiling me — at least, they raised me well.

As my body slowly gained strength, I eventually reached a point where I could seriously begin my physical and academic training. From then on, I worked hard to claw back the distance between my brother and I. My hard work earned the praise of all my tutors — and perhaps I got a little ahead of myself.

It was when I first attended academic tutoring sessions with my older twin brother, Jeord, that I noticed the differences between us. While I was racking my brains for an answer to a question, Jeord merely had a cool and calm expression on his face, soon solving the problem I was struggling with.

Even our lessons at swordplay went the same way. While I rushed at Jeord with all my might, he simply deflected my blows as he would a child's, easily defeating me without breaking a sweat.

I was inferior to Jeord... and the distance between us was vast. I had finally realized that. Of course, both my physical and academic tutors told me that Jeord was "special," and that it was somewhat natural for me to lose to him.

They were comforting me, perhaps, but I soon refused to take any more lessons together with Jeord. I would then distance myself from my brother... I could not stand being compared to him, nor could I even endure being by his side.

One day, I overheard a certain conversation.

“Master Alan is always somewhat lacking in the things he does, no?”

“I don’t think he chose to be this way — didn’t he live the first few years of his life bedridden?”

“Ah, yes, and having that Jeord as a twin brother... the poor thing.”

“Maybe all the good bits were taken by Master Jeord when they were still in their mother’s womb!”

“Haha, so you’re saying he only got the dregs and leftovers?”

“Hey, now, that’s a little too much, isn’t it?”

The servants spoke with one another, laughing as they strolled through the royal castle’s hallways. It was like as if my field of vision slowly turned dark. I could not even muster up any rage at the transgressions that had just taken place before me...

The words pierced my heart. In particular, the statement of “Maybe all the good bits were taken by Master Jeord!” Like an immovable thorn it remained, resolutely resisting all my attempts to remove it. Once I had heard that statement, it was as if those same words were whispered by everyone around me — my tutors for swordplay, academic studies, and even the servants seemed to repeat this phrase endlessly.

It didn’t matter how hard or how much I tried, Jeord would simply tower over me with that cool and collected face of his. I don’t remember when exactly it started, but eventually I was filled with nothing but a sense of being inferior to my brother.

However, no matter my attempts to best him, and no matter how conscious of his achievements I was, Jeord was simply not interested. To be precise, I was not even reflected in his eyes. This made me suffer, and made me harbor a deep resentment towards him... And yet, the more distance I put between

myself and my brother, the more I resented him, and the more it hurt inside.

It was in the Spring of my eighth birthday that I heard of Jeord's engagement plans. The castle was filled with gossip of it. He had apparently decided to take the oldest daughter of a powerful duke as his future bride. A few months after that, my engagement plans were finalized as well — unlike Jeord, I had not asked for her hand in person.

Given that I was the last prince in line to the throne without a fiancée, all the other nobles jumped at the opportunity, parading their daughters before me. In the end, it was decided that I should be engaged to the youngest daughter of the Hunt family, Mary Hunt, for political reasons.

Fortunately, she was quite the lovable girl. Her large, round eyes were a deep hue of burnt sienna, and her long eyelashes only served to compliment them. She was almost like a precious doll. With her somewhat soft voice, she greeted me with great effort — she really was adorable. As I was the youngest in my family, it almost felt like I had suddenly gained a cute little sister of my own. I was glad.

Eventually, our conversation shifted to that of a small garden she had been taking care of in her manor's central courtyard. It really was beautiful. When I praised her, saying that it was a wonderful and splendid little garden, Mary smiled, ever so slightly.

Her smile reminded me of a book I had read the day before called *The Girl with the Green Thumb*. The protagonist in the story was a girl with special hands — she had quite the talent at raising plants and caring for them. A green thumb, so to speak. Surely, Mary had these very same special hands too. And so I decided to mention this to her, but...

"In truth, I was told a few days ago that I had a green thumb. Special hands, too..."

"..."

It was as if my mind had been read — someone else had said this to Mary before me. I lost my train of thought, and was now speechless.

"Lady Katarina, who has been most kind to me, mentioned that to me just the

day before.” A change seemed to have come over Mary as she recollected the scene. Staring into space and talking about the encounter, her expression was very much reminiscent of a maiden in love.

I, of course, was left in the dust, and could only respond with a pallid “Ah... is that so.”

Mary seemed strangely prompted by my mere formality of a response, however, and started passionately talking about this “Lady Katarina.” From that day on, all Mary would talk about on my visits was Lady Katarina. When I tried to invite her over for tea, she promptly refused, stating that she had a “prior appointment with Lady Katarina.”

Who... Who even is this, “Lady Katarina”?! I felt a sense of resentment rise up within me — but soon enough, this question was answered.

Katarina Claes. A member of the Claes family, and the eldest daughter of Duke Claes himself... and she was Jeord’s fiancée too.

Jeord... takes everything away from me. All the while making that smug expression of his.

And now this? His fiancée, this Katarina Claes, is going to take Mary away from me?

I could feel my vision darkening once more. Before I knew it, I was already on a horse carriage to the Claes manor.

I was made to wait in the guest parlor. This Katarina Claes was late, but eventually she showed up and introduced herself. A girl with azure eyes and brown hair... apparently the same age as me, too. Although I would not call her ugly by any means, her blue eyes slanted upwards somewhat, giving off an impression of a somewhat strict and harsh person.

This was Jeord’s fiancée? The beautiful lady that Mary often praised? I could not believe my eyes. This was truly unexpected. In any case, I raised my concerns to this Katarina almost immediately.

“Did you know that Mary Hunt is now my fiancée?”

“Well, yes... I do know of that.”

I was incensed by the fact that she could say that with a straight face — and so readily, too.

“So you do know. Stop seducing her, then!”

“...S-Seduce?! What?!” Katarina’s azure eyes opened wide at the accusation. It was almost like she was pretending to know nothing about the affair — I became even more enraged.

“Don’t play the fool! Even if I ask her out, she declines! Going all, ‘Oh, today I have an appointment with Lady Katarina.’ In fact, YOU are all she talks about when she is with me! Mary may be pure of heart, but you are clearly at fault for seducing her! There’s no doubt about it!!”

“Wh-What is that supposed to mean?! I’ve had enough of these baseless accusations of yours!” With that, Katarina’s already steeply slanting eyes seemed to slant upwards even more. How was this even possible?

“What baseless accusations? This is the truth! With that face of yours, you’ve corrupted my pure Mary!”

“What is wrong with you?! There’s no such thing! In fact, it’s YOUR fault for asking Mary out when she already has plans to visit my manor! To begin with, if you really were charming, no girl would turn down your invitation! You’re CHARM-LESS! Mary keeps talking about me?! Well of course she would! It’s because you’re BORING!!”

“...No charm... Boring...”

Before I even knew it, I was at a loss for words. While I had been treated as the leftovers in Jeord’s wake all this time... this was the first time in my life I had met anyone who would say such a thing to my face. It was all too much for me — I started laughing in spite of myself.

“...Ha. Haha. This is the first time I’ve been ridiculed to my face...”

“...Um. That just now was...”

“Prepare yourself, Katarina Claes. I shall take your train of insults as a thrown gauntlet,” I said, somewhat haughtily, challenging Katarina on the spot. “I challenge you! To a duel!”

How did it turn out this way? I wondered, as I stood before this... tree.

Yes, I did challenge Katarina Claes to a duel. This matter would be settled by the sword amongst men... but Katarina was a woman. As such, I had allowed her to choose a more appropriate contest for the challenge at hand. While I had assumed she would simply suggest a match of chess or some other board game...

“Well, let us settle for tree climbing, then,” Katarina said without batting an eye.

For some reason, the words she had just uttered were... unfamiliar... to me. Tree climbing? What was that? Of course I knew what a tree was, and what climbing meant... but what exactly was this?

I had never done anything like it in the last eight years of my life. Maybe the children of commoners did it, but the children of nobles climbing trees? Unheard of.

Katarina, as if finding my reaction amusing, asked, “Are you perhaps unable to climb trees, Prince Alan?”

This was now a question of my pride as a man! I answered her without any hesitation. “Nonsense! I accept your challenge!”

And this was why we were now standing before the two tallest trees in the gardens of the Claes manor... all lined up for our challenge. The rules of the challenge were simple — the first to reach the top of their respective tree wins.

Yes, with this it would be easy to discern a victor. However... I had never climbed a tree in my life before. Actually, I didn’t even know how to climb trees...

However, I had accepted Katarina’s challenge — and so I had to do it regardless. I steeled myself, rolling up my sleeves.

“Well then, Prince Alan. Are you ready?”

“...Yeah. Right. Anytime.”

“Well then. We shall begin on the count of three. Anne, my personal maid,

shall do the honors.”

“Y-Yeah.”

The challenge started under the watchful gaze of our servants... and then promptly ended. I lost... terribly. All I could do was climb to the very first branch of the thing — I didn’t know how to climb in the first place! I had no idea how to progress from that point.

Katarina, however, was zipping up her tree like... some sort of monkey. She was perched all the way at the very top.

Why exactly is it that the eldest daughter of the Claes family is so good at climbing trees? In fact, isn’t she the oldest daughter? Of a noble? A duke? Do the daughters of dukes usually climb trees...? I could not understand this. My thoughts were tangled into an incoherent, jumbled mess.

“Prince Alan. We have a clear victor in this contest — could we draw this to a close?” Katarina said, turning to me with a smug expression. She seemed so full of herself! Before I knew it, the words had already left my lips.

“One more time! I challenge you again! This is the first time I’ve climbed a tree — I was simply not used to it!”

“That is quite all right. But don’t think you can win so easily, prince.”

“Bring it on!”

However, no matter how hard I tried and how many times I challenged her, Katarina always won, her speed rivaling even that of a monkey. As a result, I decided to postpone the challenge — I’d come back a few days later to settle it.

A few weeks passed since I started challenging Katarina Claes. After a few more tree climbing bouts, I couldn’t help but notice something: Katarina was always serious. She didn’t hold back or give me any slack just because I was a prince. She also looked straight at me... into me.

Up until now, no one had challenged me in such a fashion — earnestly, with their heart and soul. No matter how hard I tried, my twin brother, Jeord, never even looked at me. I was not reflected in his eyes.

Katarina's unwavering gaze and sincere attitude caused the aching in my heart to slowly subside. I looked forward to my visits to the Claes manor. Visiting Katarina was... fun.

However... that only lasted until a certain day.

"Jeord?! What are you doing here?!" I exclaimed, unable to contain myself at the sudden sight of my brother at the Claes manor.

"You sound as if me being here is a most mysterious thing. This is the home of my fiancée — my presence here is hardly out of place," Jeord replied, a confident smirk plastered across his face.

It was as he said. I could not find a suitable retort. *When... how? How could I forget that Katarina is my brother's fiancée?* I was surprised at myself.

"...In any case, I'm here for a challenge with her today. Don't get in the way."

"About those challenges... I heard that you have failed to achieve victory, time and time again. Would it not be best to simply give up...?" Jeord said, his eyes cold.

I could hear it. I heard it again... That talk about Jeord taking everything away from me, leaving me with only the dregs.

"...No! NO!! We still need to settle it! I can win this! I... I know I can...!"

Don't look down on me! Don't make a fool of me!

My vision clouded. I could feel my surroundings fading, sinking into darkness.

I had all but forgotten about it — this heavy, throbbing pain in my chest... on account of how light and warm it had felt, as of late.

No... This is bad. I don't feel good at all...

"...Ah. Prince Alan. If you would accept, perhaps we could change the terms of the challenge itself? My mother will surely be greatly displeased if we keep climbing trees."

Katarina, who had suddenly called out to me, had a strange expression on her face — she seemed oddly cheerful, but her smile was twitching slightly.

The heavy pain in my heart ebbed slightly at the sight of her face. At

Katarina's suggestion, our tree climbing challenge was called off, and was instead replaced with a musical bout — with the piano, to be precise.

After moving to the piano room, we began our contest. Katarina was up first, playing a practice song meant for children and other younger learners of the instrument. Although she made some small mistakes here and there, she kept playing until the end.

Next was my turn. When I was done, everyone in the room was clapping. Katarina, in fact, seemed the most excited of them all. She was jumping, clapping, and even cheering.

"Amazing! Prince Alan, that was really amazing!"

Katarina praised me, just like how my tutors back in the royal castle did. Surely she was just... pitying me.

"...It's no big deal."

"That's not true! You have an amazing talent, Prince Alan!"

"...I don't have anything that deserves to be called a talent."

Katarina did have a point — I found musical instruments more intuitive than academic studies or swordplay, but...

A talent? Me? No. There's no way I could have anything like that.

I was the leftovers — the dregs, after Jeord had taken away all the good bits for himself. No matter what I did, I could not possibly hope to best my brother.

"As Katarina said, that was most impressive," Jeord said, with that fake smile of his that he always had on his smug face.

My brother could do anything. Surely he was ridiculing me again — I just knew it!

My vision started fading again. The pain that had ebbed was now back in full force, stabbing itself deep into my being.

"...But you don't really think that, do you? What is this, pity? I don't need any of this! I know you simply think of me as a failure who is good for nothing!"

I couldn't stand it any longer! I couldn't stand to be in the same place as

Jeord! I felt like everyone was just... laughing. At me.

I ran out of the room as fast as my legs could carry me. I ran, sprinting into the darkness. I wanted to just disappear or vanish, but instead found myself standing before the trees Katarina and I used to climb.

I stood there for a while. Soon enough, I felt someone else's presence — and I raised my head. I had thought a servant or member of my royal entourage had come to check up on me, but... no. It was Katarina.

I blurted out the words carelessly. "...Have you come to laugh at me, too?"

"Eh?"

"...You're here to laugh, aren't you? 'Don't think you're all that just because you can play the piano'... something like that, right?"

"...Whatever do you mean, Prince Alan? Just because you can play it? That's hardly a 'just'! You have quite the remarkable talent, I'll have you know."

"I don't need your pity, Katarina. I'm not good for anything, after all. I'm just what's left behind after Jeord takes all the glory."

I'd thought that Katarina was different from all those people in the castle. But in the end... she was the as them, with their pointless pity and encouragement. I knew. I knew that they were laughing at me from the shadows.

After all, I myself knew how useless and unremarkable I was. That was how it had always been, and what they had always said.

"It's not pity! Prince Alan... why is it that you have so little confidence in yourself?"

"Ha. I've been compared to Jeord ever since I entered this world, see. I've never won against him in any category. I bet Jeord took all the good stuff for himself when we were still in mother's womb. So if you think about it... how can leftover dregs such as I have any kind of confidence?" I said in a bout of self-depreciation. Now, even Katarina would just stand still and look at me with quiet apathy. Just like everyone else.

"...Personally, I think it is more that each of you have your own particular strengths. Your own... fortes." Katarina, however, did not stand still and remain

silent.

“...What do you mean?” I muttered, glaring straight at Katarina.

“Umm... Well. I think that Prince Jeord has things that he’s suited to and good at, as well as things that he can’t really handle well. The same goes for you, Prince Alan — I do believe that you have skills you can be proud of, too. It is just a matter of... individual strengths and weaknesses.”

“Individual strengths... and weaknesses, you say? So are you claiming that even Jeord has something he isn’t good at? I’ve never heard of anything like it, from then till now.”

Look at his smug face, his confident, cool expression. Jeord could do anything!

It even extends to his tastes in food! Ever since I was born, I’ve never heard complaints that Jeord was picky with his meals.

That’s how perfect he is. Prince Jeord, good at anything and everything... unlike me.

However.

“Fufufufu. Well, Prince Alan, I suppose I should inform you that Prince Jeord does have a... weakness.”

“?!”

A confident smile flitted across Katarina’s face. “Well... the thing that Prince Jeord absolutely cannot stand is...”

“Is...?” I swallowed hard. I could only watch on in absolute silence.

Ah, there he is. Jeord had wandered close by, searching for the two of us. Katarina, upon visually confirming her target, suddenly pulled something out from her pocket and tossed it at my brother.

“Uwaargh?!”

That mystery object landed in front of him, and a strange cry arose from the depths of Jeord’s throat. *In fact... I’ve never seen him like this. He’s... panicked? Nervous?*

“Hey, hold up... so what exactly was the thing that Jeord isn’t good with?

What did you toss at him?”

Jeord was positively panicking. What was it? I had to know!

Katarina answered my question with a somewhat smug expression of her own.

“It was a SNAKE!”

“A snake?!” I couldn’t help but be surprised at this unexpected answer.

“...Well, more accurately, it’s an imitation of one. I can’t exactly keep a real snake in my pocket now, can I?”

“...I don’t think most people put snakes of any kind in their pockets, anyway. Well? Why did you toss it at him then?”

“As I said, Prince Alan, I’m showing you what Prince Jeord has difficulties with...”

“Difficulties... you don’t mean?! Is it SNAKES?!”

“Yes indeed! It was but a suspicion at first, but looking at how he just reacted, I can now say so with certainty! Prince Jeord is afraid of snakes!” Katarina declared somewhat triumphantly. For some reason, she seemed really proud of what she had just said.

But... Really? Jeord is... afraid of snakes? Unthinkable! I could never have guessed it.

Actually... that’s not what I wanted to know! I wanted to know what I could best Jeord in. I thought perhaps he was secretly lacking in the ways of the sword, or academic knowledge? But... of all things, snakes...

Even so... he REALLY does look intimidated by the thing... look at him!

This was truly unexpected. Prince Jeord, a capable and respected prince of a great kingdom... startled? By a toy snake thrown by Katarina Claes?

I should take back what I said. Katarina Claes; she was definitely different than the people at the royal castle.

Different from most noble children... “Ha. Haha...” She’s really something else! What a strange girl!

Lost in my thoughts, I continued pondering upon what I had just seen. Katarina, however, had been caught in the act by Jeord.

Jeord was angry, all right. You could see it in his eyes — and in how Katarina was slowly retreating. But... hmm. It didn't really feel like he was angry, but instead simply acting the part to mess with Katarina.

The Jeord I knew always seemed bored, and always had that fake smile on his face. He was uninterested in the world, and in anything else, really. That was how I saw him.

Even so... Jeord had genuinely panicked at the sight of Katarina's projectile toy snake. And now, he was angry at the fact that he panicked...? *Is this really Jeord...?*

I could only stare on blankly as Jeord openly announced his intent — he would tell Madam Claes about all the naughty things she had done this entire time. Katarina, who had been so confident and triumphant just moments ago, now seemed pale and genuinely shaken.

Why was she so proud of the discovery to begin with? Snakes...? I don't understand.

Look at her! She's now desperately apologizing to Jeord, and looks like she could cry at any moment. While I did empathize with the sorry sight... I could not help but laugh. *This is ridiculous! Katarina, Jeord... they all look so silly!*

I couldn't hold it in any longer. I doubled over, hugging my stomach, and...

I laughed. Tears flowed from my eyes, but I laughed, and kept laughing. It was the first time in my life I had laughed like this. I was laughing, crying — which, I was no longer sure. The tears that had been locked away in my heart intermingled with my newfound tears of laughter and joy — after a while I no longer knew which was which. My vision soon cleared, and my heart felt at ease.

After a while, Katarina was forcibly escorted away by Madam Claes, and in the light of this, Jeord and I returned to the royal castle.

Upon our return, I called out to Jeord. "Ha! Even you have something you can't deal with, huh?"

Before I knew it, I was speaking with Jeord casually — come to think of it, it has been a long time since I had spoken to him in this fashion. At my words, Jeord's constantly smug smile faltered, replaced with a slight, momentary scowl. It was the first time I had ever seen him make another expression.

"I would not say that I cannot deal with it. It is more of... something I do not like very much."

For some reason, Jeord couldn't seem to maintain his usual smile at the mention, or perhaps suggestion of snakes. *Something he doesn't like? So he's bad with snakes? How unexpected and silly! To think that my brother has such a side.*

"I'd thought that you were fine with everything, and that you could do anything."

Maybe that was all but an assumption on my part, in the end. Jeord was not the one that had entrapped me and made me feel inferior. All these emotions... they had welled up from inside me.

All this time, I had not been seeing Jeord for who he really was. After all, even Jeord had something he couldn't handle... and I was the same. I learned that, on this day... all thanks to that strange and crazy eldest daughter of Duke Claes.

"Of course there are things I am bad with, and things I cannot do."

"Oh, really? Do tell." Encouraged by the faltering, half-scowl smile that Jeord still had on his face, I casually continued the conversation.

"Ah, yes... well. For example, predicting the actions of a certain Katarina Claes, I would say?"

"...Yeah. That... That is true," I replied, an awkward smile on my own face.

Climbing trees out of nowhere with the speed of a monkey, and then suddenly hurling toy snakes at people? Even the great Jeord would be hard pressed to predict the actions of someone like that. Katarina's triumphant face resurfaced in my mind — that face she made after she had startled Jeord with the toy snake...

My cheeks felt warm. I wanted to recall that face for a while, and remember

how absurd it all was.

“On another note... did you not have yet another challenge with Katarina today? Are you going to challenge her again soon?”

“Hmm... Yeah. About that... I think we’re good.”

While I did think about it, I now felt that I was done with these challenges. All this time, I had been obsessed with winning and losing. Now, however, that all seemed like a distant lie — and a strange peace washed over my heart.

“Well then, in that case, we would never meet at the Claes Manor again.”

“Eh? What? Why?” I said, suddenly jolted back to my senses. I didn’t understand what he meant by that.

“Why? But of course, now that you are done with your challenges, there is no further need to visit, no?”

“Well... yes, there’s that I guess...”

Come to think of it, I had only been visiting the Claes manor to compete with Katarina. Now that a contest was no longer necessary, I supposed I no longer had a reason to visit...

I could see Katarina’s azure eyes staring straight at me. Even if she was my brother’s fiancée, not visiting the Claes manor anymore meant that I would not see Katarina again. At least, not often.

...I did not like that thought.

As I stood, lost in thought, Jeord suddenly looked straight at me, his eyes determined and serious. It was the first time I had seen such an expression on his face.

“She is my fiancée, Alan.”

“??” *What is he going on about? I know that already!* Confused, I asked Jeord for a clarification.

“Ah, so you do not notice it yourself. Even so, brother... I will never let you have her,” Jeord said, once more with that smug smile. With a quick turn, he was gone, swiftly walking in the general direction of his room.

I didn't quite understand his point — all I could do was watch as Jeord disappeared down the hallway. Up until now, such a sight would have filled my heart with pain and sorrow, but for some reason I felt fine now. While I did not exactly like him all of a sudden, that black aura that haunted my vision seemed gone, along with the emotions that it brought about.

I walked back to my room as well. On my way back, I looked out of a window — and there in the garden were two tall trees, standing side by side. Again, I recalled a certain strange daughter of a duke, who was ridiculously good at climbing trees.

Was she sad after being reprimanded by Madam Claes? I was the one who had challenged her in the first place... so I felt somewhat responsible for her predicament.

Well, I suppose I could just visit and apologize the next time — and maybe bring some of those candies and snacks that the silly girl loved so much. She would stuff her face full of them, just like some sort of tree squirrel.

Ah, the mere thought of it... hilarious. I feel better already.

Chapter 5: My Meeting with the Beautiful Siblings

It was now the second summer since I had retrieved the memories of my past life — I was now ten years of age.

At around this time last year, my crops had been facing a wilting crisis, and Alan had been visiting all the time, challenging me to this and that. Comparatively, this year was somewhat peaceful.

With my fiancé Prince Jeord setting the pace and precedent, quite a few other guests showed up at the Claes manor. Alan and Mary were also visiting at regular intervals this year.

Although the two prince brothers did not seem to get along very well at first, they now seemed to have made amends. Alan, for his part, had begun to seriously study the piano and violin, giving his all when it came to music and instruments. His talent was noticed eventually, and now he was referred to as some sort of musical genius, blessed by the gods themselves.

Mary, too, made her fair share of progress — while she was a somewhat shirking and timid girl when I had first met her, she was now the very image of a young noble lady. Despite this, she still seemed to look up to me.

In fact, just the other day, Mary had made quite the bold statement, looking all dizzy as she did so. It was something along the lines of... “If I were a man myself, I would very well take Lady Katarina as my bride!”

Ah, Mary. A lovable girl, really.

While I did suggest to Mary that, “Well, Prince Alan *is* your fiancé. Should you not spend time with him instead?” Mary’s response, however, was swift: “I refuse, as that would mean I would have less time to spend with you, Lady Katarina.”

It was an utterly merciless refusal. I found myself at a loss for words.

Even my cute adopted brother, Keith, was now out and about, no longer locked up in that room of his. Of course, it would be a lot of trouble if Keith

ended up becoming a playboy, charming the womenfolk around him. To that end, I often reminded him to be kind and gentle to women, and I personally felt that it was working.

On that note, I had also been improving my Catastrophic Bad End avoidance strategies... namely, a key strategy to escape from the clutches of Jeord should he ever come rushing at me with a drawn sword. To ensure that I would not be unjustly cut down, I trained hard at my swordplay and footwork, even earning praise from my tutor. Gone was my old weakness!

In addition, I had one more trick up my sleeve should Jeord go on the offensive. The head gardener of the Claes manor, “Grandpa” Tom, was quite talented with his hands. With his advice and expert consultation, my toy snakes had become even more lifelike in every possible way.

With this, Jeord would surely jump up in fright, mistaking the toy for the real thing. In fact, they were so impossibly lifelike, that I could probably make a fair amount of coin selling these at the local marketplace. Yet another strategy to cope with exile, should it ever happen.

I had not exactly been slacking off in the magic department either — it was, after all, part of my plan to make a living with my magic if it came down to it.

It had only been a year since I started receiving formal magic tutelage. At first, my “Earth Raiser” spell could only create bumps of two to three centimeters. I had made significant progress since, and was now able to make small hedges around fifteen centimeters in height. If I kept going at this rate, I would have to change my incantation to reflect its newfound impressiveness. Perhaps “Rise, Wall of Earth!” would be more fitting.

My adopted brother Keith had also made good progress, and was now fully capable of controlling his own magic. In fact, even a golem the size of the one that had previously sent me flying now obediently did his bidding.

Encouraged by Keith’s success, I too tried manipulating an Earth Golem. The infusion of magic into a golem was unexpectedly difficult, however, and such precise magical techniques were still beyond me.

Having been reincarnated as a noble daughter of a duke, I had assumed that my physical precision would have somewhat increased, but this was

unfortunately not the case. If anything, I felt like I had not changed much at all in that regard.

My magical tutor reminded me on a regular basis that one required adequate reserves of mana and magical capacity to utilize magic appropriately. Magic was truly a deep and complicated subject.

And so, I spent my days in this carefree, yet fulfilling fashion. Along the way, however, I had developed one more hobby, in addition to tilling the fields and climbing trees.

Said hobby was... reading. By reading, I did not mean books on history or economics — no, none of those hard, stuffy subjects. The books I liked were none other than romance novels.

While spoken about in hushed tones and whispers, a definitive romance novel boom was spreading across nearby towns as of late. Such novels were considered beneath a noble's tastes on account of their supposedly vulgar nature. In spite of that, many continued to enjoy them in private.

As for how these books reached my desk, the answer was simple — it was thanks to a certain maid in the manor. This maid, for one reason or another, had a good understanding of current trends and other goings-on in the streets.

All it took was a single loaner book — it wasn't long before I was completely hooked. My reaction was perhaps somewhat natural, given the fact that I no longer had access to the manga and anime I had so voraciously consumed in my previous life.

The subject matter of these novels were varied — love stories about charming princes, knights, or even stories on the beauty of friendship. While the offerings in the market paled in comparison to what I had in my past life, I immediately took to these novels like a fish to water.

Perhaps it was also worth mentioning that my absolute favorite at the current moment was a story of a beautiful friendship between two girls, a princess and a commoner girl. It was called *Princess Emerald and Sophia*.

I was ecstatic that my mother quickly approved of my newfound hobby, and promptly handed me some allowance to purchase said books. Anne's

commentary probably had something to do with it — if I recall, she had said something along the lines of... “In my humble opinion, Madam, it would be far more appropriate for the young miss to quietly read books in her room, as opposed to getting up to no-good outside.”

I suppose my mother had heard this statement enough times to make up her mind. At any rate, I was now able to purchase and read the books I liked, and that was a blessing, truly.

Amidst all the good news, however, was a single unfortunate development — the maid who had introduced me to these novels in the first place had recently left our employ because she was getting married. With her departure, I lost a friend and comrade, and I no longer had anyone to discuss these novels with.

Ah, it filled me with such an itch! I really did want to share my passion with someone else. In my search for a kindred spirit, I even attempted to introduce such books to Anne and Mary. But they weren't interested in romance novels of any kind. A most unfortunate development indeed.

Ah, I want a friend, I really do! I'll have to go looking for one at the next tea party we attend.

As it happens, news arrived a few days later that Jeord and Alan were holding a tea party at the royal castle. Due to the party's royal nature, many young lords and ladies were slated to attend — and with these numbers, perhaps I would be able to find someone who truly understood my passion... for romance novels.

Before I knew it, I had started looking forward to this royal tea party. The event would be held in a corner of the royal gardens — a wide corner, at least, given how large the grounds were. The format would be similar to the first one I had attended at the Hunt manor; an event mimicking the social dance parties one would attend once they were of age.

As expected of a royal-hosted party, this event was larger and more grand than any I had been to before. It was on a different scale altogether, and there were also many more people in attendance.

Given the fact that Jeord and Alan usually visited and spent quite a lot of time with me, it was somewhat different to only exchange brief pleasantries with them. The two were hosting the event, after all, and didn't have much time for

our usual, longer conversations.

Having learned my lesson from my first tea party misadventure, I refrained from stuffing my face with snacks, and instead sat still, drinking my tea as elegantly as I could manage.

Of course, as expected from the royal kitchens, the tea and the snacks were both unbelievably good. I couldn't even count all the varieties of snacks on display!

Suppressing my desire was slowly becoming a herculean feat. While I tried to be strategic by limiting myself to one of each snack, I didn't expect to see a wide variety of teas on display. In a rare, but equally unfortunate occurrence, I sampled each and every one, and soon realized that I had a little too much. My stomach puffed out slightly, visibly rounder than before.

I, however, had grown as a noble lady. After temporarily excusing myself as elegantly as I could, I left Keith and Mary behind, slowly and calmly heading to a nearby bathroom as my resolve was tested.

As I quickly navigated the castle grounds in search for relief, however, I came across a most horrifying sight. It was a vicious dog, running free and unchained — a guard dog of some sort that had escaped from its keeper, perhaps.

Honestly speaking, I was no good with dogs... if only because they seemed to have always hated me. In fact, this held true even in my past life. For some inexplicable reason, most dogs flew into a rage at the very sight of me, as if they were being confronted with an ancient enemy.

To make things worse, the escaped guard dog now bared its fangs at me, as if to signal that it was a threat. *But we've just met mere seconds ago! What the heck!!*

Of course, the unchained guard dog wasted no time in making a beeline for me. While I could have scared away certain types of dogs, notably that of the Chihuahua-class, this one was as large as a Doberman, and was not an enemy I could defeat.

Hiking up my dress, I ran, escaping as quickly as I could. This in turn logically led to me climbing up a nearby tree for refuge.

Unable to harass me as I hid amongst the tree's branches, the dog howled and growled for what seemed to be an eternity. Before long, however, a voice called out — its master, perhaps, having noticed that his hound was missing. Obeying the voice, the dog turned and left, and for a while, all was still.

Relieved, I started making my way downwards... only to be greeted with several humans I had not seen before. The dog was nowhere to be seen. There were six, maybe seven of them — and of all things, they had decided to start a conversation at the bottom of this very tree that I had climbed.

If I go down now... they would know that I climbed up to begin with! A perfect, infallible daughter of a Duke... climbing trees in the royal castle gardens? If word of this got out... it would really be bad. I have to quickly move to another location...!

I was, however, at my limit. To begin with, I already needed to go to the bathroom — and then I was chased by a rabid dog, and was eventually chased up this tree. It had been... quite a while. Very soon, my bladder would reach its final, ultimate limit.

Even if my descent from a tree were to become a cause for rumors... I no longer had a choice. *It'll be infinitely preferable to wetting myself — at this age, no less! The shame!*

Steeling myself, I slid down the tree at full speed. The gathered individuals could only stare at me blankly, obviously taken aback by my sudden appearance.

"Do excuse me, but you're in my way," I said to the small crowd that had assembled here for no apparent reason. It was as if they had been placed here by some divine force — all for the terrible purpose of preventing me from going to the bathroom.

My panicked, anxious voice sounded more stern than I had intended it to be — it was almost cold and demeaning to my ears! But now was not the time to be concerned about such trivialities.

As if terrified by my sudden entrance and prompt dismissal, the children scattered rapidly, like leaves in the wind. *Was I that fearsome? Surely there's no need to run away from me like that!*

Upon closer inspection, there was one girl left standing before me — too stunned to escape, I suppose. The girl had her back to the tree in question, and didn't seem to have witnessed my dramatic entrance.

As she turned around, I found myself taken aback. I swallowed, surprised at the sight. She was... beautiful, to say the least. Her crimson eyes complimented her snow-white hair — a stunning girl with smooth, fair skin that was almost translucent.

For a split second, I was entranced by her beauty, only to be rudely jolted back to reality by the intense pressure in my bladder. If I didn't make it to the bathroom soon, a tragedy would surely occur.

Mustering up all my willpower, I smiled as gently as I could to the somewhat frightened girl — my best attempts at reassuring her, given the situation. And then I turned and rushed off in the appropriate direction.

By some stroke of luck, I eventually made it, thus preventing the outbreak of a true tragedy over the course of this tea party. The worst was now over — but I couldn't shake the feeling that I would one day be bested by these treacherous events.

From now on, I would have to seriously consider a portable toilet of some kind whenever I attended a tea party. I entertained the thought for a while with a serious expression on my otherwise relieved face.

Having managed to reach the bathroom without incident, I returned to where I had originally sat at the tea party, only to find that Keith and Mary were nowhere in sight. There were simply too many people.

Complaining inwardly, I soon acted on my frustrations, stuffing whatever leftover snacks I could reach into my mouth.

"Ah... Um." A small voice drifted out from behind me.

Turning around, I came face to face with the stunningly beautiful girl whom I had met at the tree.

"Ah... you were the one from just now..."

"Y-Yes. That is correct..." the beautiful girl said, nodding slowly.

Now that I had a good look at her, she truly was breathtaking. Although I was used to beautiful people in general thanks to Prince Jeord and my merry band of friends, this girl was in a class of her own. I swallowed hard in spite of myself.

Her pure-white hair almost seemed like strands of silk, cascading in a silent, frozen waterfall. Her skin was reminiscent of freshly-fallen snow — impossibly pure and soft. Her features only seemed to accentuate her crimson eyes — those very same eyes were staring straight into my soul.

She reminded me of... a character in a romance novel.

Actually... AH! That's right! She looks exactly like Sophia, from that trending novel Princess Emerald and Sophia!!

Sophia was of common birth. She had black, silky hair, and equally black, soulful eyes. Her skin was white — white like snow. A true beauty. The Princess, who had sneaked out into the town, was captivated by Sophia's beauty.

The girl before me was like a real incarnation of Sophia herself. But unlike the character she was here, standing before me in the flesh.

I stared at the girl, unable to comprehend what I was seeing.

"Um... a-about just now..." Her snow-white cheeks were now flushed, a gentle shade of red slowly spreading through her face.

Ah, this is just like that scene! Just like how Sophia reacts when she first lays eyes upon Princess Emerald! That very same blush.

Unfortunately for the girl, I was no beautiful princess, but instead Katarina Claes, villainess extraordinaire... all thanks to this face of mine.

If I recall, the princess said this exact line to Sophia...

"What pretty hair you have. Just like strands of silk... would you mind if I ran my fingers through it, just ever so slightly?"

"...Eh?!" The girl before me seemed shocked. Her expression was enough to wake me up from my daydream...

Ugh! What have I done? My fantasies slipped out from my lips before I knew it!

The girl shifted her weight from one leg to another, apparently in a state of panic. A natural reaction if confronted by a fairy-tale prince... of course. But to think that the person who said it to her was none other than me, with my villainess-like face! If I were her, I would be afraid, truly afraid!

“Ah... Um. I meant to say...” I desperately searched for an excuse.

The panicked girl, however, suddenly blurted out a line of her own.
“...Princess Emerald.”

WHAT?! Is... could this possibly be?!

Before I could stop myself, I gripped her shoulders, moving my face close to hers. “Princess Emerald! From the romance novels!! Perhaps... maybe! You know of *Princess Emerald and Sophia* too?!”

Intimidated by my sudden approach and the fact that I was gripping her by the shoulders, the girl nodded rapidly, her panic hardly fading. Encouraged, I listed off various titles, only to have the girl nod at each and every single one of them.

I can't believe it! I've found her! My comrade-in-arms in romance novel appreciation!

That's not all! Just like the character in the story, she's also stunningly beautiful!

I... I am overcome. With emotion, with gratitude.

I stood, shivering in place...

“...What are you doing, Big Sister?” A familiar, yet somewhat suspicious-sounding voice. Suspicious of... me?

Turning in the direction of the voice, I was greeted by Keith, my adopted brother, flanked by Mary.

“...What? Whatever do...” I turned back to the girl, observing my own behavior.

I had apparently captured her with my hands, one on each shoulder at some point in time. My face was close to hers, and my nostrils were flared up in excitement.

Ah, yes. I look like the classic pervert.

“Wah! I-I apologize.” I muttered, promptly letting the girl go. I could feel surprised stares converging on me from all directions.

Yes, truly... I am sorry. In my sudden bout of elation, all logic left my being.

Come to think of it, I don't even know her name!! And to make it worse, I didn't tell her mine!

What terrible social faux pas, enough to disqualify me as a noble lady!

Lifting my dress as slightly and elegantly as I could, I curtsied, issuing a formal social greeting.

“I do apologize for my manners. I am Katarina Claes. Very pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Despite the fact that she had been captured by a suspicious-looking villainess, and was now being formally greeted by her, the girl greeted me in kind — as expected of little ladies with noble upbringing.

“...Sophia Ascart.”

What?! She's... Sophia? Like the Sophia in the book? Was Sophia based off this beautiful girl before me?!

My unbridled excitement and literary arousal was off the charts.

“Lady Sophia! If it would please you, would you like to speak in greater detail with me?” I asked enthusiastically, grasping Sophia's hands in my own.

Keith, however, who had been standing next to me this entire time, promptly reminded me of the situation at hand.

“Big Sister, I do apologize for interrupting you in the midst of such spirited conversation... but the tea party has already ended. We should make the appropriate preparations and return to the manor.”

“?!”

WHAT?! B-But my passionate discussions on novels! We've barely started!

In that case...!

“Well then, Lady Sophia. If you would like, please feel free to pay a visit to the Claes manor...”

“...Eh? Um...”

Grasping Sophia’s hands once again, I issued her a quick invitation, and was elated as she promptly accepted.

I did it! Not wanting to waste the opportunity, I decided on a date and time for the visit on the spot.

“Well then, I will be eagerly awaiting your arrival.”

With that, and an adequately large smile, I bid Sophia farewell and turned to return to the manor with Keith.

And so it came to be that I met the comrade I desired at this royal tea party. Not only would she discuss my favorite novels with me, she even looked like a character from my favorite book! *What a HUGE SUCCESS!*

I grinned widely all the way back in the horse carriage as Keith looked on, a somewhat surprised and flabbergasted expression on his face.

It was soon the promised day — and as expected, Sophia turned up at the Claes manor. I had been looking forward to this the entire morning.

“Young Miss, the Lady Sophia you had been speaking about has arrived, but...” Anne, apparently here to inform me of Sophia’s arrival, seemed a little off.

But this is it! Sophia is here! In my haste to see her, I dashed out of the room, leaving Anne with a cursory word of thanks.

As expected, Sophia was standing in the guest parlor, awaiting my arrival. *Beautiful as always... but oh?* For some reason, there was another person by her side — a ravishing youth.

With his raven-black hair and eyes, he seemed somewhat different from Sophia in appearance. Upon closer inspection, however, I found that this was not the case — their facial similarities suggested familial ties. Like two perfect dolls, they stood side by side, perfectly complimenting each other.

If I had to guess, this was the reason why Anne was so surprised earlier.

Entranced by their beauty, I could only stare at them in wonderment — the boy, however, was the first to call out to me.

“Thank you very much for extending an invitation to my sister. My sister seldom ventures out on her own, so I have come with her. My name is Nicol. I am Sophia’s elder brother.”

My hunch was indeed accurate — this impossibly handsome youth was Sophia’s brother.

I was slightly surprised at Nicol’s statement. Sophia must have been quite the sheltered child. Perhaps I wasn’t one to talk. I was sheltered in my own way, primarily due to my mother insisting that, “You will have Keith accompany you when heading out at all times. You will listen to what Keith says, and under no circumstances will you do anything strange.”

As such, Keith was predictably always by my side. *Yes, on account of us both being so sheltered, we will surely be fast friends.*

With those thoughts in mind, I curtsied properly, first to Sophia’s brother and then to Sophia herself. “No, the pleasure is all mine. Thank you for coming. I am Katarina Claes.”

“Nicol Ascart, elder brother of Sophia Ascart. Pleased to make your acquaintance,” he said, introducing himself once more.

I froze at those words. Nicol Ascart... a name that I was familiar with. I had definitely heard it somewhere before. “Ah, excuse my ignorance, but would you happen to be Chancellor Ascart’s son...?”

“Yes. That is correct.”

No way?! This person is a potential love interest in Fortune Lover, Nicol Ascart! No wonder he’s so pretty and handsome!

Honestly speaking, I had wanted to drop everything and return to my room this very instant so I could pull out the archives and give them a good read. That wasn’t exactly something I could do in this moment, so I did my best to recall what details I could.

Nicol Ascart... son of Chancellor Ascart, and a childhood friend of Alan’s. A

year older than the protagonist, and an upperclassman in the Academy who was famous for saying relatively little.

Hmm. Nope, this is all I can recall at the moment.

To begin with, I still hadn't attempted Nicol's route before my untimely death! I'd planned to do it after finally succeeding with Jeord.

As a result, I knew very little of Nicol's route... primarily on the account that I hadn't even touched it. If not for one of my friends introducing the character to me, I would have never heard of him at all! That friend of mine had cleared his route beforehand, and was telling us all about it.

Let me see... according to what my friend Acchan said... the rival character in Nicol's route is... that's right! His sister!

Yes, I remember now! Nicol is hopelessly overprotective of his sister... and so Sophia is the rival in this case.

To successfully romance Nicol, one would first have to appropriately interact with Sophia... I vaguely recall Acchan saying something like that.

Ah, thank you so much, Acchan. And I am also very sorry for getting upset about the spoilers. Who would think that Acchan's spoilers would be of assistance to me in such a scenario...?

So... if the rival character is indeed Sophia, that would mean that Katarina has nothing to do with it! There are no Catastrophic Bad Ends with Nicol!

In addition, if Sophia is indeed the rival character, Katarina won't have any famous lines to steal... unlike the incident with Alan and Mary. At the very least, I hope I won't end up doing the same thing again.

Well then! With this, there'll be no problems even if I become good friends with Sophia. After all, she's an ally, a comrade-in-arms in my enjoyment of romance novels!

I would never let her escape so easily...

"...Um. Lady Katarina...?"

It would seem that I, Katarina Claes, had once again fallen prey to my mental

fantasies. Before I knew it, Sophia was looking straight at me with worry evident on her pretty face.

“Ah, Lady Sophia. I do apologize. It is nice to meet you again, truly! If you would like, I would be glad to continue our previous conversation...”

With that, I invited Sophia to a table that had been prepared for the occasion, lined with delicious tea and snacks. After that, Sophia and I spent quite some meaningful hours together.

While she was somewhat reserved and fearful at first, perhaps in response to a strange new environment, Sophia eventually opened up as the conversation shifted to books.

She really seemed to love her books. In addition to contemporary romance novels, she also read older fairy tales and myths, along with historical fiction and many other genres. It was truly an interesting conversation — she even gave me a few recommendations!

If there was one thing that did slightly bother me, however, it was the fact that Sophia’s brother Nicol hardly said a thing. In fact, he distanced himself from our discussion, simply watching on quietly. I felt somewhat bad about excluding him while we were having a cheerful and adequately girlish conversation. Perhaps I should have called Keith here to keep him company?

He really was quiet, just like his character setting. *What a waste, given how dashing he is!*

Time passed all too quickly without either of us noticing. We were both brought back to reality all too soon by one of Sophia’s entourage, who whispered that it was almost time for her to return.

Quickly standing up in response to the statement, Sophia’s hair glittered and shimmered, shining silently as I watched on, entranced. *It’s really... beautiful. There’s no mistake about it — surely it would feel just like silk. Would she mind if I touched it... just a little bit?*

“What beautiful hair you have... would you mind if I ran my fingers through it, just ever so slightly?”

The words had already escaped my lips before I could catch myself. I had

blurted out a line from *Princess Emerald and Sophia*... and had delivered the line as if I were the princess herself.

In the novel, however... Sophia was blushing, her face stained a soft crimson. But here...

“...Eh?!”

What a disaster! I seem to have startled Sophia greatly! Oh no, I've done it! She looks positively distressed! What have you done now, Katarina Claes?!

While I had always happily played with Mary's soft, sometimes wavy hair, I hadn't thought about the fact that touching another noble lady's hair in this world may be a social faux pas! Mary, of course, always seemed glad, but still...

To make things worse, I grabbed her by the shoulders and breathed into her face when I first met her! Surely she thinks I'm some sort of deviant! A pervert!

What a terrible turn of events!! Even if I do have a face of a villainess, I don't want the title of pervert! Anything but that!

“...U-Um... well...” I stood rooted to the spot, internally panicking as I searched for an excuse.

“...you?”

“...Eh?”

Sophia repeated herself, her voice weak and quivering — it was an almost inaudible whisper. I calmly asked her to repeat herself.

“...Does it not... disgust you?” Sophia said, in a louder voice now.

Disgust? Disgust... you? Me? Wait! Is she disgusted by my seemingly perverse actions?!

No, no Sophia! You have it all wrong, I'm not a pervert at all!! All right, so maybe there was that incident from a year ago where I supposedly seduced Mary away from a certain haughty prince but... BUT! I don't swing that way! I'm normal! I'm just a normal girl!!

“A-About that, I... uh...” *An excuse! Think of one, quickly! Do it now!*

“...Are you not disgusted by my appearance, Lady Katarina?”

I stood, gaping, having lost all my words and the train of thought behind them. *Eh? What? The disgusting one here isn't me... but Sophia? What?*

Sophia continued on, evidently close to tears, as I stood with my mouth still agape like that of a gasping goldfish.

“...Does it not disgust you, Lady Katarina? This... white hair of mine, only seen in the elderly... these blood-red eyes. Everyone calls me a disgusting, cursed child...”

“?!”

WHAT?! How can something so beautiful be disgusting?!

Thus far, I had seen blonde, silver, brown, red, and black eyes and hair amongst the denizens of this world. As such, I had simply assumed that Sophia's white hair and red eyes were relatively normal. To think... she was ostracized for it? Wasn't that strange? And then there was that...

“...Cursed? What do you mean...?”

Sophia attempted to answer my question, even amidst her tumultuous emotions. But it was Nicol, her brother, who spoke first.

“...Malicious rumors. From certain individuals who are jealous of our father's — our family's achievements. Such jealousy causes them to spread these baseless accusations.”

That made some sense; the Ascarts were a formidable family. I suppose it was only natural for the strong and capable to have many enemies, and of course, these enemies and detractors would in turn spread nasty rumors about them.

This was true even for the Claes family. While Keith was capable and skilled, and I had tried my best to cultivate a noble image, rumors on the street claimed that we were “strange and eccentric.” Baseless accusations indeed! *Ah, jealousy is a terrible and frightful thing.*

“...Even so. It does little to change the fact that my appearance is disgusting and revolting,” Sophia said, with a surprising amount of conviction and force.

She must have heard many of these rumors whispered around her person. While it was true that I had never seen anyone quite like Sophia all this time...

“...Well, I personally think you’re very pretty...”

“...Eh?” Sophia’s eyes opened wide. She stared straight at me— no, *into* me, as I continued, meeting her gaze.

“I think that your silky white hair is beautiful. That your ruby-red, sparkling eyes are beautiful. That... you... are beautiful.”

Now that I’ve made myself clear, perhaps I’ll stop coming across as a pervert!

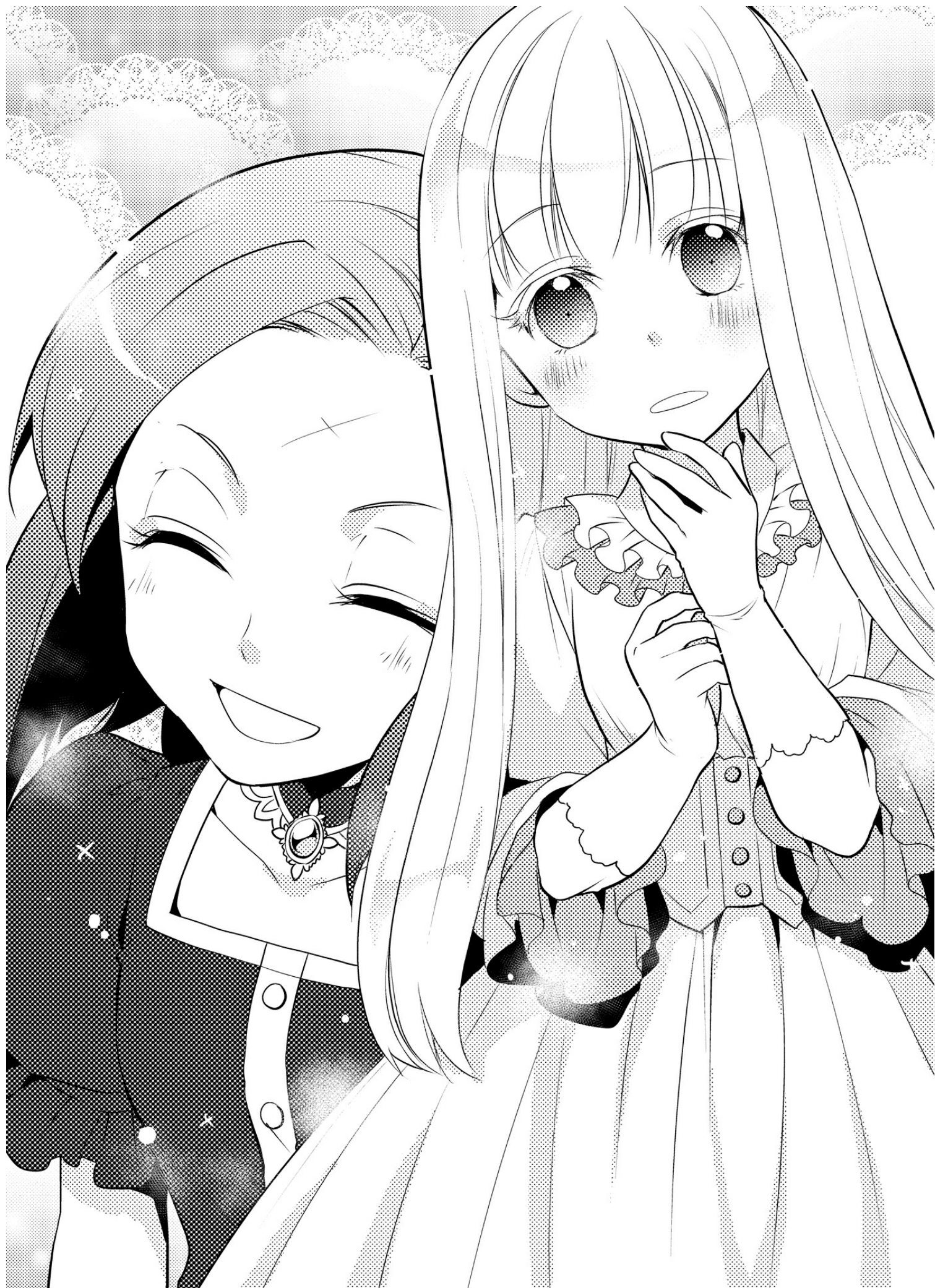
Anything but that! No pervert labels shall befall me! If I have a villainess-like face and am labeled a pervert, I have no idea what I would do.

Rest assured, Sophia. I am normal, the very epitome of normal. Attempting to reassure her, I gave Sophia my warmest possible smile.

“Actually, I would be so pleased if you would come and visit again! And if you don’t mind... would you like to be my friend?”

Saying so, I held out a hand — and was surprised when Sophia grasped it in her own. Her beautiful, gentle white hands were tightly holding mine.

Fortunately, she no longer had a surprised or shocked expression on her face. This was the story of how I made my first romance-novel appreciating friend.



I saw Sophia and her entourage out to the porch and waved as they boarded their horse carriage. Immediately after, I returned to my room and pulled out the “Archive of memories on the game I played in my past life.” As expected, there were not many details recorded within.

While I was surprised that Sophia was a rival character just like Katarina, I had not done anything strange or untoward this time. I felt a wave of relief wash over my being. If anything, I was happy — Sophia was of the same age as Katarina, and also had reserves of magic within her.

This, of course, meant that we would be in the same year at the Magic Academy. We would be able to discuss romance novels, even in class!

Overcome with happiness, I jumped up from my bed, bouncing as I landed. This behavior, of course, earned me a stern warning from Anne.

And that was how Sophia ended up coming on regular visits to the Claes manor — along with Nicol, her silent brother.

Perhaps it was due to the influence of Sophia and my passionate conversations, but Mary eventually began to show some interest too. She eventually asked, “May I borrow a book, Lady Katarina?” Before long, Mary had joined our novel appreciation group, and our conversations became even more lively.

I even took Sophia out to the fields one day, on account of her never having played much outside before. In fact, she even started assisting me with my crops!

While they were both surprised at first, Sophia and Nicol were now very much used to me, and did not react much even if I showed up in my gardening overalls.

With this, the Claes manor gained yet another regular visitor, and I, a great friend.



My name is Sophia Ascart, eldest daughter of the Ascart family. I was born to Count Ascart, my father, who was chancellor to the King. The King valued and

trusted him greatly.

My father was a gentle person — just like my mother and older brother. I was born into privilege, and blessed with a kind, loving family. I had really been blessed ever since I was born. I was truly happy... And maybe that was why it happened, as a price for my happiness and blessings.

I was born different; different than the others around me. My hair was white, stark white — as if all color had fallen from it. My eyes were red, red as blood.

My appearance was... abnormal. People would cast their curious gazes at me, and eventually whisper about me in the shadows, calling me a cursed child.

Even so, my family loved me dearly. My father, who would gently pat my head; my mother, who would lovingly hold me; and my dear brother, who was always at my side, protecting me with all his being.

My gentle family told me that one day, someone who understood me would appear. They told me that I would surely be able to make great friends... but I did not think that was true.

That was why I shut myself in my room. I did not want anyone to look upon me — and I isolated myself as much as possible.

In my quiet room, I read book after book. The wondrous, beautiful stories within transported me away from my cruel reality. When I was reading, I could forget about all my troubles.

Amongst these books, my favorite was one about a friendship between a princess and a young commoner girl — *Princess Emerald and Sophia*.

The girl in the story shared a name with me — she, too, was Sophia. But in the story, Sophia was popular and cheerful, with a head full of jet-black hair and a pair of sparkling black eyes.

The princess would eventually cross paths with Sophia...

“What beautiful hair you have... would you mind if I ran my fingers through it, just ever so slightly?” the princess said, turning to Sophia with a gentle smile. Sophia smiled back shyly.

It was a most splendid story... one that a cursed child like me could not

possibly experience. This was why I continued locking myself up in my room, fantasizing about becoming Sophia — the Sophia in the stories with Princess Emerald.

In my imagination, at least, I could be a girl that was popular and loved by those around her...

“Sophia, please do go to the tea party at the royal castle,” my father said to me, gently as ever, one day.

Up until now, I had not attended any sort of tea party. After all... a single step outside was all it took for people to start whispering about my cursed appearance.

So... I really did not want to go outside. I told my gentle father how I felt. I really did not want to go. But my father, who usually gave in to my demands, did not nod his head on that day.

“Listen, Sophia. Magic dwells in you, and when you come of age, you will be enrolled in the academy, just like your peers. It would not do you much good to stay cooped up in your room all day. The upcoming tea party is hosted by the royal princes, and many noble children will be in attendance. Some of them would even attend the academy with you. If it hurts or becomes difficult, Sophia, then you can come home early — but at the very least, you need to see a little more of the outside world.”

Of course, I knew this was true. When I reached fifteen years of age, I would be forced to attend the academy — even I knew that I could not remain in my room forever, lost in my fantasies and stories.

“At the very least, you need to see a little more of the outside world,” my father said.

He was right... regardless of my misgivings, I did my best to muster up some courage, and decided to attend this tea party.

And so, my brother Nicol and I attended a tea party for the very first time in my life. It was a large and fancy party, held in one of the corners of the royal gardens. There were many people there — crowds of a size I had never seen before.

At first, I wandered around with my brother, looking at various snacks and teas I had never seen before. But soon we were separated, and I found myself surrounded by many other noble children.

All of them had the same severe, judgmental expressions. They ended up bringing me to a tree on the outskirts of the tea party, and under it, we stood.

“Do you even know how important of an occasion this is? This is the first tea party hosted by the royal princes!”

“That’s right! If a cursed child like you shows up at an event like this, you’ll spoil everything!”

“Why are you even here? You shouldn’t be showing that shameful cursed face of yours around!”

They surrounded me, all the while saying terrible things. I knew that I looked disgusting... I knew that people hated me. Even so, all I could do was stand quietly, biting my lip in silence.

I should never have left my room. I would have been safe if I stayed locked up, and something like this would not happen to me.

Just as those thoughts crossed my mind...

“Do excuse me, but you’re in my way.”

A clear voice rang out from behind me. I turned around, and standing before me was a girl. She was cool, composed, and elegant... just like Princess Emerald herself. When did she appear? How did she get there...?

With a single, cool dismissal, the bullies that had surrounded me scattered to the winds. It was all so sudden, and I did not understand what was happening — but I did know that this girl had helped me.

I could only stand in place, stunned, as the girl smiled at me in that same composed and confident manner. Soon she turned around, briskly walking off to some unknown destination.

For a while, my eyes were trained on her silhouette, and all I could do... was stare. I hid behind the tree, afraid that the bullies would return. I only made my way back to the tea party after affirming that they were indeed gone... and as

fate would have it, I crossed paths with the girl from earlier.

I should thank her for helping me... And so, I mustered up my courage once more, approaching her with a shaky voice. “Um...”

She turned around in an impossibly graceful manner, with that same calm and collected expression on her face.

“Um... a-about just now...”

I was too nervous. My voice... it wouldn't come out. Her azure eyes stared straight into mine... then her lips parted, and she spoke.

“What pretty hair you have. Just like strands of silk... would you mind if I ran my fingers through it, just ever so slightly?”

“...Eh?!”

It was a line from *Princess Emerald and Sophia*... I would know, having read it dozens of times. It was what was said to the bright and cheerful Sophia as she crossed paths with a mysterious girl in town... A girl with an aura of refinement and confidence. Her name was...

“...Princess Emerald,” I said, without thinking.

And then...

“Princess Emerald! From the romance novels!! Perhaps... maybe! You know of *Princess Emerald and Sophia* too?!”

Before I knew it, the girl had her hands on my shoulders. I could only stand in shocked silence. Why did this girl suddenly say one of Princess Emerald's lines...? Why was she holding me so tightly by the shoulders? I... I did not know what was going on anymore...

Only curious gazes, or cold, judgmental ones, had been cast at me all my life. And yet... this girl's eyes were sparkling — they shone as she looked straight at me.

I have never... never seen. Anyone look at me in this manner before... My confusion intensified.

Swept along by the flow, I could only meekly nod as the girl asked me a

variety of questions, seemingly getting more excited by the minute.

“...What are you doing, Big Sister?”

A surprised voice from the sidelines. I turned, and there stood a handsome youth with brown hair and blue eyes. The two seemed to know each other.

“Wah! I-I apologize.” The girl finally let go of me at the youth’s question. She then curtsied most elegantly, finally introducing herself. “I do apologize for my manners. I am Katarina Claes. Very pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Her mannerisms and countenance... it was really like she was Princess Emerald, in the flesh.

I soon realized that I had to return the greeting with one of my own, and quickly did so in a somewhat panicked manner. “...Sophia Ascart.”

And then... a most unbelievable thing occurred.

“Lady Sophia! If it would please you, would you like to speak in greater detail with me?”

The girl— no... Katarina’s hands were now holding mine. *What is this girl saying...? Does she know who... what, I am?*

I could not understand the situation, and only stood still, silent. And then —

“Well then, Lady Sophia. If you would like, please feel free to pay a visit to the Claes manor...”

“...Ah... um. Yes. I will.”

Before I knew it, I had promised Katarina that I would pay her a visit. Even as we finalized the details of my attendance, I felt lost and confused — no longer sure if this was reality, or the dreams and fantasies that I had always imagined while locked away in my room.

And so... the promised day arrived. I had never gone outside on my own, and so naturally, my gentle and caring brother accompanied me.

My brother was a year older than me, with a head of raven-black hair and deep, thoughtful eyes. He had come along to protect me — having him next to me was truly reassuring.

And so I mustered up my courage and made the trip to the Claes Manor. When we arrived, the servants who welcomed us stared at me with expressions of surprise and shock. Although I was already used to all this, I could feel what little courage I gathered rapidly fading.

Perhaps this is all just another prank... As my unease consumed me, she appeared. Her refined features, her rapid breaths — it seemed like she had rushed all the way here. Katarina, however, simply stared at us, not saying a single word.

Is it true? Is it all just a joke, after all? Was I mistaken in coming here? I froze in place, and words never left my lips. My dependable brother, however, spoke up in my stead.

“Thank you very much for extending an invitation to my sister. My sister seldom ventures out on her own, so I have come with her. My name is Nicol. I am Sophia’s elder brother.”

As if shaken awake by my brother’s words, Katarina promptly offered her own response. “No, the pleasure is all mine. Thank you for coming. I am Katarina Claes.”

Thank you for coming...? So this isn’t some prank or joke? Is it... really all right for me to be here?

“Nicol Ascart, elder brother of Sophia Ascart. Pleased to make your acquaintance,” my brother said, once again stating his name.

For some reason, Katarina froze for a moment, not moving in the slightest. *I wonder what’s wrong...*

I called out to her, worried about her strange state. “...Um. Lady Katarina...?”

“Ah, Lady Sophia. I do apologize. It is nice to meet you again, truly! If you would like, I would be glad to continue our previous conversation...”

And with that, Katarina invited us to a table seemingly prepared for the occasion, with tea, snacks, and all.

While I felt very uneasy at first, that unpleasant feeling slowly faded as I

started speaking with Katarina. It was the first time I had ever been able to speak with someone else about the books I loved. Time passed as if it were a dream.

And just like a dream, it was fleeting — before I knew it, the sun was setting. One of our servants leaned in, informing me that it was time for the dream to end... that we had to return.

I stood up, ready to go — and it was then that Katarina called out to me. “What beautiful hair you have... would you mind if I ran my fingers through it, just ever so slightly?”

“...Eh?!” I could only stare blankly, my features frozen in confusion. *What is she talking about...? There’s no way this disgusting white hair of mine could be beautiful...*

Before I could stop myself, I asked the question I had always wanted to ask. It was that nagging suspicion I’d had in my mind ever since I met her: “...Are you not disgusted by my appearance, Lady Katarina?”

Those looks that were leveled at me as I ventured to the outside world, and the whispers in the shadows, speaking of how repulsive my appearance was...

“...Does it not disgust you, Lady Katarina? This... white hair of mine, only seen in the elderly... these blood-red eyes. Everyone calls me a disgusting, cursed child...”

There was not a single part of me that could be beautiful in any way. I was nothing more than a disgusting thing to be avoided, something for others to avert their gazes from. Nothing more...

“...Cursed? Whatever do you mean...?” Katarina said, stuttering in her confusion.

“...Malicious rumors. From certain individuals who are jealous of our father’s — our family’s achievements. Such jealousy causes them to spread these baseless accusations.” My brother’s voice echoed coldly through the room. My gentle brother, my family — once again protecting me from the world... like always...

“...Even so. It does little to change the fact that my appearance is disgusting

and revolting.”

There was no shortage of heartless statements directed at my strange appearance. It had always been this way. *Why was I born like this...? I wish I had been born beautiful... just like Sophia from my favorite story.*

“...Well, I personally think you’re very pretty...” Katarina said.

Pretty? What is she talking about...? I stared straight at her.

“I think that your silky white hair is beautiful. That your ruby-red, sparkling eyes are beautiful. That... you... are beautiful,” Katarina said, smiling at me as she did so.

Silky white hair... ruby-red, sparkling eyes. Are these truly words that could be used to describe one such as myself? It’s... unbelievable... those words are unbelievable.

Her aqua-blue eyes, however, did not speak of lies as they stared into mine. Katarina... like a hero of justice, she came to my rescue at the tea party. A girl just like Princess Emerald from my favorite story.

“Actually, I would be most pleased if you would come and visit again! And if you don’t mind... would you like to be my friend?” Katarina said, her hands reaching out towards me.

“One day, someone who understands you will appear, Sophia. And you will be great friends.”

I had never once nodded when any member of my beloved family had told me this. It was, after all, impossible... I’d thought that no one like that could ever exist.

I, who had been treated like an outcast, who was always regarded with strange, fearful gazes. To think that anyone would ask for me to become friends with them...

I slowly took Katarina’s hands in my own shivering palms. She held my hands tightly, smiling gently as she held onto them.

Is this a dream...? I could no longer tell as I sat in the horse carriage, still

stunned from the events.

My brother, however, smiled at me — a smile that I did not often see. “I am glad that you have made a friend.”

A friend... I’d thought that it would be impossible for one such as myself. That was why I had remained holed up in my room, with nothing but my imagination and daydreams for company. In reality... I had wanted, desired, a friend. For the longest time... that was all I ever wanted.

I recalled the warmth of Katarina’s hands and the happy smile on her face. I had always wanted someone like that... but then, I had given up. And now, I held that very thing... tight in my hands.

From then on, we continued our visits to the Claes manor — and in doing so got to know some of Katarina’s other friends, including her brother and the two crown princes.

Before I knew it, my previously cramped and isolated world had expanded — almost impossibly, in the blink of an eye. Mary, another friend of Katarina’s, said this to me: “A while ago... I hated myself. I hated these hair and eyes of mine — that they were this shade of burnt sienna.”

I was surprised. Mary was much like Katarina — a noble lady of certain means... and yet, she hated herself...? *Look at her beautiful hair, her stunning eyes!* I couldn’t believe what I was hearing.

“But... when Lady Katarina told me that I was lovable, that I was cute, and that she liked me for who I was... I found that I could no longer hate myself. I found that I loved my hair, my eyes... And so, Lady Sophia, I think that you will be quite all right as well,” Mary said, looking at me earnestly as she did so.

All the individuals gathered in this manor, Mary included, did not think of me as disgusting or revolting. Katarina herself said as such — that my hair and my eyes were beautiful, wonderful things.

All the people I had met up until now thought that I was disgusting... but Katarina was different. Her heartfelt praise made this clear.

Will I one day come to love myself, like Mary has...? Will a day ever come where I will be able to accept this strange appearance of mine?

The future was still a mystery to me. Even so, I now felt that such a day could eventually come to pass.

“Thank you very much,” I said gratefully to Mary.

Mary, however, smiled brazenly, much like how Katarina did. “Just so you know... I have no intentions of handing Lady Katarina over.”

I once thought that reading alone in my room was the best thing I could ever do. I never knew that I would find something so much more amazing... in this wondrous world that I had suddenly been thrust into.



As summer reached its end, the world was now colored in the beginnings of autumn. Several weeks had passed since Sophia and her brother, Nicol, first visited me at my abode.

With the addition of Sophia, even Mary got interested, and the three of us were collectively swept up in a romance novel boom. Thanks to Sophia’s bibliophilic nature and encyclopedic knowledge, the genres covered in our meetings greatly expanded in scope.

On another note, the current romance novel I was infatuated with was quite something else — a story about a devilishly dashing count and his romance with a younger girl.

The Count was so incredibly breathtaking that he charmed both men and women alike — but he instead falls in love with a normal girl living in a small town. It was a sweet story of love and romance.

I had, of course, started reading this novel under Sophia’s recommendation. The Count in question was an incredibly beautiful youth, with jet-black hair and eyes.

“Actually... I noticed that the Count looked like my brother, and so I ended up liking this series...” was what Sophia told me, albeit in whispers.

“My opinion may be biased... he is my brother, after all...” So said Sophia, seemingly embarrassed at the notion. The more I read this novel, however, the more I noticed the similarities.

Although Jeord, Keith, and Alan were all handsome in their own right, Sophia's brother, Nicol, was quite... different, in his aura and charms. His doll-like features, smooth, black hair... and then there were those eyes of his that had a mysterious ability to draw one deeper and deeper into his gaze.

If he continued to age in this fashion, I could definitely see him becoming that very same alluring Count in my novel, bewitching both men and women alike.

However, there were still too many unknowns with regards to Sophia's brother, Nicol. Come to think of it, it was written in *Fortune Lover's* manual that Nicol had the most common sense amongst the rest of the game's potential romantic interests.

In addition, he was also the older brother of one of my beloved friends... I wanted to get along with him very much. However, Nicol was a man of few words. When he did speak, the conversation would often end in one or two phrases.

Due to the fact that my surroundings were often busy and bustling, the naturally quiet Nicol hardly had a chance to speak with me much, if at all. Be as it may, his actions communicated his love for Sophia, and he even put up with all our antics — Nicol was a very good brother indeed.

It was not difficult to understand why Sophia would look up to such a brother. In fact, if the rumors were to be believed, Nicol excelled in both academics and the sword — a high-spec character, just like Jeord and Alan.

If the opportunity comes to pass, I really want to speak more with Nicol... Not long after I had this thought, said opportunity presented itself to me.

"If you would like... we could have a reading session at my humble abode..."

Day after day, I had pestered Sophia about her books, as I really wanted to see them! So she eventually invited me over. I couldn't help but feel that I had coerced her into doing it, maybe just a little...

"Really?! Can I really come?!" I exclaimed, jumping up and down for joy.

Sophia simply smiled at me, while Anne's eyebrows furrowed, occasionally twitching. "Madam would be most displeased to see you behave as such, Young Miss..."

And so it came to be that I paid the Ascart a visit at their home. Although I was mainly there to go through Sophia's books and talk about novels, I also hoped to speak with Nicol.

It was important to get to know him a little better, especially with how Sophia looked up to him. Steeling myself, I made up my mind to get more than two phrases out of Nicol on this visit.

Eventually, the promised day came to pass. Eager to get my hands on Sophia's prized collection, I hopped on the horse carriage bound for the Ascart family home. Naturally Keith was with me as well, on account of me supposedly being the spoiled and socially inept daughter of the Claes family.

Mother was worried as usual, giving me yet another warning as I left. "Do be careful, Katarina. And please, do not embarrass yourself."

How very like mother to say such a thing! I had been to many tea parties now, and even visited Mary's manor several times. We were close. There were no problems, of course. Why would there be?

Having finally arrived at the Ascart home with Keith, I found it not as big as the Claes manor, but it was clean, well-organized, and decorated in good taste. We were led by the servants to what seemed to be a reception area with tea and other offerings.

Just as we were about to settle in, a couple entered the room: a most handsome man, with an elegant and dignified lady by his side. They seemed to be about the same age as my parents.

I was expecting my friend Sophia, not this impossibly beautiful couple. This sudden development stunned me, and for a while I stared at them in awe.

So... who exactly are these beautiful people? Just as that thought crossed my mind, the man turned to me, smiling brightly.

"A pleasure to meet you. I am Nicol and Sophia's father, Dan Ascart. This is my wife, Radia."

"Radia Ascart. A pleasure."

Having delivered their greetings, they both smiled gently, welcoming me into

their household.

What?! These are Sophia and Nicol's parents?! As expected, they were formidably beautiful individuals.

If this was the case... this must be the very same capable man who had taken on the position of chancellor, directly serving the king himself. The rumored royal chancellor.

I turned to Madam Ascart to see that gentle smile still illuminating her features. Just like Nicol, Count Ascart had black hair. Madam Ascart was impressive as well, with her pale, golden-blond hair and blue eyes. If I didn't know any better, I would have assumed they were characters straight out of a fairy tale. As expected of Sophia and Nicol's parents.

Still stunned by their fairy-tale radiance, I continued staring at them both, mouth agape, until Keith gave my hand a slight push.

"Big Sister... your greetings..." Keith whispered.

That's right! In these circumstances... right, a noble lady's socially acceptable greeting...

"...The pleasure is mine. I am Katarina Claes. Thank you very much for inviting me here on this day."

"I am her younger brother, Keith Claes. We are in your care."

As soon as I had delivered my elegant greeting befitting of a young noble lady, Keith followed up with his own.

Yes. We did our introductions correctly. But what are Sophia's parents doing here? My confusion was perhaps apparent on my face.

"We had thought to greet you first — Sophia and her brother have not been informed yet, you see. She is probably fidgeting up there in her room, waiting for you as we speak." Count Ascart provided a quick answer to my unspoken question.

"Is that so..." While I now knew why Sophia's parents were here, this was the first time someone else's parents had come in person to greet me. I couldn't help but feel nervous.

While I had been to Mary's abode several times, her father was often busy, and as such was often not at home. In fact, I had not seen him ever since that very first tea party I attended.

Going to a friend's home to play was nothing new to me — but having their parents show up to greet me was. Nervous, I clammed up, standing stiff like a board. Madam Ascart, however, elegantly and slowly approached me.

"I have heard many things about you from my daughter, Lady Katarina. Ever since she met you, Sophia has been so happy... Thank you very much," she said, before holding out a hand.

Now that I could see her up close, she really was quite the beauty. Her features also resembled that of Sophia's... or was it the other way around? Reaching out nervously, I took her outstretched hand in mine.

"I am most grateful as well. I greatly enjoy speaking with Lady Sophia. I would be glad if we could continue getting along from here on out."

In truth, I had been able to live this fulfilling romance novel life of mine largely thanks to Sophia. If I had not met her, my life would not have been enriched with these wonderful stories. Of course I would want to continue being friends with her.

Upon hearing my words, Madam Ascart, who really did look like Sophia, squeezed my hand somewhat tightly. "I am really, really glad... that Sophia has a wonderful friend like you."

And with that, Madam Ascart and the Count both bowed their heads. "I would like to thank you too. Lady Katarina Claes... thank you. Truly."

"Eh...? Ah, yes, thank you too, yes..." My nervousness peaked — to think that this beautiful couple would bow to me, of all people! I was now flustered, panicked. I had wanted to part ways with a dignified greeting, but with this, all of my efforts were wasted!

Even so, both Count and Madam Ascart simply continued smiling at me warmly, paying no heed to my panicked flustering. *What gentle, kind parents!*

And with that same welcoming smile, they left the room, telling that they would soon fetch Sophia. Even their exit was a thing of beauty. I couldn't help

but sigh as my eyes followed them out of the reception room.

...How could anyone not be nervous in their presence? Well... in any case, I suppose it's a good thing that I've been welcomed into their household.

Perhaps it was more difficult for me to leave a good impression, as opposed to, say, a normal person. This villainess face of mine was to blame. Any attempts to smile elegantly may become a villainous, or even an evil smile instead. The possibility of such a thing happening was high.

In fact, that was exactly what happened during that tea party at the castle when those children all scattered as I descended from the tree. One look was all it took! What a sad memory...

Once the Ascart couple were out of earshot, I leaned in, whispering to Keith. "What beautiful, gentle parents Sophia has!"

"It is as you say, Big Sister," Keith agreed, smiling as he did so.

"If only mother were like Madam Ascart! She should be a little calmer, don't you think? All that frowning and getting mad does no favors for her appearance..."

"...Big Sister. I, too, think that mother would very much like to live peacefully..." Keith said, looking at me with a strangely sad gaze as I complained about how our mother was not at all like the kind and beautiful Madam Ascart.

What does he mean? I stared at Keith, a blank look at my face. My brother, however, merely sighed in response.

At that very moment, Sophia entered the room. Following close behind her was Nicol, as expected. Sophia's breaths were somewhat irregular, and her cheeks were flushed with a slight tinge of red. On the other hand, Nicol, who had probably traveled at the same speed, hardly seemed winded at all.

"Welcome, Lady Katarina!" Sophia said, with her flushed cheeks and slight smile. *Ah, Sophia. Cute as always.*

As usual I had a lot of fun talking with Sophia, as well as looking through the Ascart family's study with its amazing collection of books and tomes. Amongst them were many stories that Sophia had read. It was truly a delight for me to go

through them.

Things were different, however, due to the fact that Keith's presence meant that Nicol was not as isolated as he was before. Now presented with a boy around his age, even the infamously silent Nicol would have a few things to say. While they were not as vocal as Sophia and me, a few glimpses revealed that they did have some conversation amongst themselves.

Enjoyable time passes all but too quickly. Although my academic and etiquette lessons felt like an eternity, the time I spent with Sophia seemed to pass in an instant, as if time itself had sped up. While there were still many things I had wanted to do, staying too late would infuriate Mother, who had instructed me to not inconvenience my hosts.

Hugging books that I had borrowed from Sophia close to my chest, Keith and I packed up, getting ready for the journey home. It happened as we were about to say farewell to the Ascart siblings.

"Oh no! I left the book I'd recommended to you in my room, Katarina..." Sophia exclaimed, a little more shocked than she should be.

"Ah, that book we were talking about just now, right?" It was, as Sophia said, the top book in her recommendations list. She had spoken of it passionately in the study — and perhaps in her passion had forgotten to take the book with her as she saw us off.

"Yes, that book. I apologize... I will go fetch it right away."

"It's quite all right, Sophia. Maybe I can borrow it next time?"

Sophia seemed ready to dash off back into the study at any moment. "No, it really is an amazing book... I do hope that you can read it as soon as possible...! Please, it will just be a moment."

Saying so, Sophia turned, rushing off in the direction of the study. Noble ladies in dress did not do much in the way of running, of course, but she did set off at quite the pace.

Seeing Sophia take off like that reminded me of a friend in my previous life, Acchan. If Sophia had known me back then, we would surely have read manga together, watched anime, and maybe even played some otome games. *Ahh... I*

have really great friends.

As I saw Sophia off, Nicol, who had been silent up until now, suddenly turned to me. “Lady Katarina Claes. Allow me to thank you once again for being friends with Sophia. I am grateful from the bottom of my heart.”

Come to think of it, I did want to speak with Nicol today... That thought was all but forgotten as I lost myself in the Ascart family’s study, however, buried amongst talk of books and novels with Sophia.

But now... this is a good chance! With this, I would be able to speak a little with Nicol.

“No, the pleasure is all mine... In fact, I am grateful that Lady Sophia would be friends with someone like me. Actually... your parents both said the same thing...”

“My... parents?”

It was then that I realized I had forgotten to tell Nicol and Sophia about our short meeting with their parents.

“Yes, they took the trouble to personally show up at the reception room prior to your arrival. They are truly wonderful parents.”

“...Is that so. Thank you, Lady Katarina,” Nicol said expressionlessly. And with that, the conversation was over.

While this was the longest conversation I had ever had with Nicol Ascart, this was also hardly a conversation at all! What exactly did Keith say, for Nicol to have responded to him as much as he did?

I would like some of Keith’s conversational talent. Maybe just a little bit of it. Or is it because they’re both boys? In any case, I have to see if the conversation can be revived...

I need some sort of topic... Yes! Maybe this is it! This is the place to utilize all my knowledge from my past life! I’ll show him all of my seventeen years of wisdom! I’m not willing to lose to Keith any longer.

Something... something to continue the conversation. I racked my mind and plumbed my memories. And then... *Oh wait. What about that granny next door*

who would talk to me for thirty minutes or more whenever she caught me?

That's it!! That's the thing! That neighbor of mine was a conversational expert, with the power to prolong the most mundane of conversations. Now is the time to channel her power...!

Yes, in fact, there was that one phrase that she was so fond of using, over and over again...

"You really are blessed, Master Nicol, to have such amazing parents, and a cute younger sister." I followed up on my statement with a full-faced smile, just like that old lady had done.

That granny would change up her phrase when faced with a different member of our family. For instance, she would tell my father what a lucky man he was, to have married such a beautiful bride. Once this phrase had been uttered, my father was as good as gone for the next thirty or so minutes.

Yes. A complete reproduction of that talkative granny's words. However...

"...Blessed...?" For some reason, Nicol's demeanor suddenly changed completely.

"Eh? Um..."

"...Do you truly think... that I am blessed?"

Although Nicol's face was still as expressionless as ever, something about it was... different. This sudden change in him scared me. No, it terrified me.

I've really done it now, haven't I? I had somehow selected the wrong phrases, the wrong words...

"I do think that you have a wonderful family... um. Was I perhaps... mistaken in any... way?" I stuttered, delivering my words slowly and apprehensively.

Nicol stared into me with those black eyes of his — so intense was his gaze that I could feel holes boring through my being. Holes! And then...

"...No. No, Lady Katarina. You are not mistaken at all. I have two respectable, wonderful parents, and a gentle, cute younger sister. Yes... I am truly blessed," Nicol said, as if pleased. And then... he smiled.

I had known Nicol for a few weeks now, but never once had I seen him smile. I had heard from Sophia that her brother did not, in fact, usually smile very much at all.

But Nicol was now... smiling. Smiling, like as if he were truly happy. Although he was already beautiful in his own right, that heartfelt smile on his face seemed to amplify that beauty several times over.

It was as if the alluring Count himself — that very same one from the novel I liked, had appeared before me, bewitching smile and all. To think that Nicol was really the alluring Count all this time...

Predictably, I clammed up, frozen solid. It was Sophia who freed me from the Count's curse — hugging the book that she had brought like it was some sort of treasure. "Lady Katarina... here. This book!"

I had finally broken free of the Count's spell, all thanks to the cute book-hugging Sophia. Turning my head slightly, I saw Keith, who was also rooted to the spot. Nicol, on the other hand, had gone back to his usual emotionless self.

This is bad! My lovable adoptive brother has been charmed by the alluring count's power! Although I don't want Keith to fall in love with the protagonist, him falling for another boy is a little too dangerous! If this goes on, my treasured adoptive brother may go astray!

After gratefully accepting the book from Sophia, I strategically positioned myself between Keith and Nicol all the way to the horse carriage. We waved our goodbyes and boarded, and soon left the Ascart family home behind. And on the way back...

"...To think that Nicol really was the alluring Count himself all this time... will I be able to protect Keith from his clutches from here on out...?"

"...To think that yet another rival would surface... just how many temptations must she be showered with...?"

Both Keith and I stared out of our respective windows, each muttering something inaudible to ourselves.



I am the oldest son of the Count Ascart's family — Nicol Ascart. My father took me to the castle many times in my youth, owing to the fact that he was the royal chancellor. As a result, I had many opportunities to mingle with the princes of this kingdom — especially the two twin princes, who were a year younger than me.

It was about a year prior when these two princes, whom I had known from childhood, began to change.

Jeord, the third crown prince, and his incessantly perfect, fake smile. His eyes only spoke of boredom; nothing was reflected in them. Jeord, however, said that he had found "something most interesting" ... and then, he smiled. It was a smile most dissimilar to the one he was fond of showing the world. And with time, Jeord changed, slowly but surely. His false smile slowly disappeared, and in its place was a sparkling vigor.

And then there was Jeord's brother — the fourth crown prince, Alan. Alan often compared himself to Jeord and resisted him at every turn. His desperation seemed to only bring him pain.

Even Alan, however, started to change with time. As if a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders, Alan stopped resisting Jeord. Instead, he started putting effort into furthering his musical talents — which was where his interests originally lay. His talent was formidable, and almost overnight, people were lauding him as a prodigy of music.

However, the most marked change of all was the fact that Alan would now speak normally with Jeord, whom he used to despise. Those in the castle were surprised, bewildered even, by this. They found it strange that Alan's attitude towards Jeord, which had always been one of defiance and resistance, would change.

In fact, the changes went beyond the two just speaking normally with each other. They even started leaving the castle grounds together. As of late, they had even been seen speaking cordially within the castle grounds. A truly theatrical change.

The reason for this profound change remained a mystery to most, however. The rumors, when they eventually came, spoke of a place they were known to

frequent — the Claes manor, home to Duke Claes and his family. Something or someone, was the reason why such a change had come over the two princes...

It was a day after the tea party at the royal castle that we made our way to the rumored Claes manor. My sister, who had attended this party with me, had apparently received a formal invitation from the eldest daughter of the Claes family, Lady Katarina Claes.

My sister, Sophia Ascart, is a gentle and lovable girl. A noble lady of good standing in her own right. Sophia does stand out, however, with her porcelain-white hair and red eyes.

And because of this fact — because Sophia was a little different, she was exposed to the cruel whims of society. They would look upon her strangely as she walked, and those jealous of our family's achievements claimed that she was a "cursed child."

Even more cruel were the foolish children who took those words literally. With their heartless gazes and words, these people hurt Sophia. She eventually cooped herself up in her room, no longer willing to face the world. For a few years, Sophia remained that way — closed to the outside world...

Until the day where those two princes held a tea party at the royal castle, which we both attended. Sophia did not seem too enthusiastic about going, and neither was I.

The two princes had met with Sophia several times before. I had no doubt that they would not cast discriminatory looks upon her, nor consider themselves above her. The party, however, was large in scale — as fitting of one held by the twin princes.

The children, young lords and ladies of many noble families, would also be in attendance. There would surely be some amongst them who would shun and bemoan Sophia's presence, thinking themselves superior. I did not wish for Sophia to go to such a place, but my father convinced us otherwise.

"Both you and Sophia have magic within. At the age of fifteen, you will both have to attend the Academy of Magic. Remember that you and Sophia are different in both gender and age, so you will not be always able to stay by her side and protect her. Sophia has to learn how to protect herself. With that

many children gathered, I am sure that she will even make some friends.”

We, the Ascart siblings, did have magic in our veins, and all those who did had to enroll at the academy once they come of age, as per the laws of this land. In four years, I would do the same... and in another year, Sophia would have to follow suit.

I wanted to stay by her side as long as possible. I wanted to protect my precious sister. However, given our differences in age and gender, there was no way I could always watch over her.

Before Sophia had shut herself in, my parents did take her along on similar outings — to make friends, they said. Children, however, were exceptionally sensitive to those who were... different, from themselves. In the end, all those efforts ended up hurting Sophia.

I understood that this could not possibly go on. However... the prospect, the very thought of seeing Sophia cry once more was infinitely more terrifying to me.

At the tea party, I was separated from my sister, despite my efforts. I was truly pathetic. How could I think of protecting Sophia like this? Many of those terrible noble children, the very same ones that had hurt Sophia before, were also present at this party. Surely they would hurt her again, now that I was separated from her. There was no doubt about it. With this thought in mind, I could hardly calm myself.

And so I desperately searched for my sister, to no avail. It was only at the end of the party that I had finally found her. Sophia, however, was simply standing still with a blank expression on her face.

“What have they done to you? Who was it?” I asked, worried.

“Someone by the name of Lady Katarina Claes... has invited me to visit her manor,” Sophia muttered, that same expression still plastered across her features.

And so the two of us headed to the rumored Claes manor. Honestly speaking, I wasn’t too enthusiastic about this turn of events — if only because Sophia had received many similar invitations before... only for them to spurn her and turn

her away at the gates.

Worry clouded my mind. I had little choice but to approach Jeord, Katarina's fiancé — about Katarina herself. I referred to how she had been kind to Sophia at the party and had invited my sister to her manor.

"You seem to have changed recently. A little more... restrained. Were you simply playing with yet another noble lady...?"

"...?" For a while, Jeord muttered to himself, before finally looking up at me, with a seemingly all-knowing smile. "Nicol. I will admit, Katarina is... strange. Different. She would not, however, hurt your most beloved sister."

Trusting in Jeord's words, but yet still concerned for Sophia, I ended up following her to the Claes family manor.

"I think that your silky white hair is beautiful. That your ruby-red, sparkling eyes are beautiful. That... you... are beautiful," Katarina Claes said, smiling at Sophia as she did so.

"Actually, I would be most pleased if you would come and visit again! And if you don't mind... would you like to be my friend?"

Those were the girl's words. She was gently smiling as she held Sophia's hands in hers. It was as Jeord had said. There was no way this girl would hurt my precious sister.

As I stared at Katarina's gentle smile, I finally noticed it. She was the one. She was the reason why those changes had come over Jeord and Alan.

A unique atmosphere... a most mysterious girl. The twin princes visited this manor just to meet her. And just like those before her, Sophia changed after meeting Katarina Claes.

Before, she had never wanted to take a single step outside her room. Now she clamored to be let out every single day. A light had illuminated her pained, dark features. A light from within — and a smile had returned to her face. I was deeply, deeply... grateful... towards Katarina Claes.

With Sophia's increasing amount of outings, however, came the whispered rumors and insults in the shadows. I was not about to stand by and see my now-

smiling sister return to her dark, lonely room.

I applied the appropriate kinds of... pressure on those who would dare speak ill of Sophia. I silenced the voices in the shadows. I suppose I had not been forceful enough before. I renewed my efforts, and with that, the whispers eventually faded.

Even so, as these gossip-mongers eventually disappeared...

“Master Nicol is most unfortunate, having to do all that just for that sister of his!”

“Master Nicol is most capable... but those rumors! All because of his sister! What a pity...”

“How very unfortunate. That Ascart boy... to have so many things said about him behind his back.”

The condemnations, gossip, disdain, had all but ceased. In their place was... pity. Empathy, perhaps? The harder I worked to protect Sophia, the louder the voices became.

They were not hostile voices, not by any means. They merely pitied me — pitied me for having to do all this. They spoke of how unfortunate I was.

However... those words pierced my heart. Mercilessly. Thoroughly. I was not some victim to be pitied. My family was in no way unfortunate. I had two respectable parents, and a lovable and gentle sister. They were family I could be proud of. If anything, I thought that I was fortunate.

But no one around me understood this. If I claimed to be fortunate, to be happy, they would assume that I was merely putting up with it. Tolerating it.

This infuriated me. I was fortunate. I was blessed. And yet... how could they? How could they simply decide that I was unfortunate, that I was to be pitied?

Don't you dare think of my precious sister as a source of misfortune! I've been nothing but happy ever since Sophia was born...!

In time, I grew tired of these unwanted words, this unsolicited pity. I thought that it was no longer important, even if no one ever understood. My precious sister was now smiling, laughing. And that, to me... was enough.

Even if bystanders pitied me, or thought of me as an unfortunate victim... even if they would never understand me. That, too, was fine. That would do.

“You really are blessed, Master Nicol, to have such amazing parents, and a cute younger sister.” Katarina Claes, the girl in front of me, said with that same gentle smile on her face. It was that exact smile that she had shown to Sophia. A gentle, warm light.

“...Blessed...?”

Yes. Exactly. Just like I had always thought. But... no one would understand me. No one sought to.

“Eh? Um...”

“...Do you truly think... that I am blessed?” I said, staring straight at Katarina.

“I do think that you have a wonderful family... um. Was I perhaps... mistaken in any... way?” And Katarina stared back — her aqua-blue eyes looking into mine.

“...No. No, Lady Katarina. You are not mistaken at all. I have two respectable, wonderful parents, and a gentle, cute younger sister. Yes... I am truly blessed.”

I had thought that no one would ever understand. I had already given up. Even so... this. This girl... Katarina. She understood.

Ah. To think that I had assumed that I was alone, that no one would ever understand these thoughts of mine.

The indignation in my heart slowly started to fade. I gazed upon the girl standing before me once more.

The eldest daughter of Duke Claes, Katarina Claes. A mysterious girl who had changed those twin princes — and the first to understand these thoughts of mine, when I had already long given up on empathy and understanding.

I finally understood why the princes and my sister were so eager to visit the Claes manor. Again and again, day after day. I suppose it was reasonable to assume that I would soon take after them — putting one foot in front of another on the way to the Claes manor. Not just to escort Sophia and to keep her safe — but to meet... Katarina Claes.

Chapter 6: Finally, My Birthday Has Come!

Time passes ever so quickly. I recall the events of that spring, when I was eight years of age — and in the blink of an eye, another seven had passed.

I was already fifteen, which meant that I was of age in this world. Fifteen was the age where noble children made their social debut. And of course, those with magical affinity had to attend the Academy of Magic, as per the laws of the land.

I turned fifteen this summer, so in the spring of next year, I too would have to enroll. In addition, the academy was a boarding school — all students had to stay in its dormitories, regardless of social class or standing.

Although students who were particularly important were given their own private rooms and were permitted to take some servants with them, it was a more restrictive life that was nothing like the freedom most were familiar with.

Upon enrolling in the academy... the terrifying otome game would begin. The protagonist, a commoner who was born with the rare aptitude of Light magic, would enroll in this Academy of Magic to walk amongst the nobility. And at this academy, this protagonist would attract the attention of the twin princes, the son of a duke, and the son of a chancellor. They would all be incredibly handsome and popular — and they would all fall for her.

Meanwhile, Katarina Claes, the antagonist and villainess in some of these scenarios, would head towards a Catastrophic Bad End.

As I thought back upon these seven years, it was plain to see that I had put in the utmost effort in avoiding these bad endings. I moved on many fronts: improving my skill with the sword, practicing the applications of my magic repeatedly, ensuring that Keith was never lonely, and advancing my technique in the art of projectile snake toy creation.

I did have my successes. For one, I was praised for my swordplay. Keith was no longer withdrawn, and my snake toys grew more lifelike with each attempt.

There was, however, one thing that didn't quite go so well — and that was the strengthening of my magic.

My aptitude with magic was somewhat lacking to begin with. Although I did increase the capabilities of my Earth Raiser spell from two to fifteen centimeters within a year... that was as far as it went. No matter how much I trained, the wall of earth did not grow any taller, nor was I able to use any other kind of magic.

While I fought against this reality at first, I was soon left with little choice but to accept it. It was most unfortunate, yes, but it did little to change the fact that I didn't seem to have much in the way of magical aptitude. While I was told that my lessons at the academy may awaken some hidden potential within me, a second "flowering," so to speak, I personally didn't have much in the way of expectations.

And so, my original plan of utilizing my supposedly rare magical capabilities to find a job should I be exiled from the kingdom was... jeopardized. There was a possibility it wouldn't work out at all. If so, how would I keep myself afloat?

It was during one of these contemplative sessions that one of my servants mentioned something interesting to me. "It is common practice for large farming families to employ other farmers to work their fields and whatnot."

That's it! My agricultural abilities had drastically improved over the years, and plants no longer wilted with my touch. I had even become reasonably versed in fieldwork. Even if I were to be exiled, I could simply look for a large farming family, get hired, and live on as a farmer. As long as I could find work, I could surely live on.

So I continued my magical training, although I did branch off into agricultural studies, in case I really would have to turn to farming for my livelihood.

With that, my strategies and contingency plans were complete; perfected. I continued to live on, honing my skills and improving my plans.

However, there was one thing that deviated from my plans and predictions: namely, the fact that all the romantic interests of *Fortune Lover* had ended up gathering at my abode, and how I seemed to have developed dramatically different relationships with all of them.

First... there was Jeord Stuart. The third crown prince of the Kingdom, and the fiancé of Katarina Claes. Although he appeared to be a fairy-tale prince with his blonde hair and blue eyes, he was actually a terrible, twisted sadist. If Jeord fell for the protagonist, Katarina would be headed for a Catastrophic Bad End — without any doubt.

While Jeord was completely uninterested in Katarina and hardly had any contact with her within the setting of *Fortune Lover*, before I knew it, he was visiting my manor every three days. I often gave him vegetables and fruits from my harvest, and he would send some snacks and candies my way as a sign of gratitude. It seemed that we were friends; after all, we spent lots of time together.

Honestly speaking, I got along really well with Jeord. It was difficult for me to imagine that he would suddenly come at me with his blade drawn, intent on exiling me from the kingdom. However... if Jeord were to come into contact with the protagonist and fall for her, Katarina would become an obstruction.

“Love can change a person,” or so claims a novel that I had read recently. I couldn’t let my guard down.

In fact, the scar on my forehead that led to this entire marriage engagement in the first place had long since vanished. Upon noticing this, I immediately sent for Jeord, eager to inform him of the news...

“Prince Jeord. The scar on my forehead has completely vanished. As such, there is no longer a need for you to take social responsibility for me — I do not mind if the engagement were to be cancelled,” I said, happy to inform Jeord of his newfound freedom. Jeord, however, seemed surprised, his eyes widening for a moment, before his expression was quickly replaced by his usual smile.

“Is that so? Well then, if you would please show me.” Jeord approached me with that ever-smiling face of his. He brushed my fringe aside, almost roughly, and inspected my forehead.

And there it was! I no longer had any scars on this forehead of mine. Or so I thought...

“No, Katarina. There is still quite the scar, from what I can see,” Jeord said as he continued to stare at my healed forehead.

“Eh? But I’ve checked many times in the mirror... Anne helped, too...” I muttered, stunned at this turn of events.

“I would suppose you were both mistaken, yes. A scar yet remains here. Do you not think so too?” Jeord said, turning to Anne as he did so. Anne, my personal maid, had been standing next to me all this time.

Although Anne had agreed with me that the scar was completely gone only a short while ago... she now nodded her head, agreeing with Jeord! An unexpected betrayal...!

And so it came to be that the supposedly vanished scar on my forehead was deemed to still exist. Jeord, still smiling, ended the discussion with a single statement. “So you see, there will be no cancellations with regards to our engagement.”

After this event, my mother, who had agreed to the engagement all that time ago, now felt very differently about the matter. Both she and Keith seemed to believe that “Katarina could not possibly fulfill the duties expected of a queen.” Regardless of their protests, however, my marriage engagement remained untouched to this day.

As expected of Jeord — this was exactly how it was in the game of *Fortune Lover*. The prince was not quite ready to let go of his fiancée just yet, perhaps due to the fact that she was a convenient wall against the endless stream of suitors he would otherwise be presented with.

With this, it became clear that I was unable to completely avoid the Catastrophic Bad End of becoming engaged to Jeord. As such, I decided to bring a sword to the academy for personal protection, along with a completed, most lifelike snake toy. I had yet more work to do; for starters, practicing how to smoothly pull out the snake from my pocket...

And then there was the matter of Keith Claes. My cute adopted brother, who had been brought into the family seven years ago for his impressive magical ability — and a potential love interest. Should Keith fall in love with the protagonist, it would all be over for Katarina. A straight line to yet another Catastrophic Bad End.

In the setting of *Fortune Lover*, Keith, with his flaxen hair and green eyes, was

ostracized and alienated by his adoptive mother and sister. His rebellion against such an upbringing turned him into a playboy.

And then he would go on to meet the protagonist at the academy, and would be slowly healed by her love; a most troublesome prospect for me, of course. And so I worked hard every day to ensure that Keith never felt lonely. As a result, Keith never became a shut-in, and before I knew it, he was constantly by my side.

By the looks of it, Keith was not lonely anymore... so he probably wouldn't fall for the protagonist at the academy. There was, however, one failing in this entire plan.

To prevent him from becoming a playboy, I constantly instructed Keith to be gentle and kind to women. I repeated this often. The result was... not as I expected.

Keith had become a gentlemanly womanizer, for the lack of a better word. He did as his adoptive sister preached — he was gentle and kind to women, which was a great thing.

However, Keith did grow as the years passed by, and before long he was no longer the cute, lovable youth he one was. Instead, he had become... appealing, to the other sex. I, of course, hardly noticed any of this happening. Perhaps it was because I was with Keith all the time, or perhaps it was because I lacked the perceptiveness to be affected by Keith's charms.

One way or another, it was far too late when I noticed that Keith had become so charming and attractive that noble ladies were falling head over heels for him. To make things worse, even the servants were affected. He had become a complete ladies' man. While I had managed to prevent Keith from becoming a shut in, I had instead encouraged his transformation into a gentlemanly lady-killer...

Right. Alan Stuart. The fourth crown prince, Jeord's twin brother, and yet another potential love interest. With his wild looks, silver hair and blue eyes, Alan grew up constantly comparing himself to Jeord, nursing a huge inferiority complex... which made him hate his brother. At least, that was how it was in the original setting of *Fortune Lover*.

Alan had instead become quite a different person, no longer feeling inferior to Jeord, nor hating him. In fact, while the two didn't exactly get along superbly, they did at least have a functional, cordial relationship.

Katarina Claes never did appear as an antagonist in Alan's route, and originally the two should never even have met... But for one reason or another, Alan visited my abode often. Now, having fully embraced his musical talent, he had sent me many invitations to his piano or violin performances, and I would attend these functions with Mary and the rest. We were good friends now.

This was strange — in the setting of *Fortune Lover*, Alan never did explore his talents to such an extent. In fact, he was only supposed to do so after he had met the protagonist. I couldn't help but notice that this series of events greatly deviated from the setting and plot I remembered.

And then there was the matter of Mary Hunt... Alan's fiancée, and the rival character of the Alan route. Her eyes and hair were a shade of burnt sienna, perfectly complimenting her features. She was almost like a doll — a beautiful young girl. In the original setting of *Fortune Lover*, Mary hardly had any contact with Katarina Claes, much like Alan.

However, Mary had now become one of my close friends. While she was reserved and slightly fearful of social interactions when I first met her, she had changed a lot over the last seven years. She excelled in her studies, and presented herself as an elegant and refined young lady at her social debut a while ago. And also, the allure of her dance steps had recently become quite the conversational topic. If anything, she was the perfect example of what a noble lady should be — and she had become that very image over the years.

According to the original setting, Mary was supposed to be deeply in love with Alan. Mary as she was now, however, didn't seem to think very much of him. While they got along fine enough, Mary never spoke of Alan when we were together, and they didn't seem to be meeting together outside of my manor at all. Was she simply hiding it all because she was shy?

Mary was supposedly the image of a perfect noble lady who also had ambitions to become a queen — at least, according to what I recalled of *Fortune Lover*. But now, she didn't seem to have any interest in entering the

royal family.

In fact, Mary had started claiming from quite a few years ago that “I am hardly suitable for such an important role — that of queen, in particular...” She also mentioned to me on a somewhat regular basis just how difficult it was to live as royalty, and how busy their lives were.

The more I heard of Mary’s views, the more I felt a certain melancholy towards my seemingly inevitable engagement to Prince Jeord. After all, if such a thing daunted even Mary, who was perfect in many ways, someone such as I would be hardly suited for the role.

Seeing that I was having doubts about my future, Mary offered a suggestion. “Well then, perhaps we could both renege on our engagements... and the two of us could escape to some faraway land.”

Ah, such gentle words. Mary was truly a gentle and reliable friend.

And then... Nicol Ascart. The silent, ever-expressionless son of Chancellor Ascart... who was, of course, also a potential love interest. A ravishing youth of raven-black hair and eyes; devilishly alluring, capable of charming both man and woman alike with his unique aura and presence.

As expected, such an individual would have no connections with Katarina Claes whatsoever. But I did end up becoming friends with Nicol’s younger sister, and as such, even he started showing up at the manor.

Nicol only said what he had to, being stoic and reserved most of the time. And yet his alluring powers of bewitchment only seemed to increase as the years went by. He now smiled more than he used to — probably because he had decided to open up to us. It was a delightful thing... *No, no. I will not be swayed. That smile of his is dangerous.*

Dangerously alluring... so much so that Nicol was popular amongst the ladies as well as the men, if the rumors were to be believed. All it took was a glimpse at his beautiful face and faint smile.

The Claes manor was host to many of Nicol’s victims — with his charm already placing quite a few servants under his spell. Even so, the fact that I had somehow managed to protect Keith and Mary from his alluring wiles was

something that I could take comfort in.

Last but not least... Sophia Ascart. Nicol's younger sister, and naturally the rival character in Nicol's route. Sophia, who was beautiful like her brother, originally should never have crossed paths with Katarina Claes at all. She was now a close friend of mine, however, just like Mary — as well as a comrade in the business of appreciating romance novels.

Due to the fact that she had been cooped up in her room until she was about ten, Sophia's reading prowess was formidable indeed, and her recommendations were always good reads. She had the amazing ability to sniff out truly great pieces from the literary sea. I deeply respected her — in my heart, she was the true master of romance novel appreciation.

Sophia also had great respect for her brother, and often spoke of him in our conversations. "My brother is truly an amazing individual... he would make the ideal husband, if I could say so..." It was almost as if she had fallen for him! Sophia really loved her brother.

At this rate, she would surely be intensely saddened if Nicol ever found someone he liked. If such a time would ever come, it would be my duty as her close friend to comfort her as best as I could!

And so it came to be that I, for some strange reason, had formed friendships with these potential love interests and rival characters, and would soon be starting my academy life with them come this spring.

At long last, it was my fifteenth birthday. My social debut party was held at the Claes manor, just like it had been planned a few years ago.

Perhaps it was worth noting that this party was a dance. Not only did I have to greet each and every guest that came through the gates, I also had to participate in the dances themselves.

While I was capable enough when it came to physical movement and exercise, I was unfortunately not born with a good sense of rhythm, and always struggled with dancing. I had to undergo a hellish training regimen under the watchful eye of my mother, all for the sake of being able to dance at this birthday party of mine. At least my movements now looked like some sort of

dance — but I was deeply unsettled at the fact that I could slip up at any time.

And then there was the fact that my escort for the party was... Jeord, of all people. I had honestly wanted Keith to do it instead, but was told that it was inappropriate, on account of me having an actual fiancé. While Keith would simply smile and forgive me even if I did end up stepping on his toes, I had a feeling that Jeord would not be... quite as forgiving.

The more I thought about it, the more sullen I became. I found that I disliked this party now more than ever. Although the party started some time in the evening, I was preoccupied from the moment I woke — with makeup and last minute checks on my outfit, amongst other things. By the time evening had come around, I was already considerably worn out.

A glance in the mirror did show a well-dressed and appropriately made up young lady — the efforts of many, of course. However, all their troubles did nothing to change the villainous nature of my face.

And so I made my way to the venue with Jeord, all dressed up in formal attire, hardly looking like my usual self. After issuing the customary greetings with guests and the like, Jeord led me to the dance hall, as the first dance of the day would be with my fiancé himself.

I focused hard so that I wouldn't do anything silly like stepping on his feet. With utmost caution, I danced carefully.

"You are most beautiful tonight, Katarina."

"Thank you very much."

I couldn't help but notice the smitten gazes of the other women around me as the blonde haired, blue-eyed prince delivered his lines. After all, regardless of how Jeord was on the inside, there was no denying that the way he presented himself was truly a wonderful thing to behold.

As a result of this, however, I could feel the concentrated jealousy of the women in this world — all directed at me for being his fiancée. *Honestly, I wouldn't mind if any of them took my place, if they're that envious...* Those were the thoughts that flitted through my mind as I continued on with the dance.

“Katarina. Although I may have said this before, do allow me to say this once more; I have absolutely no intentions of cancelling my engagement with you,” Jeord said, smiling as he did so.

Jeord said this as we were on the dance floor, even as countless passionate gazes were being directed at him. But of course he would. If he cancelled the engagement now, all hell would break loose. He needed someone like me to ward off his endless wave of lady suitors, it would seem. So...

“...I understand.” I should just say this for now.

“I see. So you finally understand, Katarina?”

“Yes... but... um. If you ever do find someone else you like, Prince Jeord, do inform me right away. I will withdraw from the engagement immediately!”

Yes, I would never interfere! In fact, I would be praying for Prince Jeord's future happiness! I thought, desperately. I had to do this much so that I wouldn't be an obstacle... so that I wouldn't be erased some time in the future!

“...Hmm. I see, Katarina. It would appear that you do not understand at all,” Jeord said, his smile twitching slightly as he did so.

Eh? Does he not believe me? Even after my passionate declaration of non-interference?

“Yes, I really do wonder. How exactly should I communicate this to you? Perhaps it was a little early, after all, for the party involved in formulating this... pre-arranged agreement.”

“?” What exactly is he talking about? I had absolutely no idea. Pre-arranged agreement? What is that? Questions and confusion started to cloud my mind.

“Wah!” Suddenly, I felt something sweep me off my feet — my sense of balance immediately vanished into thin air. Before I realized it, I was being held in Jeord's arms.

“Um... Ah. Prince Jeord. My apologies.”

To think that I would be so distracted during the dance... Given that I was already bad at dancing, I could only assume that I had failed to keep up at one point and had dramatically fallen over. Jeord, in turn, probably caught me in the

process.

I apologized, quickly attempting to stand up so that Jeord would no longer have to support me... *Hmm?* It would seem that Jeord was holding me quite tightly — I was unable to break free. “Eh? Prince Jeord...?”

In fact, Jeord had me in what could only be described as a tight embrace. *Oh no...! Did I maybe step on his toes when I fell? Is that why he’s frozen like this, unable to move?! This is bad! And after I’d tried so desperately to be cautious...!*

“Prince Jeord... are you quite all right?” I asked, somewhat timidly. Jeord, however, seemed to be... chuckling to himself.

“Ah, but you are really so defenseless, Katarina. If you remain this way, I could simply catch you... anytime,” Jeord whispered right next to my ear.



Eh? So this isn't a case of me accidentally stepping on his toes and him being frozen with pain? As I grew more confused by the moment, I noticed Jeord's head slowly moving down to my neck — and then I felt a... strange sensation, on the side of my neck. Before I knew it, I had been released from Jeord's vice-like grip.

"This will do for today, Katarina. But one day... I shall take it all." The grin on Jeord's face was like that of a mischievous child.

So... what is this all about? I was completely baffled. In any case, I had managed to avoid stepping on anyone's toes for now... and that was fine.

Eventually, I finished my strange dance with Jeord. Immediately after, however, Keith walked towards me briskly, a somewhat tense expression on his face.

"If you would, Big Sister..." Keith said, withdrawing a handkerchief from his pocket, before placing it on my neck, moving it this way and that.

"Eh? Hey, Keith, what are you..." Why is my cute adopted brother suddenly rubbing my neck with a handkerchief...? Given that I was given quite the makeover today, I would expect that my neck is clean...

"Ah, you see, Big Sister. A small bug landed on your neck, and I was just... cleaning that up for you."

"Ah, is that right? Thank you, Keith." *A bug, huh? Well, it is summer.* Come to think of it, that strange sensation I had felt on my neck while in Jeord's embrace may have been some sort of bug.

Ah, what a pity... to think that our family servants spent so much time powdering me up and ensuring that I looked perfect! What a pity for a bug to come along and ruin everything. It was a good thing that Keith noticed it, and was now helping me clean it up.

After finishing his voluntary cleaning of my neck, Keith turned to me, asking me for a dance. "You are most beautiful on this day, Big Sister."

"Thank you, Keith." While Keith spoke with his usual, gentle smile, I could feel the many feminine gazes now trained upon us. But of course that would

happen — Keith was the successor of the Claes family, and he was not yet engaged to anyone.

There was no shortage of noble ladies who were after him, and his supposedly irresistible charm (that I regrettably did not understand) only served to bewitch even more of the surrounding womenfolk.

Come to think of it, Keith didn't seem to have anyone he liked, despite being so impossibly popular. In fact, this topic of conversation had never been brought up before while we were together.

If possible, I would like for Keith to be engaged to an amazing lady — perhaps just not the protagonist girl. Such were the thoughts floating about in my head as Keith led me along. He really was good at dancing. The faintly smiling Keith, however, suddenly adopted a more serious expression.

"You know, Big Sister... You really should be a little more... aware. Of the dangers that surround you."

"...Hmm? Aware of... danger?"

"Yes. Especially when it comes to Prince Jeord."

Ah! To be aware of dangers in one's surroundings! But why would Keith suddenly talk about being aware of any dangers when I'm around Jeord? I was already very aware of Jeord to begin with. Cautious, perhaps.

"Don't worry! I'm all about sensing danger when it comes to Prince Jeord!"

"...Really, Big Sister? To be honest, it does not quite come across that way..." Keith replied, appearing somewhat incredulous at my proud response.

"Things are perfect, yes! I am absolutely prepared to call off the whole engagement at any time! I even told him just now that I would do so, that I would never get in the way of his true love... I told him, I did!"

"...How is that... perfect, Big Sister? No... This would not do at all. Did you not see what happened just now? How could you be... saying..." Keith's expression became even more intense as he started rapidly muttering to himself.

Hmm? Is my situational awareness really that lacking? Then... "If that is not enough, I could even prepare documents, you know? To call off the

engagement and such. And then all I would do is to show them to Prince Jeord...”

“No! No you must not, Big Sister...! If you provoke him any further... there may be no telling what he would do... what he would, really do...”

What is Keith going on about? I truly had no idea... Keith, however, took great pains to warn me against being alone with Jeord at any point in time.

But yes, of course, Keith did have a point. If I were to meet with him in private and he exiled me there and then, I would be in a lot of trouble. In any case, the protagonist still had not showed up yet. *I’m still doing all right... I think...*

And so I eventually finished my dance with Keith, who had now adopted quite a strange expression. He was still muttering himself. Next in line was apparently Alan, who had just finished his dance with Mary.

Alan casually stuck out his hand in my general direction. “Looking less shabby today, huh?” he said.

Is that even a compliment? In any case, I suppose I should thank him. “...Thank you very much.”

Alan, of course, attracted many passionate gazes from the women on the dance floor — just like Jeord and Keith before him. From what I had heard, the youthful prodigy and genius in music was supposedly sponsored by many older, female patrons. These older women would say things like... “Oh, but that change in personality when he’s performing... and how he is when he’s not... I can’t get enough of it!” I had no idea what they were going on about, as usual.

Alan’s fiancée was, of course, none other than Mary, an upstanding noble lady who was acknowledged by many. Rumors said that even Alan’s fans wish the two of them well. They did pretty well for themselves, if I may say so, unlike what the rumors about me and Jeord... something about how we “never got along, other than on the grounds of our stations.”

While Alan was a lot more brusque and rough in how he was leading the dance compared to Jeord or Keith, he truly was a genius of music — his sense of rhythm was impeccable. The elegant movements were in stark contrast to how Alan usually was. He now seemed more like an adult than ever.

Is this the difference in demeanor that the older ladies were speaking of? Hmm. Probably not quite... This was all a bit much for me to understand. Maybe I will when I get a bit older?

Well, technically I'm mentally seventeen or so... and then there's the fact that I'm now fifteen... so I'm adult enough, no?

...Maybe it's just my body limiting my consciousness! Yes, it has to be that! There's no way I could be a hopeless child who will never grow and mature! Yes, Katarina, let us just believe in that, I thought, encouraging myself to the best of my ability.

"Oi, you... what's with this spot on your neck?" Alan asked, as if noticing something.

"On my neck?"

"On the side, right here. It's a little red."

"Ah, that. Well, I was bitten by a bug just now, unfortunately..."

"A bug? A bug indoors?"

"Yes, it is by no means a completely sealed space. It probably crawled in from somewhere."

"Is that... so."

Is this bug bite of mine so eye-catching? I had to make sure to apply some sort of bug-warding spray the next time I attended any kind of dance party. Actually... did this world even have bug sprays of any kind?

"Even so... you really do look different than usual..." Alan said as he took a good look at me.

"Yes — my family's servants spent the entire day doing me up and tidying my hair... and all that." Even I couldn't help but think that the servants were exceptionally skilled the first time I looked into that mirror. "They did quite a lot, you know. Scrubbed me all over, fixed my dress a countless amount of times... They even took pains to deal with my underwear..."

"...Oi!!" For some reason, Alan saw fit to interrupt me as I was extolling the virtues and skills of my family's servants.

“What is it?”

“Don’t ‘what is it’ me! You’re a lady, aren’t you? And yet you... at this place, talk about un... under... underwe...” Alan, whose face was now beet-red, seemed to be saying something, but I couldn’t catch that last bit.

In fact, he was red all the way up to his ears, and his breaths were erratic and heavy. *Is he tired from all the dancing? Less stamina, maybe, when it comes to this sort of thing? Unexpected... Or maybe he’s not used to the place?*

Alan didn’t seem all that well by the time we finished our dance... And next came the devilishly alluring Count Nicol. Many eyes were trained on him as well — both men and women. Although he was already enrolled in the academy, being a year older than me, he had decided to make time to show up at my party.

Elegantly, Nicol held out his hand elegantly, and soon I was in yet another dance. “You look wonderful, Lady Katarina.”

“Th-Thank... you. Very much.”

A familiar, bewitching smile flitted into his features, and as soon as it did, sighs of admiration could be heard from the individuals around us. Having interacted with Nicol all these years, I was used to the sight of him smiling, bewitching or not — but I imagine these other people weren’t that fortunate.

“Master Nicol is smiling... ever so faintly!” I could hear the whispers in the crowd. The Alluring Count. A truly terrifying existence. I could imagine how he would walk about in the academy, entrancing students left and right.

Even so, Nicol’s lead was elegant, and most polite. Although he did have an alluring air about him, he was really a gentle and caring brother on the inside. He stuck out from the other potential love interests of *Fortune Lover*. In fact, if I ever had a chance to go back to my previous life and play this game again, I would definitely explore his route first.

As I continued dancing with Nicol, I thought to ask him more about his life at the academy. “Master Nicol, how do you feel about your life at the academy?”

“There have been no issues to date.”

...Ah. As usual, our conversations didn't seem to go very far. Although Nicol had opened up to me and seemed to be always acting in my best interests across the years, his silent demeanor had remained constant.

"...Um... have you made friends? Anyone you are close with, perhaps?" I said, deciding to push on with my endeavor.

"...To a certain extent, yes." Nicol replied, after giving my question some thought. It almost seemed like he had to think quite a bit to answer... well, it was probably nothing to be concerned about.

"Well... Then have you found anyone you like, perhaps?"

Although Count Nicol was an impossibly alluring individual, charming men and women alike, I had not once heard rumors of him expressing romantic interest. This was the perfect chance for me to ask more questions — for Sophia's sake, too, since she did love her brother so much. I had asked my question somewhat casually, but...

"..."

Did Nicol suddenly just go silent? Eh? Was it a question I shouldn't have asked...?

Hmm... what should I do. What should I say next? I started to... panic.

"...Yes. I have," said Nicol abruptly.

"EH?!" Surprised, I stared straight at Nicol. Sure enough, a very slight blush was now present on his face.

So... should I take this as a "yes"? That he does indeed have someone he likes? Although I was the one who asked the question to begin with, I really was not expecting that he would answer in such a fashion.

In fact, Nicol wasn't close with anyone else barring the usual group at my manor. *Did he find someone he likes after enrolling into the academy? Hmm.*

"Would that be someone at the academy?" I asked.

"...No, not quite."

Huh? No? Then who could it possibly be? "Um... well then. May I ask who it

is...?”

“...That... I— I cannot answer.”

“...Eh...”

“It is someone I should not be thinking of, in truth. However... I am always wishing for their happiness.”

“...”

The fact that Nicol had someone he likes is already surprising enough — and now I’m told that it’s someone he shouldn’t be thinking about?!

Is this... f-forbidden love?! Who is it? Some noble lord’s wife... or perhaps even a man?!

Ah, to think that my lighthearted question would bring forth such a heavy response. I would have never expected this... that Nicol would be after someone else’s wife... or a man...

Perhaps it’s nothing quite like that at all, but then there’s the possibility that Sophia has just said nothing about it...

“I am sure that something will work out for you, Master Nicol,” I said, hoping to ease his worries over this supposedly forbidden love of his. Nicol, however, merely smiled in response — a slightly troubled smile, at that.

And with that, Nicol and I finished our dance, with the former seeming a little worse for wear after the whole thing. Mary approached me with a smile almost immediately after.

“My heartfelt congratulations, Lady Katarina. You are most beautiful today, truly,” Mary said, looking at my made-up appearance that had taken the utmost dedication and skill of my household’s servants to prepare. Mary, in contrast, was truly breathtaking in her own right — compared to my villainous appearance that had taken half a day to mask.

“Lady Katarina... Congratulations.” Emerging from behind Mary was Sophia, who was pretty enough to give Mary a run for her money. *With these two by my side, and yet everyone telling me how beautiful I look all this time... Hmm? Maybe I am somewhat pretty after all.*

But alas, that was when I caught myself engaging in these silly thoughts. Yes. *Good that I shelved those thoughts quickly.* If I kept that up, I would have gone off and did something silly again.

“If I were a man, I would be able to dance with you too, Lady Katarina...” Mary said as she adorably puffed out her cheeks in exasperation.

“I would have liked to dance with you too, Mary,” I said with my best smile.

“REALLY?! Well then, perhaps we could dance later... in secret...?” Suddenly, a most audacious suggestion from my friend Mary.

“Eh? Well, sure, but I don’t quite know how to lead a dance...” If I were dancing with Mary, my mental image suggested that I would be the one doing the leading — typically the man’s part. Unfortunately, I was hardly capable of such a thing. In fact, it was already considerably difficult for me to get the lady’s part right in the first place... However...

“Not to worry, Lady Katarina! I had prepared myself should such an event come to pass! I know the gentleman’s dance steps too!”

Ah. As expected of Mary, a shining example of the ideal noble lady. To think that she is capable of even leading the dance... she really is on another level.

While I didn’t quite understand what Mary meant by her “preparations,” I could only assume that she spent her days preparing for a wide variety of activities in general.

“Well then... perhaps we could, after all this, in secret?” I said. I supposed two girls dancing in the midst of all these guests would cause some gossip — it would be better for us to have our fun towards the tail end of the party.

“Yes... I would be most glad to, Lady Katarina,” Mary said, beaming. However, a voice of dissent soon rose from next to her.

“Uu... I want to dance, too...” For some reason, Sophia was sulking quite intensely where she stood. Did Sophia want to dance with Mary, too? I suppose she could have her turn after Mary and I were finished.

And so Mary and I had our dance towards the end of the party. In fact, Mary was very good at what she did. Sophia too, was somewhat vocal about wanting

to dance with me as well — and so I obliged, although I probably bungled more steps than I should.

And with that, I peacefully turned fifteen, without further incidents or mishaps.

With the onset of winter, the countdown to enrolling in the academy began. The curriculum spanned two years, so given that I had to stay in the dormitories on the grounds for that duration, I had to prepare the relevant items and luggage to take with me.

Since I was the eldest daughter of a duke, most of these preparations were done by the servants of our household. But of course, I didn't feel like it was fair to have them do all the work.

After all, all the servants packed were things like dresses and brooches, jewels and other things like that. For instance, none of my romance novels or farming implements were included! As such, I decided to start packing my own bags.

On another note, five servants from my household, including my personal maid, Anne, would follow me to the academy. Although I told my parents that I could handle myself fine and didn't need servants, I was told that it was unbecoming for the daughter of a duke to say as such.

In the end, I was made to take five servants with me — the lowest possible number. However, I was worried about one amongst their number.

To be precise, I was concerned about Anne, who had been by my side since I was eight. Anne had been taking care of me these past seven years, and was eight years my senior. That would make her twenty-three years old.

Although she would have been considered young in my previous life, it would seem that women in this world were expected to marry early — someone who married at, say, twenty-five, would be considered late.

While Anne was my family maid, she was also actually the eldest daughter of a Baron. Apparently the lower-ranked aristocrats and nobles of this world sent their daughters off to higher noble houses to learn the ways of the world while earning their keep. So many of these less noble families had the habit of

sending out their eldest daughters to serve as maids — a sort of internship, I suppose.

Accordingly, many maids in my personal entourage came from such backgrounds. As expected, they were quite the noble ladies, evidently raised with care. For instance, they screamed when I climbed trees, and promptly passed out when I caught snakes. As a result, most of these maids didn't last very long at all, and quite a few of them had to leave our service. My mother, of course, gave me quite the earful every time it happened.

Amidst all that, however, Anne, who always remained by my side with her little snippets of advice and criticisms, was a truly important person to me.

The message from Anne's family actually arrived a few years ago — one discussing her marriage. This made me panic, of course. If Anne left her position, yet another new maid would faint upon witnessing me climbing trees and the like. I couldn't picture how my life would be without her. And so in my panic, I did the first thing that came to my mind...

...Which was to approach Anne's father, who had arrived at the manor to bring his daughter back for the marriage. I dramatically lowered my head and pleaded desperately, "Please, I need Anne by my side, I absolutely do!"

Upon witnessing this, Anne's father was stunned, his expression frozen. And yet, I did succeed in convincing Anne's family to allow her to remain with me. Perhaps pleading can pay off after all.

In other words, I had successfully cancelled Anne's wedding arrangements. When my mother found out about the entire affair, I predictably got into my fair share of trouble...

Anne, however, simply laughed and forgot about the whole thing. And so I ended up accepting Anne's kindness for what it was, and I had her stay with me all this time. Anne was now twenty-three years of age, however, and even I felt bad about making her stay this long.

As such, I decided that Anne would return to her estate after I enrolled into the academy. Or at least, I thought that would be the case...

“If I were gone, Young Miss, where would you find someone who would take care of you? Of course I will be accompanying you to the academy,” Anne said.

Honestly speaking, I was overcome by a feeling of deep unease when I thought about having to go to the academy alone without Anne by my side, and slowly waiting for any Catastrophic Bad Ends to creep up to me. So in the end, I humbly accepted Anne’s kindness once more, and agreed to have her accompany me on my travels.

Thank you, Anne. Truly.

“Young Miss... if I may ask. What exactly is this?” Anne asked as she pulled out some gardening overalls from my pile of luggage.

“Ah, that? My gardening overalls, of course.”

“Gardening...? Young Miss... correct me if I am wrong, but do you intend to grow crops and till fields in the academy as well?”

“But of course, Anne! After all, if I stop farming and gardening for two years, I’ll never become a good farmer!” I replied, full of confidence and vigor. Anne, however, looked as if all the strength had been sapped from her being at once.

“...But... Young Miss, why would the daughter of a duke ever become a farmer, of all things...?”

“Just in case certain cases comes to pass, Anne!”

“And what exactly are these cases?! Please, Young Miss. Do not tell me that you intend on bringing your hoe as well.”

“Yes, that too! After all, there is no guaranteeing that I’ll be able to find one at the academy.”

“...Please, Young Miss...”

Anne and I went back and forth like this for quite a while, with me trying to put the relevant items in my suitcase, and Anne actively preventing me from doing so.

As winter’s end came to pass, the waking breaths of spring slowly approached...



My name is Anne Shelley. I was born in the rural outskirts, to the family of a baron. At fifteen years of age, I was sent to the Claes Manor to learn the ways of the world.

It was there that I became the personal maid of Katarina Claes, the only child and daughter of the Claes family. When I first met with Lady Katarina, I recalled her having quite the cute face. Her upwards-slanting almond-like eyes, too, contributed to a certain look of determination about her.

As expected of the daughters of most noble families, Lady Katarina was very spoiled, and had a selfish, arrogant personality. A few months into my service, however, Lady Katarina tripped and fell during a walk at the royal castle grounds, and most unfortunately hit her head on a rock.

As a result of the incident, Lady Katarina hurt her head — the impact even left a scar. Perhaps that was the reason why she slept for quite a few days, all the while with a high fever.

However, when she awoke, it was like as if she was a different person altogether. The arrogant, self-absorbed and egocentric Lady Katarina was gone, instead replaced by a calm, caring little lady. She even showed unprecedented awareness and care towards her servants — it was as if she was reborn as a gentle and compassionate individual.

The Young Miss' personality had changed completely due to the impact to her head and the fever that followed. While the servants were equally surprised and grateful by the sudden change that had come over her, Lady Katarina only remained like this during her short period of bed rest.

After the fever receded, Lady Katarina sat up — and then proceeded to become even more problematic than she was before this entire affair.

Having awoken from her rest, Lady Katarina ran all the way to the library, asking many questions of the servants, and sometimes making outlandish requests of them. Just as we thought it had all passed, the Young Miss had yet another demand — that she take up lessons in both magic and sword.

While her presence and effort on the field were commendable, the footwork

aspect of her swordplay lessons did not quite go as well — it almost seemed like the Young Miss would slice her own leg off before cutting the opponent, and we all collectively held our breaths.

Next, she declared that she would practice her magic, and then promptly dressed up in a set of gardening overalls, took up a hoe, and started tilling the earth. Lady Katarina Claes was readying a field in the Claes manor's gardens.

After spending quite some time in the gardens, she would then hike up her dress and start climbing trees. The Young Miss also took up fishing, of all things — fishing up her prey from the small river that ran through the grounds. She would eventually almost push the local fish population close to extinction.

Problem after problem arose, just like that. While Madam Claes became progressively angrier with each transgression, the Young Miss was firmly set in her ways. While she would have a downcast look about her immediately after she was given a scolding, she would be all recovered the very next day. It would seem that Lady Katarina had the mysterious ability to forget about all the reprimands and criticisms directed at her after a good night's sleep.

At fifteen years of age, the Young Miss had unfortunately very much remained the same. She did, however, stop climbing trees eventually.

One time, Lady Katarina picked up a mushroom growing in the garden, claiming that it was “absolutely edible.” That was, however, unfortunately not the case, and the Young Miss suffered a bout of food poisoning, in addition to a good scolding from the madam.

After this incident, however, the Young Miss suddenly announced that she would study farming methodologies, immersing herself in books on agriculture. Before long, she had started on a mission to expand the fields in the gardens.

It was as if she hadn't changed at all — not in the slightest, ever since she was eight. Although I had been in her service for seven years, and was always by her side, I still could not predict what Lady Katarina would think about next.

However, even though the Young Miss was quite the troublemaker, she did enjoy immense popularity amongst... certain parties.

For instance, there was the third crown prince, Jeord Stuart, Lady Katarina's

fiancé. The skilled, capable, and beautiful Prince took a great liking to Lady Katarina. Prince Jeord, in turn, enjoyed his time with the Young Miss — the expression of adoration on his face was quite something else.

Lady Katarina, however, did not seem to understand the prince's feelings, not even with such an expression directed at her during their interactions. Thick as the Young Miss was, I could not help but be overcome with fear when she unexpectedly approached the prince — to cancel their engagement, of all things!

The scar on Lady Katarina's head was the reason why this engagement existed in the first place, and now that scar had perfectly healed. I remember the day of her injury, back when the Young Miss was eight years old. And so I was overjoyed upon noticing that the scar was gone. I was happy for her.

However, never in my wildest dreams would I have known that the Young Miss would use this as a reason to cancel the engagement — or say what she did to the prince. That was when I first realized that Lady Katarina did not have a clue about Prince Jeord's affection towards her — in spite of all his actions.

"Prince Jeord. The scar on my forehead has completely vanished. As such, there is no longer a need for you to take social responsibility for me — I do not mind if the engagement were to be cancelled," Lady Katarina said, happily smiling as she did so!

The prince's eyes opened wide in surprise — but soon, a reassuring smile returned to his face. His eyes, however, were hardly smiling at all... "Is that so? Well then, if you would please show me."

Slowly approaching the Young Miss, Prince Jeord parted her hair somewhat roughly, exposing her forehead. It was as she said — the scar had completely vanished, and not a trace of it remained...

"No, Katarina. There is still quite the scar, from what I can see," Prince Jeord said, all the while staring at Lady Katarina's perfectly smooth and unscarred forehead.

"Eh? But I've checked many times in the mirror... Anne helped, too..."

Oh, Young Miss. You mustn't. Please don't turn this way...

“I would suppose you were both mistaken, yes. A scar yet remains here. Do you not think so too?” Prince Jeord said, turning to me with his charming smile. His eyes still did not share the same sentiment. Overcome by fear, all I could do was nod my head rapidly up and down, agreeing wholeheartedly with him.

In the end, the now non-existent scar was brought back onto the table by Prince Jeord, who promptly ended the discussion with a single statement. “So you see, there will be no cancellations with regards to our engagement.” All the while looking at us with those unsmiling eyes of this.

A most terrifying incident, truly — enough for me to feel as if several years of my life had been shaved off my poor heart.

And then there was the matter of Lady Katarina’s adopted brother, Keith Claes. Although he was a most skinny and gloomy child when we first met him, the Young Master was now the apple of many a lady’s eye — he had become quite the beautiful youth as the years went by.

He was, of course, exceedingly popular with women, perhaps on account of how he was always gentle and kind to every woman he met. And now, having reached this age, the Young Master could not help but be charming. To tell the truth, many of the servants had fallen head over heels for him.

Master Keith, however, only had eyes for the Young Miss. He would follow Lady Katarina about almost daily, offering her support and cleaning up her occasional social faux pas. The gaze of burning passion in his eyes, directed at the Young Miss, was evidently not one of platonic sibling love.

Lady Katarina, being thick as she was, however, hardly noticed this. Perhaps she simply did not have the faculties to understand the Young Master’s charms. As expected of the Young Miss.

“...They say I’m charming and whatnot... but it is all meaningless, is it not? If the one you love hardly notices it at all...”

That was what I heard as I happened upon the Young Master one day, mumbling to himself with a gloomy expression on his face. It was a most... unfortunate sight.

Eventually, the Young Master would side with Madam Claes, forming the

“Katarina could not possibly perform the duties of a Queen!” camp. Try as they might to cancel the engagement between Katarina and Prince Jeord, however, their efforts have not yet borne fruit. As far as I know, their efforts continue in the shadows to this day...

And then there was the fourth crown prince of the kingdom, Alan Stuart — the twin brother of Prince Jeord. He, too, only had Lady Katarina in his eyes.

He was said to be a genius of music, and possessed great talent for the art. As such, the invitations for Prince Alan’s many performances drew steadily multiplying crowds — such were the desires of the masses to listen to his music.

The prince would invite Lady Katarina each time, without fail. There was an unmistakable gleam in his eyes — favor for the Young Miss, surely, when he looked upon her.

The one fault with Prince Alan, however, was the fact that he was almost as thick as the Young Lady herself. For seven long years he stared in her general direction — and yet had no self-awareness of it at all.

The sight of the prince who obviously had feelings for Lady Katarina not understanding his own feelings was quite sad to behold. While I was originally exasperated, I now felt some pity for his situation.

However, I did understand that this wasn’t just a matter of Prince Alan being particularly thick. Those who already had an eye for the Young Miss, such as Prince Jeord and Master Keith, set about ensuring that Alan would never notice how he himself felt.

Of these individuals, the most skilled amongst them had to be Prince Alan’s fiancée herself, Lady Mary Hunt. To Prince Alan, the entire reason why Lady Mary was here was so that the Young Miss would not take the prince for herself. The truth, however, was the opposite of that — after all, Lady Mary Hunt herself was a woman after the Young Miss’ heart.

Prince Alan’s fiancée, Lady Mary Hunt, had changed drastically since her first meeting with the Young Miss. While she was originally shirking and shy, her name had spread far in noble society these seven years, and she was heralded as the very image of a noble lady — a far cry from how she used to be.

That very same lady, however, really did have quite the thing for the Young Miss. If I had to describe it... Lady Mary had no qualms about cancelling the Young Miss' engagement with the prince, and then dragging her to some faraway place so she could have her all to herself — that was how deep it went.

Lady Mary's plan had begun quite a few years ago. At that time, she announced to the Young Miss that she was not capable of being queen. "I am hardly suitable for such an important role — that of queen, in particular..."

This filled the Young Miss with unease. After all, even the most perfect noble lady now had reservations about the entire affair.

Upon hearing that, the Young Miss eventually echoed those sentiments, announcing that, "Ah, then it would be impossible for me, too. What am I going to do?"

Lady Mary's response to the Young Miss' unease was swift. Holding her hands, she smiled gently, saying, "Well then, perhaps we could both renege on our engagements... and the two of us could escape to some faraway land."

At first, I had assumed that this was all some sort of joke... until Lady Mary started detailing the tools used in this grand escape. It was then that I understood just how serious she was.

To phrase it simply, Lady Mary Hunt was absolutely serious and willing to cancel both engagements, sweep the Young Miss off her feet, and carry her to some faraway foreign land.

Lady Katarina, being as thick as she was, hardly noticed Mary's feelings. Even now, she speaks of Lady Mary as a friend, with a warm smile. "Ah, Mary is truly a gentle girl..."

And with this, her adopted brother, the twin princes, and even the noble lady engaged to one of the princes are now after her affections. The Young Miss, of course, knew absolutely nothing about all this.

The Young Miss had yet more admirers — one of which being the royal chancellor's son, Master Nicol Ascart. He too was hopelessly lost in the Young Miss' eyes.

He was quite the impressive individual, with his jet-black eyes and hair, doll-

like features, and alluring aura. He had his official debut to noble society late last year, and even had a fanclub following. His so-called fanclub, however, was not only filled with women — but also a fair number of men.

While Prince Jeord, Prince Alan, and Keith were all beautiful and handsome in their own right, there was something different about Master Nicol — to be specific, that alluring and bewitching aura of his. This was why the Young Miss referred to him as the “Alluring Count” day in and day out.

Master Nicol was, however, usually a very stoic individual. He hardly talked about himself, much less spoke very much at all. Even amongst this large following, few had seen him ever show any hint of emotion.

That very same Master Nicol, however, often smiled at Lady Katarina — a truly happy, blissful smile. It was truly a force of nature, that smile of his. Those who bear witness to it inadvertently become weak at the knees. In fact, many of my fellow maids had become effectively useless after witnessing such a spectacle.

As expected of the Young Miss, however, she remained perfectly oblivious to this, even though she was the only one who caused Master Nicol to behave in this way...

“I have to protect Mary and Keith from being bewitched by the Alluring Count...!” she would say, muttering to herself.

It would seem that the Young Miss, being impervious to Young Master Keith’s charms, had proven to be equally invulnerable to the destructive power of Master Nicol’s faint smile...

Lastly, there was the sister of Master Nicol — Sophia Ascart. Needless to say, she was very fond of the Young Miss as well.

Much like the Lady Katarina, Lady Sophia had a great love for romance novels, and often came to the Claes manor, bringing many recommendations with her.

Lady Sophia, having long noticed her brother’s feelings for the Young Miss, often extolled Nicol’s virtues in her presence. As expected of Lady Katarina, however, she hardly understood Sophia’s motivations for doing this, and quickly attributed it to her love for her brother.

And just like that, many people began to gather around the problem child that was Lady Katarina. Much like Master Keith, the Young Miss was very much a subconscious charmer.

And Young Miss had more than just friends of the noble variety. Even the difficult and usually reserved head gardener, Tom, seemed to enjoy himself in Lady Katarina's presence. The somewhat distant head maid, who was strict with herself and her colleagues, was also different in front of the Young Miss — she often wore a peaceful expression, one that I had not seen before.

Regardless of her age, the problems she causes, and her eccentricities, Lady Katarina attracts people to her side without fail. What exactly is it that pulls so many people to her...?

To tell the truth... I can answer that question easily myself.

I, Anne Shelley, was born of Baron Shelley and a servant of the Shelley family — my mother. I was kept separate from the Baron's main household, and was instead raised in a small home.

The Baron was a fickle man, my mother says. He had only slept with her a few times before I was born into this world.

"Do as the Baron says... act in such a way that would make him like you. Never, ever think about going against him..." This was something that she always repeated to me as I grew up.

I followed those instructions. I did what the Baron said and what my mother wished for me to do, never going against either of them. I lived my life for the sole purpose of earning their favor.

Perhaps it was because I did this — I would never really know. I was never called to the main residence, nor was the Baron ever cruel to me. All things considered, I was able to live a somewhat unrestricted life.

However, that would all end one day in the year of my fifteenth birthday. Without warning, the room next to mine caught fire, and the fire soon spread to the surroundings.

Although I had somehow managed to escape, I suffered large burns to my back, and my mother lost her life in the disaster.

All I could do was stand, stunned at the sudden developments. It was then that it happened — for the first time since I was born, I was summoned to the main residence by the Baron.

“I have heard that your back has been terribly scarred. Now that you are damaged, I can no longer use you as an instrument for political marriages. I have no more need for you. Get out of this house,” the Baron said to me, as if he were speaking casually of the changes in the weather. I could not even find any words of protest.

Up until now, I had tried all my life to earn the Baron’s favor. I had been so proud of myself, thinking that an absence of cruelty meant that the Baron had accepted me. But I was... wrong. The Baron was not cruel to me simply because he was not interested in me. To the Baron, I was nothing more than a tool. And now that I have become like this, I was... no longer needed.

And just like that, I lost my abode and my reason for existing, almost overnight. The Claes family, a distant relation of mine, just so happened to be looking for maids — and that was how I ended up there, learning the ways of the world.

I eventually ended up as the personal maid to Lady Katarina Claes, the sole daughter of the Claes family. Lady Katarina was spoiled, selfish, and arrogant towards her servants. Most maids assigned to her did not last very long, but that was not the case for me.

After all, I was different from the other girls, who could simply return to their homes and search for another place to learn their lessons. I no longer had a place to go back to. If I were chased out of the Claes manor, I would be out on the streets.

I lived as I had always lived — I sought to earn her favor, just like I did with the Baron and my mother, never going against anything she said. Whatever Lady Katarina wanted to hear, or the objects she desired... I did all that, and never went against her in any way. I became what my masters wanted me to become, shaped by their desires.

As long as I did as I was told, Lady Katarina’s mood would slowly improve, and the days began to pass without any problems. After all, this was how I had

always lived. The only thing that changed was the individual I served. All I had to do was become a new tool in the Claes manor.

However, following the impact to her head and her feverish slumber, the awakened Lady Katarina changed. She was no longer arrogant, and no longer selfish. She no longer sought praise from me, or words of approval. She climbed the trees and tilled the fields — a most unusual noble lady.

I no longer knew how to earn her favor, or how I should react to her actions. Having lived my entire life telling people what they wanted to hear, and being what they wanted me to be, I found myself at a loss — I had no real will of my own.

And so, as I remained lost in thought about how to interact with this suddenly changed Lady Katarina... I realized that I soon began to speak on my own accord. Although I no longer was full of praise for her, nor did I affirm everything she said and did, Lady Katarina was never cruel to me. I found myself slowly starting to respect her.

For the first time in my life, I received a birthday present. A sheaf of paper tickets with the words “shoulder massage ticket” written on them in somewhat messy letters. And wooden carvings of a strange, unidentified lifeform. All these were gifts from Lady Katarina, handed to me every year, and I kept all of them packed away safely.

The days I spent serving the unpredictable Lady Katarina were exhausting to say the least. However, compared to those fifteen-odd years that I spent living in that small house, this was something I could never have dreamed of — impossibly bright, vibrant, and happy days.

I want to stay by Lady Katarina’s side for as long as I can. I no longer remembered when I started thinking this way.

After spending a few years in the Claes family, a letter arrived from an individual who had not contacted me all this time — Baron Shelley. The letter was curt: *“Your engagement has been arranged. Return to the estate at once.”*

All the color drained from my face. *Engagement...? Even though I was told that I am no longer useful as an instrument for political marriage because of the burn scars on my back?*

Before, I would have rushed back to the estate immediately after receiving such a letter. I was just a tool. A tool that could not dream of going against its master, the Baron. However... I was no longer the girl I was before. I wanted to stay here.

This was why I had ignored the letter... until Baron Shelley himself showed up at the Claes manor. Seated in the room I was summoned into was Baron Shelley — seated and unchanged, looking exactly as he did all those years ago.

“I found an eccentric, you see. Someone who has interest in you, regardless of the damage. Since you did not seem to understand my summons, I have personally shown up, to bring you back, of course,” the Baron said, his twisted expression seemingly suggesting that I thank him for his efforts.

The individual that I was engaged to had many bad rumors swirling around him in noble society — a viscount with more lovers than one could count with both hands. Baron Shelley was certainly being paid a handsome sum to arrange such a marriage. But I knew I would never be happy in such an arrangement.

In fact, was it mistaken for a tool to think that it could ever be happy in the first place? A sudden chill came over my body, as if all the blood had been sucked out of it that very moment.

“Why do you dally? I have already spoken to Duke Claes. Make the arrangements now! We are returning to the estate,” the Baron said, seemingly displeased at my silence.

Ah... with this, it will all end. My happy days will be over, and I will become nothing more than a tool once more.

I want to stay here. I want to spend more time here, by Lady Katarina’s side...

And that was when it happened.

“Do excuse me.” With a prompt greeting and a knock, the Lady Katarina herself burst into the room in a huff. “You are Anne’s father, yes?” she said, directing her sharp gaze towards the Baron.

“...Y-Yes.” the Baron himself was at a loss, apparently surprised by the sudden entrance of this young girl.

“Please! Please rethink this whole affair about Anne’s marriage engagement!” Lady Katarina said, suddenly gripping me by the arm. “Please, I need Anne by my side, I absolutely do! I want her to stay! If you take her away... I won’t stand for it! I can’t!” she shouted, ignoring the Baron’s surprised expression as she said what she needed to say.

The sight before me was surreal — it was like was a spectator, gazing into a foreign world.

I could feel the heat of Lady Katarina’s grip. Slowly, the warmth from her hand warmed up my body.

I had lived all my life, simply pleasing my betters. It was here at the Claes manor, however... here by Lady Katarina’s side, that I first found my own will, my own voice.

Somewhere along the line, I had stopped being just a mere tool. No longer a tool, but just... just Anne Shelley. And even so, Lady Katarina said she needed me. That she wanted me by her side.

Before I knew it, the Young Miss’ warmth filled my entire being. I found that it warmed up my head, especially so. I desperately held back the tears that were threatening to spill forth from my eyes at any moment.

Due to Lady Katarina’s actions that day, the engagement itself was now called into question. A short while after this incident, Duke Claes somehow found out about the negative circumstances surrounding my engagement, and in turn called off the entire deal with the Baron’s family.

No words could describe the gratitude I felt for Duke Claes. In fact, the Duke himself even suggested an alternative. “If you would like, I could put the word out for a proper suitor — someone who would treat you well,” he said.

Even so, I chose to stay by Lady Katarina’s side. And so, I remained as Lady Katarina’s personal maid at the Claes family up until now.

Regardless of her age, the problems she causes, and her eccentricities, Lady Katarina attracts people to her side without fail. What exactly is it that pulls so many people to her...?

To tell the truth... I can answer that question easily myself. After all, I know

better than anyone else could possibly know...

I was just a tool to be used, but Lady Katarina treated me, Anne Shelley, as a human being. I would never forget the warmth of her grip, or the words she spoke on my behalf that day.

I will definitely accompany her to the Academy of Magic in the coming spring. Although the Young Miss claims that she would be “Quite all right”... she could hardly put on her own dress correctly. If left to her own devices, her hair would be messy and undone — there is no way she would be quite all right, nor was this fitting for the eldest daughter of a duke.

“Of course I will be accompanying you to the academy,” I said, despite Lady Katarina’s stunned expression.

“But then, are you not of age for marriage, Anne? I don’t think I could possibly ask you to stay...”

It would seem that the Young Miss was even concerned about my age! Talking about weddings and such. I could not help but laugh a little. After all, I hardly had any desires or expectations for marriage. I only had one wish.

“If I were gone, Young Miss, where would you find someone who would take care of you? Of course I will be accompanying you to the academy.”

At my words, Lady Katarina herself started laughing.

Even if Lady Katarina did become queen in the future, and had to live at the royal castle with Prince Jeord... even if Lady Mary took her away to some faraway land. Regardless of what the future held, I would always be by the Young Miss’ side.

After all, this was where I belonged... and this was where my happiness was — standing next to Lady Katarina.

I only have one wish, My Lady. And that is to live on, always by your side.

Epilogue: From Me to You

After my birthday party ended, a semblance of peace finally returned to my surroundings. With all my party dress preparations and dance lessons done, I no longer had to keep up with them at a breakneck pace, and at last could take a breath of relief.

In fact, I had it in my mind to tend to the fields that I had left alone for quite some time — and till it well I would. For the first time in a while, I put on my overalls, and with my bandana and all, I walked out to the fields in full farming gear.

To prepare for this year's summer harvest, I had intended to scatter the fertilizer that Jeord had given to me for my birthday. Keith was here as well, as I had asked if he could assist with the fertilizing. As we were about to get down to it, Jeord himself showed up.

"Hello, Katarina. I see you are hard at work today as well."

"Ah, yes, Prince Jeord. Thank you for coming to my birthday party the day before, and for your birthday gift. I wanted to set about using the fertilizer you gave me immediately."

"I see. I am glad that you were able to put it to good use so quickly. Well worth the effort to gift you what you requested, if I may say so... In truth, I had wanted to give you a dress, or perhaps an accessory you could wear on your person... but knowing you, Katarina, you would hardly accept such a gift," Jeord said with a somewhat bitter smile on his face.

It was as he said. Originally, Jeord always wanted to send me a dress or some sort of accessory, but I always refused on the spot. My father, who loved me to bits, constantly showered me with dresses and accessories already — there was a small pile of them in my closets. Honestly, I felt like there were a few too many garments in my room...

If I were like Katarina from the original setting of *Fortune Lover*, I would have

loved changing in and out of pretty dresses, sporting a new one each day. In fact, she would hardly mind having a surplus of dresses to choose from. Unfortunately, I was not quite the same as my game counterpart.

To begin with, I didn't really like grand dresses of any sort — if only because they were so annoying to move around in. In fact, living life in tight-fitting, frilly, and restrictive dresses day in and day out was a terrible notion. I could not see it as anything but sort of twisted punishment game.

And anyway, I was mostly focused on my work in the fields, and had fitting gardening overalls for that. I had no need for the small mountain of dresses tucked away somewhere in my closet. I felt the same way about accessories as well. If I were to lose some expensive accessory while working in the fields, it would be quite the debacle.

Due to the reasons I had just described, I had decided to inform my close friends to not send me such presents. Jeord, of course, was one of them. He heeded my request, and presented me with the fertilizer I asked for instead.

“However, Katarina, you are already fifteen years of age this year. It is about time that your status is made clear to those around you. After all, you belong to me — perhaps I should send you some garments befitting your station,” Jeord said, seemingly lost in thought.

Garments befitting my station? Me belonging to Jeord? Hmm... what does he mean?

“I think everyone already knows that I am your fiancée, Prince Jeord...” In fact, word of it had spread so far that one would be hard pressed to find someone who did not know. But of course it would be as such — no point keeping me around if my existence could not be used as an excuse to deflect potential suitors.

“Perhaps it is so, Katarina. However, many are not quite convinced of the reality of it — regardless of their knowledge on the matter.”

I supposed Jeord had a point. I was not breathtakingly beautiful like Mary, and I had this villainess face of mine to deal with. I was not that impressive compared to the relatively high-spec individuals around me — hence the gossip. To be precise, gossip that said Jeord and I were hardly a match beyond our

standing in noble society.

I, however, hardly wanted to challenge their perceptions, much less convince them. In fact, if anyone had wanted to take over my position as fiancée, I would have welcomed it wholeheartedly...

Even so, I couldn't just tell Jeord to his face something like, "Being your fiancée is quite the bother. Could we change it up?" Instead, all I did was smile vaguely. It was with this very same smile that I turned to Jeord now, hoping to somehow resolve the problem.

"What exactly is it that you are doing...?" Keith said, coming between me and Jeord with quite the intense expression.

Hmm? Does he feel left out because I didn't include him in the discussion?

"Hello, Keith Claes. To come between two who are engaged and interrupt their rendezvous... quite the tactless maneuver, no? And what is it with that intense expression of yours? Hardly fitting for your pretty face, Keith."

"Unfortunately, Prince Jeord, it seems like the only one who thinks of this meeting as a rendezvous is you. To answer your question, I have adopted this intense expression in place of my Big Sister. After all, she has absolutely no sense of danger... especially when it comes to particularly nasty bugs."

"A nasty bug, you say? I wonder who that could be?"

"...A most unscrupulous individual who engaged in most questionable acts in the middle of a dance party, Prince Jeord."

"Hmm. Is that right? I, for one, have no idea who that could possibly be."

"You dare say that with those very lips?!"

"But of course, Keith. After all, she is my fiancée. Exactly how questionable is it to leave your own mark on something that belongs to you?"

"And who is it that you say belongs to you?! Big Sister is still a fiancée at this point in time, nothing more!"

It would seem like Keith and Jeord have started a heated discussion in a subject matter that was foreign to me. *Is this how it feels to be left out of discussions...? Hmm. Indeed, it is quite a lonely thing.*

I suppose I should start working the fields on my own, then. Such were the thoughts that passed through my mind as I embraced my newfound agricultural exile.

“Lady Katarina!” Turning around upon hearing a familiar, bright voice, I caught sight of Mary and her vibrant smile. Following close behind her were Sophia and Alan.

“Hmm? Did you all decide to come visit together?” Although they were a common sight on the grounds, it was somewhat rare for my friends to visit in groups.

“Yes. I invited them, you see.”

“You did, Mary?”

“Yes. I had heard from Master Keith that some questionable events came to pass at the recent dance party. I felt that it would be prudent to strengthen our defenses — and there is strength in numbers, so I invited Lady Sophia. Prince Alan came too.”

What exactly happened at the party? I had no idea what they were talking about at all. *To think that Keith would choose to not tell his older sister, but instead inform Mary about this whole development... ah, I really have been excluded, haven't I? I suddenly feel... so lonely...*

Also, Mary just bringing Prince Alan along like that for such a thing seems a little absurd... well, it seems like Alan himself doesn't mind, so I suppose that's all fine and good. But honestly... recent developments have really gone against what I knew of Fortune Lover.

“On another note, Lady Katarina. Did you enjoy the books that you have been gifted for your birthday?”

“Ah, that's right. Lady Mary, Sophia, Prince Alan. Do allow me to express my heartfelt thanks for your wonderful gifts. The books were so interesting that I already finished one volume before I knew it!”

Alan, Mary, and Sophia had come together to select quite a few amazing books for my birthday. Mary and Sophia did most of the work, of course. In fact, Alan hardly knew what to send me each year, and before long had decided to

simply follow Mary's choice on the matter.

This year, Mary had decided on a book as a gift, and had then apparently approached Sophia, who more often than not gifted me with a book each time. The two came together and had a discussion before choosing this year's gifts — that was what I gleaned from the developments, at least.

I was more than satisfied, of course, to receive so many highly-regarded literary works as presents.

"I am glad that you are happy with your gifts, Lady Katarina. As I expected, something that remains in one's hands is much more fitting as a gift. At least, when compared to something that simply disappears into the soil."

"And would that be a jibe directed at me, Lady Mary Hunt?" Jeord, who had been locked in a heated argument with Keith mere moments ago, apparently decided to join this discussion upon noticing Mary's presence.

"Oh, if it isn't Prince Jeord. I did not quite see you there. I hope you are well?" Mary said, curtsying in an impossibly elegant way. As expected of Mary — truly a lady amongst noble ladies. I would do well to learn more from her.

Upon seeing her elegant greeting, even Jeord couldn't help but break into a smile. "Ha ha. Surely you jest, Lady Mary. I heard you loud and clear. It would seem like you are here with the express purpose of disturbing my and Katarina's private time."

"Oh, was I a disturbance? Do pardon me. All I wanted to do was spend some pleasant time with Lady Katarina."

"Lady Mary. Are you not my brother's fiancée? Perhaps you should be sharing some pleasant time with Alan instead, no?"

"But of course! That is why I have invited Prince Alan as well. Appearances, yes?"

"Ah, Lady Mary. To think that you were so lovable in your younger years. It would seem that your personality becomes more and more... interesting, with each passing year."

"Oh? It is an honor that you think so highly of me. However, I would still not

be able to rival someone like you, Prince Jeord.”

“But alas. You are merely being humble, my good lady.”

It seemed that Jeord and Mary had now gotten into their own intense discussion. In fact, Keith had started cheering for Mary at some point, “Do your best, Lady Mary!” Alan, however, seemed puzzled upon hearing his name.

“Hmm...? Appearances...?”

Again! I’m excluded from this discussion. Did all of you not come to my manor to spend time with me?

To make things worse, they’re all talking about difficult things I could hardly understand. I have never felt more lonely than this...

All this loneliness was starting to make me sulk.

“On another note, Lady Katarina... What did you think of my brother’s gift to you...?” Sophia asked, smiling.

My lonely sulking was blown away in an instant by her radiant, lovable smile. “Ah yes, I really quite enjoyed it. Do tell Master Nicol that I really liked the cute necklace he sent me, if you would be so kind,” I replied, smiling back at Sophia.

“NECKLACE?!” For some reason, the four that had excluded me from their conversations prior all said the same thing at the same time, turning in my direction. And then...

“Katarina. What exactly is this... ‘necklace’?”

“But you are not fond at all of accessories, Big Sister. Did you not reject all such gifts?”

“Yes, yes. Something that is worn could not possibly be used, and so you would never accept it, Lady Katarina. Was that not the case?”

“Oh. Actually I heard from Mary that it was something like that...”



Everyone in the garden was seemingly overcome by surprise. But yes — that was exactly it. I had no interest in accessories and dresses, so I turned them all down. However...

“...Actually, it was a necklace that was featured in one of the stories I read, you see. So I was quite happy to receive it. Also, it had no gems or anything like that — hardly stuffy at all, so I happily accepted it.”

That’s right. Nicol’s birthday gift to me was none other than the necklace that a favorite romance novel protagonist of mine wore. Although I had no interest in accessories whatsoever, my otaku tendencies meant that I was particularly weak to items that showed up in the books and stories I read.

“It’s just like that one character!” I would say, becoming all excited about it.

“I actually like it so much that I have it on today as well, under my gardening overalls!” Saying so, I lowered my collar ever so slightly, showing the necklace to my gathered friends. For some reason, all of them instantaneously adopted similarly intense expressions.

Ah, as I thought... I suppose it’s a social faux pas to wear accessories like this under farming attire!

“Fufu. I was the one who gave my brother the advice, Lady Katarina. After all, he’s the only one who’s a year older, and he is always away. It’s not very fair, you see...” Sophia said, smiling innocently as she did so.

Upon witnessing her smile, my other four friends stood silently, and for a while, seemed resolutely rooted to the spot.

Afterword

Hello, this is Yamaguchi Satoru. Thank you very much for purchasing this book.

This work was originally submitted to the novel submission site “Shousetsu ni Narou” in July of 2014, and was then serialized. I have all my readers to thank for my work being compiled into a book — and as such would like to extend my sincere thanks to the fans who have read my works on the site. Thank you very much.

Well then... the title of this book is quite long, isn't it? “My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! Volume 1” Even the supervisor of the editing department said, “It's the longest among all the works we have.”

And as for the book's contents... it's exactly like the title says! The protagonist has been reincarnated as an antagonist character in an otome game called *Fortune Lover* that she had been playing before her untimely death. She must overcome all the Catastrophic Bad Ends, and work hard to stay alive and well.

The protagonist, Katarina, isn't exceptionally beautiful, smart, or magically inclined. She's quite the disappointing protagonist, isn't she? But she has a creative mind, and tries her best to do what she can. I would be very glad if you, my dear readers, could continue watching over her warmly.

With regards to the illustrations for this book, I would like to thank Hidaka Nami-sama for their cute illustrations of Katarina and the other rival characters, as well as the cool Jeord and the many other romance interests.

When I first set eyes on these character designs, I was overwhelmed by just how splendid they were. Hidaka Nami-sama, thank you very much for your wonderful illustrations.

Lastly, I would also like to thank the supervisor of the editing department, who gave me a lot of advice, as I was quite clueless. I would also like to thank everyone who has helped with the publishing of this book — I thank them from

the bottom of my heart.

Again, thank you very much, everyone.

Yamaguchi Satoru



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My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! Volume 1

by Satoru Yamaguchi

Translated by Shirley Yeung Edited by Aimee Zink

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