
ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM
Hannelore's Fifth Year at the Royal Academy
~ Volume 1 ~
Author: Miya Kazuki
Illustrator: You Shiina


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Prologue

Toward the end of autumn, the merchants visiting Dunkelfelger for trade started returning to their own duchies, while the nobles of the castle began preparing for the weeks to come. Knights went on expeditions to the northern barrier, where they hunted feybeasts intent on sneaking into the duchy for the winter, and scholars informed the dormitory supervisor of new students, collected information from Sovereign nobles visiting home, and scheduled meetings with the aub and giebes over winter. Attendants, meanwhile, prepared to welcome nobles for winter socializing, brought cleaning magic tools to the Royal Academy's dormitory, and checked the furniture there for any issues.

Cordula, head attendant of the archduke candidate Hannelore, was making her way down a busy hallway inside the castle. She had received a summons from Sieglinde, the archduke's first wife, requesting that she head to the noblewoman's chambers.

Lady Sieglinde would normally be in her office around now. What must have happened for her to summon me to her chambers instead?

It must have been important, but Cordula kept her uncertainty from seeping through as she passed into the castle's restricted area, where the archducal living quarters were situated.

"Lady Sieglinde, it is I, Cordula," she announced upon her arrival.

It was not particularly rare for a mother to summon her daughter's head attendant for a report. On top of that, Cordula had previously served as Sieglinde's attendant, and she had spent plenty of time educating Hannelore, so she knew the chambers reasonably well.

"Yes, come in," Sieglinde answered. "Please take a seat. This might take a while."

Cordula did as instructed, albeit with some hesitation. Being summoned was not particularly rare, but being told to sit was. She took a few deep breaths to steady her nerves while waiting for Sieglinde to speak.

"We have decided to select marriage candidates for Hannelore,"

Sieglinde announced at last.

Cordula inhaled sharply. In her third year at the Royal Academy, in the heat of a ditter match, Hannelore had taken Lord Wilfried of Ehrenfest by the hand and abandoned her team's base despite being its treasure. She had, at that moment, resolved to marry into Ehrenfest.

However, during the Interduchy Tournament that followed, Ehrenfest had stated that they wanted only an end to the ditter challenges being thrust upon them. They had no interest in taking a bride from Dunkelfelger, as they lacked the means to accommodate a greater duchy's archduke candidate, and thereby rejected Hannelore's proposal.

The two parties' negotiations had been anything but normal, but nothing changed the fact that Ehrenfest had won the ditter match. Dunkelfelger had needed to accept the refusal, and Hannelore had proposed that they could start by taking a step back and working out what would be of actual value to Ehrenfest.

"Did we not tacitly accept that milady would focus on looking into what Ehrenfest truly wants?" Cordula asked.

There were many reasons Hannelore's parents had elected to leave her to her own devices despite Ehrenfest's rejection. First, society looked harshly upon archduke candidates who brought defeat upon their home duchy. Second, it had been Lestilaut, not Wilfried or Rozemyne, who initiated the ditter match at the heart of the matter. Third, they wished to acknowledge Hannelore's decision to work on fixing their relationship with Ehrenfest. And fourth, they believed that Dunkelfelger had much to gain from being on good terms with Ehrenfest, especially considering Rozemyne's increasing closeness with the royal family.

"Indeed, that was the case." Sieglinde sighed. "But not anymore." Plenty had occurred over the past year. Most notably, Hannelore had led knights into the war between Old Ahrensbach and Ehrenfest, securing the latter's victory.

"I thought the plan was to wait and see the general opinion now that Hannelore has made up for her shame," Cordula said, her brow furrowed. "Has the situation changed yet again?"

Sieglinde pressed a hand to her forehead. "The problem is that Hannelore absolutely refuses to bend. Cordula, has she said much about Ehrenfest of late? Have there been any exchanges of letters or gifts?"

“No, my lady. Nothing of note has transpired.” Anything sent to Hannelore would have gone through all sorts of checks before reaching her, and if she had met with someone from Ehrenfest, Cordula would have reported it at once.

Sieglinde let out another, heavier sigh. “I see. What in the world is that girl thinking?”

Dunkelfelger had no way of probing into the status of Hannelore’s potential engagement—not when Ehrenfest had ordered them to “be silent as losers should be.” The most they could do was demonstrate Hannelore’s value. If that turned out not to be enough for Lord Wilfried to accept her, then there was nothing else to be done.

“Ehrenfest did not speak about Hannelore during the Archduke Conference, nor did they have any of their merchants bring her letters or presents,” Cordula stressed.

“And now that the merchants have returned home, we have no reason to expect any contact.”

Cordula nodded. The only conclusion they could draw was that Ehrenfest had no intention of ever welcoming Hannelore.

“How unfortunate,” Sieglinde mused. “I was hoping we could speak about our worth to Ehrenfest and what it might mean for us, but that no longer seems to be in the cards...” Hannelore continually defended Ehrenfest, insisting that she did not want to bother them further and that Lord Wilfried was “a kind soul,” but she refused to think about her own future or answer any questions about it.

“Your intentions completely escape her, Lady Sieglinde. Milady is so afraid of being scolded that she tends to close her ears and stubbornly refuse to take notice.”

Ehrenfest did not share their opponents’ reverence of bride-stealing ditter, so they had simply overturned whatever customs would inconvenience them. Many in Dunkelfelger had seen that as deceitful, asserting that the rules were in place for a reason and that their actions constituted trickery. As a result, Hannelore had begun repeating her defense of Ehrenfest almost on instinct whenever the subject came up, making it almost impossible to communicate with her.

“Given the circumstances, I would say that I have been more than patient enough,” Sieglinde proclaimed. “Hannelore has spoken with

Ehrenfest and Lady Rozemyne personally, has she not?”

Hannelore had answered Rozemyne’s call to battle, played a key role in securing her victory, and then accepted an invitation to Ehrenfest’s celebrations. She had exchanged promises with Rozemyne and received a special invite to both the transference ceremony and her inauguration during the Archduke Conference.

“And yet, Hannelore said nothing of the good she can do for Ehrenfest. Strange, is it not? I am starting to question why I was even told of her invitation—and why I approved it.”

Hannelore was valuable to Ehrenfest—they had made that much clear when they invited her to their celebration. Rozemyne’s obtaining the Grutrissheit meant that Ehrenfest’s nobles had expected her to go to the Sovereignty, so her engagement to Lord Wilfried had secretly been canceled. There would have been no better opportunity for Hannelore to bring up marrying into the duchy.

“If she had the time to petition Ehrenfest’s archducal couple to let Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand marry, then she had time to at least broach the subject of her own engagement,” Sieglinde opined. “Why did she not ask Lady Rozemyne to support her marrying Lord Wilfried? Instead, she merely accepted the offer of a hairpin. What a wasted opportunity.”

Cordula understood Sieglinde’s frustration all too well. Her head had started to spin when she first received Hannelore’s report.

“Hannelore had nobody to advise her on what to say to Ehrenfest’s archducal couple,” Cordula said. “We neglected to send any attendants or scholars with her, for Lady Rozemyne had said their true ditter would be concluded in a matter of two bells.”

Hannelore had gone into battle in a position that would have allowed Dunkelfelger to sever ties with her if necessary. It would have been ideal to at least assign other retainers to her for the celebration, but Ehrenfest was much farther away than the castle of Old Ahrensbach; they had not stood a chance of keeping up with Hannelore’s group using the teleportation circles they had access to.

“If only we could have reunited her with her retainers when we learned of her trip to Ehrenfest, where the knights were going to finish venting their enthusiasm...”

Because that news had coincided with reports of their knights draining

the region's food and alcohol stocks, they had hesitated to add more noncombatants to the mix. More than that, though, they had not wanted to send more personnel while Rozemyne was unconscious following her theft of Old Ahrensbach's foundation.

"We could not have predicted that Hannelore would be invited to a celebration immediately after the fighting," Cordula said. "Furthermore, we did not expect the knights we sent with her to provide no assistance whatsoever."

The knights who had joined Hannelore for the celebration had gone straight to the castle's training grounds, and those who had stayed in Bindewald had waited in the giebe's estate. Both groups had been so excited about their joint training with another duchy that they had mentioned nothing else in their reports. It really had been headache-inducing.

Sieglinde and Cordula sighed at the same time. Outside of combat, Dunkelfelger knights were so very unreliable.

"I should wish for her to learn from Lady Adolphine's example," Sieglinde mused. "She exposed Lord Sigiswald's misdeeds before the avatar and new Zent, then secured her divorce without showing even a shred of weakness."

"I doubt Hannelore could manage such an approach. It would suit her better to pin Lord Wilfried down and demand conditions for their engagement."

Considering how long Hannelore had spent agonizing over what to do, mimicking Adolphine would clearly be too much for her. She was more the type to follow Clarissa's example and earn her engagement by force, for while she lacked social dexterity, she had all the mana and combat potential expected of an archduke candidate.

"I would accept any course of action from her, but alas, I cannot wait any longer. Not now that our duchy ranks higher than any other in Yurgenschmidt."

Indeed, in honor of their contributions to the invasion of the Royal Academy and the war against Lanzenave, Dunkelfelger had been granted the highest rank during the most recent Archduke Conference. Klassenberg had not been able to protest, and neither had any of the other duchies, for none of them had involved themselves in the battles that had saved the

country.

As for the second and third ranks, those had been given to the new duchies of Blumenfeld and Korinthsdaum, which were being run by former royals Trauerqual and Sigiswald, respectively. Klassenberg occupied the fourth space, and Drewanchel, the fifth, which constituted a rather severe drop for them both.

“In truth,” Sieglinde said, “Lord Sigiswald probed Hannelore for an engagement during the conference.”

“That is news to me...”

“Hah. It cannot have been good for his image, since it came hot on the heels of his separation from Lady Adolphine. He must really wish to keep Drewanchel from glowering while he develops his new duchy.” A mischievous smirk spread across the noblewoman’s face. “He used such vague language that we are merely feigning ignorance of the proposal.”

Cordula gave a half-smile. The first wife had retained the strong spirit of her youth. “Perhaps he should have spoken more clearly, then.”

“I assume he will try again—though not until the next Interduchy Tournament, at the earliest.”

As more time passed, Sigiswald would no longer need to mention his divorce. And as his new duchy, Korinthsdaum, had such a small archducal family, he would need a second or third wife posthaste. It was only natural that he would seek assistance from the highest-ranking duchy he could.

“As it stands, his duchy ranks below ours,” Cordula said. “But the former royals still enjoy a great deal of power, so we might be hard-pressed to refuse any future advances.”

“Quite... Next year, alongside the other duchies, Blumenfeld and Korinthsdaum will receive rankings based on their harvests and authority. I doubt they will remain where they are now, but who can say how long the prestige of being former royalty will matter to noble society at large.”

Had a Zent arisen from a family entirely unrelated to the royals in power, then the previous royal family would have lost all status in the blink of an eye. Only because the divine avatar had seen fit to grant the Grutrissheit to Eglantine were they clinging to even a fraction of their former authority. Eglantine had taken Anastasius as her groom, and Cordula expected their immediate family to hold inflated ranks for quite some time.

“Milady’s position certainly has changed.”

Only a year ago, the stain on Hannelore's honor had made her feel out of place even at home. Now, however, she had cleared her name by taking part in true ditter, made friends with the divine avatar, and proven her worth as an archduke candidate of the country's top-ranked duchy.

"She has done so well that even Drewanchel inquired about taking her hand in marriage," Sieglinde said. "We refused them on the spot, of course."

"Oh my. Is that so?"

Because of her duties as Hannelore's head attendant, Cordula had not gone to the Archduke Conference and was somewhat out of the loop as a result. On the one hand, she wished to have faster access to news relevant to her lady's future, but on the other, she understood that refused proposals were anything but urgent.

"We cannot yet say how Lord Sigiswald and Lady Adolphine's separation will impact Drewanchel and its relationship with the new duchies, and their drop in rank makes their interest in such an engagement perfectly understandable," Sieglinde explained. "However, their interest in Hannelore came while they were chastising Lord Sigiswald for attempting to remarry so soon. I could not help but feel they were committing the same shameless act."

Sieglinde sighed, shook her head in exasperation, and continued, "I asked Lord Anastasius about the matter. As it turns out, when the divorce was settled, Drewanchel asked for a royal decree that would secure them a marriage with Alexandria. Then, when they were refused, they asked for a marriage with the Zent."

"And when they were refused a second time, they sought to marry Hannelore..." Cordula mused. "Even for a political engagement, that sounds far too self-serving." It was not unusual to start with one's best option before approaching less ideal alternatives, but Cordula could not stand the thought of her lady being looked down upon.

Sieglinde went on: "Zent Eglantine has made it clear that she intends to prioritize Dunkelfelger and Alexandria over Klassenberg. In that regard, we should expect more greater duchies to seek an engagement with ours. We must be even more on guard during this year's Interduchy Tournament and the next Archduke Conference. Even at the Royal Academy, we will need to keep our distance from other duchies. By choosing Hannelore's suitors now,

we shall give ourselves the means to deflect with bride-taking ditter if another duchy should propose."

Cordula nodded; sorting out a potential partner for Hannelore would make her next academic term all the more manageable. "I see now why this has to be done. But why take this approach over arranging an actual engagement?" Hannelore's father could always decide not to wait for his daughter to work things out with Ehrenfest and choose her future husband for her.

Sieglinde responded with a wry smile, "To light a fire under her, first of all. She has become far too complacent as of late. But I also wish to give my daughter some choice in whom she marries, especially with all that Lestilaut has put her through." A proper engagement would deter other duchies far better than mere suitors, but Sieglinde wished to compensate Hannelore for all that she had done.

"Even if we took the other approach, and Werdekraf chose Hannelore's partner for her, the engagement would not be set in stone until the Zent approved it during the next Archduke Conference," Sieglinde continued. "Choosing only suitors should at least give Hannelore a chance to make her own selection."

Sieglinde intended to be fully considerate of her daughter's wishes. Hannelore could choose one of the Dunkelfelgerian suitors her parents picked out for her or, if she was proactive enough, move things along with Ehrenfest.

An onlooker might see this as merely an act of compassion between a mother and her daughter, but Lady Sieglinde also means to repay Lady Hannelore for the damage her brother caused.

Hannelore had wiped away the shame of her past defeat and strengthened her personal value through her friendship with the divine avatar. She could stay in Dunkelfelger if she so wished or marry into any other duchy of her choice.

"The problem is," Sieglinde ruminated, "no names come to mind. Can you think of anyone, Cordula? I think choosing archnobles would be ideal, to help quiet those who would argue that Hannelore should be the next aub now that she has taken part in true ditter. It is law that female aubs must be married to archduke candidates, so pairing her with an archnoble seems an excellent solution."

“These men would marry into her house, not the other way around, correct?”

“Correct. It would be too great a loss for our duchy to reduce her to the rank of archnoble. Other duchies might even consider it a weakness to exploit.”

Cordula nodded, tapped a finger against her cheek, and cast her eyes down in thought. Dunkelfelger had its share of unattached men who could match Hannelore’s mana. Someone from an archducal branch family would be ideal for marrying into her house and supporting Lestilaut with his duties as the next aub.

“You have some understanding of what is going on beneath the surface, do you not?” Sieglinde asked. “Although I see all of the engagement requests sent to the aub, I cannot fully grasp the circumstances behind them.” In her capacity as Hannelore’s head attendant, Cordula was better able to acquire such knowledge.

“Ohoho... Even my information network has its gaps. Gathering intel about Lady Reichlene’s faction has been troublesome, for a start. The second wife remains as vigilant as ever.”

“We need not consider such people. In the interest of keeping things simple, let us only choose suitors from among our own faction. I do not want Hannelore being swayed this way or that by our rivals.”

Perhaps due to her kind and rather timid nature, Hannelore had trouble ignoring others’ opinions and tended to bury her own thoughts rather than express them freely. On countless occasions, people had mistaken her silence for tacit agreement, and she had ended up on the verge of tears as she attempted to correct them. It took her a long time to make decisions, but she refused to change them once her mind was made up.

“Marrying someone from another faction would place too great a burden on milady’s heart. But if we restrict ourselves to *her* faction... That leaves us only her and Lord Lestilaut’s retainers.”

“Indeed. They will merely be *potential* grooms, so I will not require them to cancel any preexisting arrangements they might have. In the event that Hannelore succeeds in her negotiations with Ehrenfest, they will return to their previous engagements.”

Aub Dunkelfelger would acknowledge those deemed worthy to marry Hannelore, but none of them would actually be engaged to her. They would

be free to prioritize anyone else they had already made plans with.

“Among my daughter’s retainers, who would make ideal candidates?” Sieglinde asked.

“I am told that Luitpold is rather deep into arranging his own engagement, which puts him out of the question. We need someone who can reinforce Lord Lestilaut’s power base, do we not? In that case, I would expect his own retainers to be ideal. Neither Kenntrips nor Rasantark should be taken at the moment.”

Kenntrips and Rasantark were Hannelore’s cousins. Both were sons of Aub Dunkelfelger’s elder brother, though they did not share a mother. Even before their baptisms, they had frequently been brought to the castle to help teach Lestilaut and Hannelore to socialize with the other children their age. In that regard, one could say they were longtime friends as well as family.

“From what I have seen, both are rather fond of Lady Hannelore.”

“Oh my... Is that so?” Sieglinde asked, eyes widening with surprise.

“Kenntrips consoled and protected milady whenever Lord Lestilaut lashed out at her. As for Rasantark, I could see the admiration in his eyes as he watched her tearfully push through her intense training.”

“You speak of when they were children, do you not? Does their fondness for Hannelore remain even to this day? It was my understanding that a wedge has since been driven between her and Lestilaut’s retainers.”

Lestilaut had wagered his sister’s engagement without her permission, and she had thrown the game for love. The outcome had done much to change Dunkelfelger’s relationship with Ehrenfest but also severely damaged Hannelore’s relationship with her elder brother. In the event of such controversies, retainers had a tendency to side with their lord or lady.

“For milady’s sake, Kenntrips and Rasantark strove to keep the dormitory in order during Lord Lestilaut’s absence,” Cordula explained. “Although, as you know, she is stubborn to a fault, and their concern ended up being for nothing.”

The two brothers had taken issue with Ehrenfest’s refusal to marry Hannelore despite winning their ditter match. They felt that someone precious to them was being looked down upon, as did Cordula and all of Hannelore’s other retainers.

“The ditter match started it all, which means the blame rests primarily with Lord Lestilaut,” Cordula said. “Still, Ehrenfest played their part by

refusing milady’s hand.”

Had their opponents accepted the proposal, as per the rules of their game, then Hannelore would never have been thought of as the archduke candidate who brought about her duchy’s defeat. Instead, she would have been the expert tactician who exploited even her elder brother for the sake of love.

“Milady’s failure to grasp this, coupled with how desperately she defends Ehrenfest, has produced this unfortunate situation where others’ concerns do not properly reach her. Still, their feelings for her remain the same.” Kenntrips, Rasantark, and Hannelore’s retainers all still cherished her dearly.

Sieglinde’s lips curled into a relieved smile. “I see. I shall consider Kenntrips and Rasantark, then.”

Entering the Dormitory

“Lady Hannelore, the preparations are complete,” Cordula said. “Let us depart.”

It was the day of my return to the Royal Academy. I rose to my feet at my head attendant’s call, trying to seem calm and composed, but my spirits were painfully low. As nice as it was to socialize with other duchies, free from parental supervision, it was exhausting constantly having to worry about besmirching my name as an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger. The past year, in particular, had seen so many changes that going to the Academy now felt more depressing than ever.

“This will be farewell for quite some time, Lady Hannelore,” my adult retainers said, cheering me on. “We look forward to reports of your successes at the Royal Academy.”

Once we had said our goodbyes, I exited my room with Cordula and my apprentice guard knight Heilliese. Our shoes clacked against the white stone underfoot as we made our way to the teleportation hall.

The floors of Ehrenfest’s castle had been adorned with thick carpets when we attended the victory celebration in spring. Here, the floors were completely bare. Dunkelfelger was one of the hotter duchies in Yurgenschmidt, so our carpets were embroidered with cooling magic, and we only brought them out to help battle the summer heat.

“Gathering will start as soon as we reach the dormitory,” Heilliese announced.

I nodded. We had to prepare materials for our classes, but there was also the matter of confirming whether our gathering spot had any to begin with. “We can only pray that we will not need to perform the healing ritual,” I said.

“I wonder how the gathering spot will fare this year. Last I heard, Rasantark had resolved to impress you.”

“I would rather not think about it.”

It was customary in Dunkelfelger for second-years to enter the

dormitory before anyone else. The third-years would arrive next, then the fourth, and so on, with the first-years then being the last to arrive. It was an unusual order of doing things by Yurgenschmidt's standards, but it was the only way for the younger students to stand a chance of gathering what they needed for their classes.

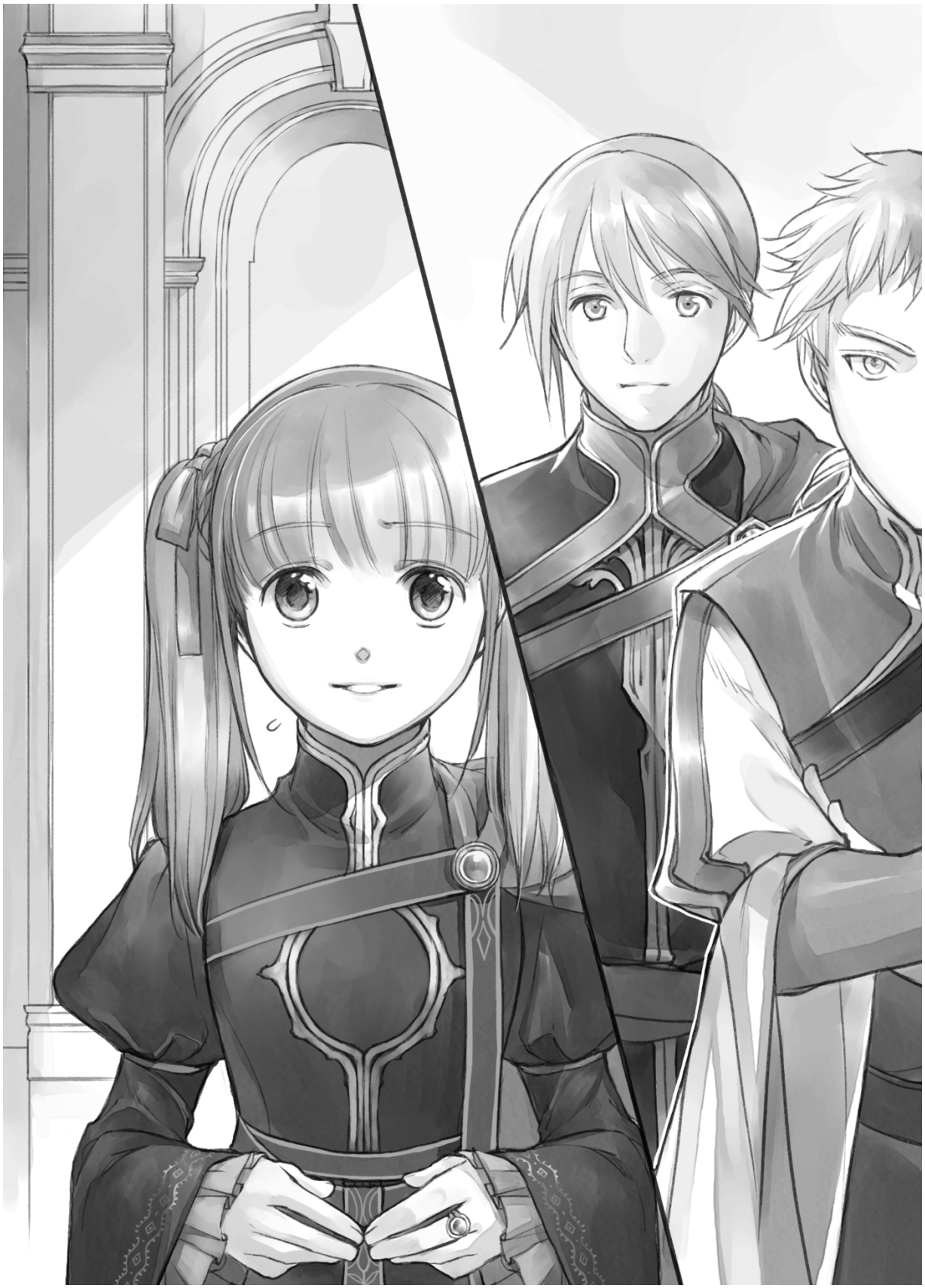
In other duchies, the eldest students would apparently arrive first, then hunt the more dangerous feybeasts to make the gathering spot safer for their first-years. Dunkelfelger, however, was a duchy of warriors, which made that consideration unnecessary. It was more important to keep the sixth-years from clearing out the entire gathering spot, leaving nothing for everyone else.

Not to mention, Dunkelfelger needs more rejuvenation potions than the other duchies, owing to all the ditter we play.

By teaching everyone the prayer to rejuvenate gathering spots, Lady Rozemyne had eased the battle for ingredients to a noticeable degree. Even then, the amount of mana it required meant it could not be performed lightly. Everyone was praying to obtain divine protections, but with the amount of mana that classes required, things were far from simple.

Mother, Father, Lestilaut, and their retainers came to bid me farewell. I could see Kenntrips, my brother's apprentice scholar and one of the boys chosen to potentially become my fiancé, waiting among them. Our eyes met, and he smiled at me. I smiled back without even thinking.

I can only pray that was not awkward of me.



It had not been too long ago that Father had informed me of the suitors he had chosen for me. As well as being my brother's retainers, Kenntrips and Rasantark were my childhood friends and family. I knew them well, but the sudden announcement had rendered me uncertain about how to interact with them.

I placed a hand on my cheek, hoping my smile had not been unnatural in some way. The gesture prompted Mother to step forward.

"Hannelore—for as long as you are on the Academy's grounds, take great care to act in a manner befitting an archduke candidate of the country's top-ranking duchy."

"Yes, Mother."

The rise of a Zent with the Grutrissheit had resulted in the reformation of several previously deposed duchies and enormous changes to the duchy rankings during the last Archduke Conference. We were bound to feel the impact at the Royal Academy as well.

"Blumenfeld and Korinthsdaum are expected to hold their current ranks for only a single year before the former royals' status loses relevance, but some students will get carried away nonetheless," Father began. "Only the Zent couple and Dunkelfelger the First will possess the authority to chastise those who let their newfound power get to their heads. For that reason, you must never forget your pride as the Zent's sword, and..."

Mustn't I...? Because I really rather would.

A quiet sigh escaped me as I stopped paying attention to whatever lecture Father was giving me. Being an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger was already an enormous and exceptionally unpleasant burden, and something told me it was about to get a hundred times worse. The formation of new duchies, the changes to the Royal Academy's curriculum, the reveal of shocking truths about the temples and their bibles during the Archduke Conference, and more would make gathering intel from other duchies an unbearable mess.

For once, I actually bemoaned the fact that my brother had graduated.

"It astounds me that such sweeping revolutions would come about when I, not my brother, must serve as Dunkelfelger's representative," I said. "Is it not cruel that my timing is this unfathomably poor?"

"I won't deny that your timing is tragic, but what right do you have to complain?" Lestilaut shot back with a grin. There was an unmistakable glint

in his red eyes. “You made your burden all the worse by showing up to the Archduke Conference’s inauguration ceremony. Mother warned you not to go, remember?”

I cast my eyes down. He was right. It had never even crossed my mind that simply attending an inauguration ceremony would attract so much attention. Mother had not wanted me to go—she had said the Archduke Conference was no place for a minor, invitation or no—but I refused to budge. Nothing would stop me from seeing Lady Rozemyne’s inauguration with my own eyes.

“Well, Lady Rozemyne kept her promise and invited me...” I muttered. “Refusing her was out of the question.”

Lady Rozemyne had looked stunning during the ceremony. The feystone necklace given to her by her fiancé, Lord Ferdinand, had sparkled wonderfully against her chest. Each had worn colors that accentuated the other’s hair, making it clear at a glance how close they were. I was glad from the bottom of my heart to have seen the smiles of unwavering trust they gave one another.

My nostalgic daydreaming must have spread to Lestilaut as well. “That certainly was a once-in-a-lifetime ceremony...” he mused aloud. “Lady Rozemyne’s hair was down, as she had yet to come of age, and the skirt she wore went only to her shins... Minors aren’t usually allowed at the Archduke Conference, but there we saw the birth of an underage aub.”

A voice had cried out during the ceremony that there was no precedent of anyone underage becoming an aub, to which Lady Rozemyne had declared that she *was* the precedent. Zent Eglantine had then spoken in her favor, insisting that she had only been able to become an aub at all because noble society had pushed for the age of schtappe acquisition to be reduced. Nobody had protested after that.

“Brother, the splendorous blessing that Lady Rozemyne gave us all once she had been recognized as an aub overwhelmed you so severely that you were unable to stay calm for the entirety of the Starbind Ceremony.” I shot Lestilaut a glare. “You have even more artwork of Lady Rozemyne and Zent Eglantine in your chambers, no? As I understand it, Eineliebe is none too pleased.”

Eineliebe and my brother had married on the same day as Lady Rozemyne’s inauguration. Zent Eglantine had performed the ceremony as

the Sovereign High Bishop. She really had looked beautiful, but I could understand why Eineliebe took issue with her new husband ceaselessly drawing other women.

Lestilaut grimaced and told me to keep my nose where it belonged, but his business was very much mine. This was a matter of grave importance.

“You should worry about your own situation, not Eineliebe’s,” he added. “Attending the ceremony has cost you greatly.”

“Ngh... Curiosity alone was a poor reason to go. That, I admit, is one of my regrets.”

Although I had only attended the inauguration and the Starbind Ceremonies held in the morning, being the only minor invited to observe the Archduke Conference had caused the entire noble populace to mark me as an especially close friend of Lady Rozemyne. They were entirely correct, of course—we had spent years together as members of the Academy’s Library Committee, researched religious ceremonies together, invaded Ahrensbach and fought Lanzenave together, celebrated together, arranged to have matching hairpins together...

“I am overjoyed that Lady Rozemyne considers me her friend, but...”

I ended my sentence there—I thought the rest went without saying—but Lestilaut elected to chime in anyway. “There is much to gain from being Lady Rozemyne’s friend, but trouble follows her wherever she goes.”

Indeed, the problems that went hand in hand with Lady Rozemyne’s friendship had been looming over me since the conference.

“Especially now that she has more sway over the Zent than anybody else,” Lestilaut continued.

Father nodded gravely. “Indeed. On many occasions throughout the conference, Zent Eglantine openly consulted Lady Rozemyne rather than her home duchy of Klassenberg. It’s only natural that all the other aubs are desperate for some form of connection to Aub Alexandria.”

Father was right, but actually obtaining those connections was a monumental task. An underage girl would naturally attract men seeking to marry her, but Lady Rozemyne already had a partner in Lord Ferdinand. He had obtained the Zent’s approval, exchanged feystones, and arranged an engagement ceremony in the brief period between the Lanzenave War and the Archduke Conference. Nobody could hope to best him.

As someone who had seen the fighting up close, I knew that it was

nothing but reckless to oppose Lord Ferdinand. He could formulate and execute several plans at once, meaning the only way to defeat him was to lay several traps and pray that he might wander into them. Otherwise, he was practically unbeatable now that he was properly engaged to Lady Rozemyne.

"Lord Ferdinand will not take any other wives now that he is engaged to a female aub," Mother said.

Lestilaut crossed his arms and nodded. "Some aubs proposed that he take mistresses alongside the aub, but he shot them down every time. He said that Aub Alexandria is every one of his goddesses."

"Oh my!" I exclaimed. "I was not aware of that. You simply *must* tell me more!"

During my time in Ehrenfest, Lady Rozemyne had spoken dryly about her marriage to Lord Ferdinand, explaining it away as a political union devoid of romance. He must have won her over with his words and actions in the meantime. Her heart had surely been moved by his passion.

I gazed up at Lestilaut, my own heart brimming with hope, but he just grimaced. "I don't have anything more to tell you. He said it with a suspicious grin, so I don't know how serious he was."

I was desperate for the details, but my brother cut the conversation short. It was a shame, really—the little he had told me sounded so sweet that it could have come straight from the pages of a love story. I resolved to ask Lady Rozemyne for the rest.

On second thought, perhaps not. Her response will surely be as draining as when she opined about creating a library city.

If an exciting tale of romance was what one desired, then Lady Rozemyne was the last person to ask. I knew that well from my experience in Ehrenfest.

"As it stands," Mother said, "Alexandria's archducal family comprises only Lord Ferdinand, Lady Rozemyne, and Lady Letizia—although most still view the latter as an archduke candidate of Old Ahrensbach. She is currently engaged to Lord Hildebrand."

I gave a careful nod.

"We will need to use this academic year to determine Lady Letizia's relationship with Lady Rozemyne," Father said. "And more, of course; I want to know how the lesser and middle duchies, not to mention

Klassenberg and Drewanchel, are approaching the situation, and what they think about the new aubs. Find out as much as you can, Hannelore—and you too, Kenntrips."

Kenntrips nodded and said, "Understood." He was a sixth-year apprentice archscholar, which meant we were pinning our hopes on him more than anyone.

"We need as much information about the other duchies as we can get our hands on," Father continued, a bitter look on his face. "Many will recognize the difficulty of establishing a direct connection with Alexandria and will attempt to reach them through you or Ehrenfest's archduke candidates instead. They hope to secure Lady Rozemyne's attention and her assistance in reforming their temples."

"Indeed," Mother added. "Our joint research with Ehrenfest has led to plenty of our knights seeking Leidenschaft's spear from our temple. Many of our other nobles go there too, hoping to obtain more divine protections, but I doubt other duchies would share their enthusiasm. You have a heavy burden to bear, Hannelore."

My mother was correct. In the event that I married into another duchy, I would surely be lumbered with the expectation of reforming my new home's temple as successfully as we had reformed our own. I doubted that I would even be able to; a lot of our progress came down to the fact that so many of our knights sought to acquire Leidenschaft's spear.

Father had almost certainly chosen my two potential fiancés from within our network to preserve Dunkelfelger's bond with Alexandria and to protect me from being wed into another duchy. My intention had originally been to marry elsewhere, as I was not particularly attached to ditter, but all of my life's plans had since been turned on their head.

"On the bright side, being at the top of the rankings means that no other duchy can force its demands on us," Father said. "Had we not been so fortunate, we wouldn't have been able to refuse that proposal from Lord Sigiswald. If you wish to avoid being married into Korinthsdaum in the future, then you will need to choose either Rasantark or Kenntrips as your fiancé and receive approval for your marriage during the next Archduke Conference."

I took an instinctive step back in the face of my father's intensity. Kenntrips and Rasantark must have been the only men in our duchy who

suited my mana, faction, and age. They were my uncle's sons and my brother's retainers; I was expected to take one of them as a groom and support Lestilaut in the future.

Though, honestly speaking, I would rather not marry either of them.

I did not have anything against them personally—I just was not ready for an engagement that would decide the course of my future. It surely had not helped that when Father announced them as my marriage prospects, my thoughts had turned straight to Lord Wilfried and the hand he had reached out to me.

Kenntrips and Rasantark always speak so ill of Lord Wilfried and Ehrenfest.

I glanced at the green-haired Kenntrips, who stood next to my brother as his apprentice retainer. Although he was exceptionally smart, he was unmistakably a scholar of the sword; he created all manner of violent magic tools meant to secure victory during our ditter matches at the Royal Academy. In fact, it had seemed to me that people expected more of him than they expected of the knights.

"You are the pride of Dunkelfelger, Lady Hannelore," he said, his smile reaching his gray eyes. "I am proud to have been chosen as a candidate for your hand in marriage."

Kenntrips had always been so kind. These days, however, it was common to see him with a rather grim look on his face.

Rasantark, my other suitor, had already teleported to the Academy. He was an apprentice archknight in the same grade as me who greatly resembled Heisshitze and seemed to think of nothing but ditter. Choosing him or Kenntrips as my fiancé would almost certainly doom me to a life saturated with ditter matches.

Although, that would still be better than marrying Lord Sigiswald, who attempted to court Lady Rozemyne and ended up separated from Lady Adolphine.

Liebeskhilfe must not have had eyes for me. Lady Rozemyne proclaimed that her love for Lord Ferdinand was purely familial, but that did not change the fact she was now engaged to someone who truly cared about her. I could only hope to find someone who cherished me the same way.

I am more in need of Liebeskhilfe's divine protection than Dregarnuhr's.

O Liebeskhilfe, Goddess of Binding! I shan't be so indulgent as to request a romance as dramatic as those in my favorite stories. I simply wish to have other options.

As I squeezed the Liebeskhilfe charm Cordula had made for me, Father gestured me onto the teleportation circle. My head attendant nodded, then helped me into my winter overclothes. It was so hot in Dunkelfelger that I always waited until right before teleporting to put them on.

I stepped onto the circle with Heilliese.

"Hannelore," Mother called, as if only then remembering something.

"Yes?" I asked, turning around.

"This is Raufereg's first year at the Royal Academy. He is rather anxious about it, as you can imagine. Guide him well as an elder student and a fellow archduke candidate."

I fought against the urge to avert my eyes. Had they not thrust too much upon me already?

Raufereg was the son of Father's second wife. Because his baptism had come after the decision was made for Lestilaut to become the next aub, he was far more a knight than an archduke candidate. My retainers reported that he thought of nothing but ditter.

Truth be told, I knew very little else about Raufereg. He spent his days training alongside the knights, whereas I focused on what was required of me as a member of the archducal family. We were neither the same sex nor in the same school year, so we had never trained together, but he must have been quite rowdy. Although his younger sister Lungtase had been permitted to attend the Grutrissheit transference ceremony, he himself had needed to stay away.

Had he been born two years later, I would not have had to struggle like this. And how nice it would have been for Lungtase to be his elder.

Such meaningless thoughts wandered through my mind as I stepped onto the teleporter. "The time has come for me to depart," I announced.

"Indeed. Keep a close eye on all that you can."

I would need to maneuver the changes to the duchy rankings, new curricula, my reputation as the divine avatar's friend, two potential fiancés, and a half-sibling in need of guidance. It might have been the first time in my life that I was dreading the freedom of the Royal Academy.

A sigh escaped me just as the teleportation circle at my feet lit up. Black

and gold swirled around me, distorting my vision.

“We gathered your share of ingredients, Lady Hannelore! Consider your classes prepared for!” Rasantark declared. He had rushed over to me the moment I arrived at the Academy, his chestnut eyes sparkling and orange hair bouncing with each step. “Now we can play ditter! We ask you to permit us to use the training grounds!”

He sounds the same as ever, despite the fact we could one day end up husband and wife. Am I the strange one for thinking so carefully about how I should speak with him?

Kenntrips and I were still trying to navigate the change, but Rasantark seemed to think nothing of the situation at all. Rows of apprentice knights stood behind him, champing at the bit. No pillars of light had appeared back home, no matter how hard we prayed, so they must have been eager to test out the results of their training in the temple.

“Cordula,” I said.

“I shall prepare your room. Please unlock the grounds in the meantime.”

There was no real difference between gathering ingredients and going to the training grounds. I had no reason to refuse, but seeing Rasantark rejoice over ditter made disappointment swell in my chest.

He is not a bad person. Far from it. But as a potential groom...

Conceding to the request, I went to the training grounds with Heilliese. Thus began my fifth year at the Royal Academy.

Welcoming Ditter

We students of Dunkelfelger awoke at first bell, changed into more appropriate attire, and then launched into our training. Everyone took part, even attendants and scholars, so we started with a series of light exercises. Only when the apprentice attendants left to prepare our breakfast and changes of clothes did our training become more intense, but compared to what proper apprentice knights went through, it was still barely anything at all.

Because it was my first morning back at the Academy, I concluded my training at the same time as the attendants and went to inspect the gathering spot with my knights. Rasantark had collected so many ingredients the day before, and I feared for how he had left things.

How right I was to be concerned. At least I noticed the state of the gathering spot before the sixth-years' arrival.

When my inspection was complete, I returned to my room to bathe. Then I ate breakfast with the other students in the dining hall. This was normally when archduke candidates and the dormitory supervisor would make their announcements, so I took the opportunity to explain that our gathering spot needed to be healed.

"We might have Lady Rozemyne's healing spell, but that does not mean we can act without restraint," I said. "You took things a little too far this time. I expect everyone here to assist in restoring the gathering spot after breakfast."

As a general rule, students could spend the time before lessons started however they pleased. It was rare to be told to do anything other than prepare for one's classes. That, coupled with how much mana the healing spell would require, drew upset exclamations from my peers.

"Wait, Lady Hannelore! Now that the training grounds are open, we plan to spend the morning—!"

"*You* were the ones who ravished the gathering spot, showing not a trace of consideration for the sixth-years," I said. "We are going after breakfast,

and that is final."

I understood the others' concerns—these few days between our arrival at the dormitory and the start of classes were usually reserved for ditter. Still, they had no choice in the matter; restoring the gathering spot would become so much harder when classes started and we had less mana to spare.

Not to mention, it is my duty as an archduke candidate to oversee the gathering spot.

My fists clenched, I surveyed the dining hall. I needed to stay strong.

"I shall reseal the training grounds until the gathering spot is restored. There are matters more important than ditter to attend to."

At once, the apprentice knights began to whine.

"This can't be!" one shouted. "You would prioritize something over ditter, even after playing a true game?!"

"No, wait! You have it all wrong!" cried another. "It's *because* Lady Hannelore played a true game that she can make such a declaration!"

"Ngh... Not to mention, she was chosen to participate despite her young age. We should expect nothing less! Her wisdom befits her status as the divine avatar's closest ally!"

"HURRAHHH! PRAISE LADY HANNELORE, THE PRIDE OF DUNKELFELGER!"

Why do they bellow like drunkards? Was our breakfast laced with some foul intoxicant?

I gazed across the unreasonably excited crowd, and my eyes came to rest on Professor Rauffen. He wore an amused grin as he ate his own breakfast.

"Professor Rauffen, what are your thoughts on the matter?" I asked.

"I think you are correct," he said. "Ditter can wait until the healing ritual is complete."

Professor Rauffen looked over the students, an intense fire blazing in his blue eyes. Experience had told me he was an expert at keeping the knights under control—especially when he wore that expression—so I elected to leave the rest to him.

"Students!" he roared. "I understand your passion for ditter better than anyone! But we cannot play by ourselves—we should all enjoy it together! Isn't that right?!"

Um, no. Not at all.

"Shall we not wait for the first- and sixth-years to arrive so we can all

play together, our hearts unburdened?" Professor Rauffen continued. "Race to the gathering spot after breakfast. Restore it so you can start brewing rejuvenation potions while the sixth-years are gathering. And of course... spare no effort to prepare the welcoming ditter to be played when the new students arrive!"

"HEAR! HEAR! FASTER THAN STEIFEBRISE!"

That phrase of Father's certainly has caught on.

Welcoming ditter was meant to light a fire under the new students, both through the excitement of the game and by making them so envious of their seniors' highbeasts that they would strive to make their own to participate. Any active student could take part, even apprentice scholars and attendants. The tradition resulted in such a severe drain of our stock of rejuvenation potions—before classes had even begun, no less—that I honestly thought we would be better off without it.

Of course, as strongly as I felt, I could never actually put a stop to welcoming ditter. It was a rare comfort for the scholars and attendants not chosen to be knights and, according to Professor Rauffen, made students a lot more invested in their practical lessons.

Our duchy does *tend to excel at practicals more than written lessons.*

I watched the apprentice knights as they spent the rest of breakfast locked in serious debate, trying to decide their teams. Professor Rauffen had joined in and was advising them on how to better balance the strength of each group. Our dormitory's obsession with ditter was inevitable when our supervisor was the most excited of us all.

Though I do not mind as long as the gathering spot is healed.

After breakfast, I restored the gathering spot with my fellow students. They were free to do as they wished afterward, but most gravitated to the brewing room to prepare for classes and welcoming ditter. As there was only so much space, many sat in the common room while they awaited their turn.

I, too, headed to the common room. I wanted to ask those waiting there about Ehrenfest's books. Socializing required me to find out how the new publications were being received in Dunkelfelger and what others thought about them.

"Is it not wonderful how many Dunkelfelger men have taken up

reading? It would never have been possible without the publication of *A Ditter Story* and our duchy's histories."

"Lord Raufereg takes no pleasure in studying, but even he seems to enjoy them. I overheard his retainers muttering that they wished for a version of *A Ditter Story* written in old vernacular."

"I cannot wait to see what Lady Rozemyne lends us this year. Her love stories are sublime."

"Lady Rozemyne is an aub now, is she not? Will your trade be with Alexandria or Ehrenfest?"

I paused in thought. In my mind, they were Ehrenfest's books, but Lady Rozemyne had moved to Alexandria. Perhaps I could trade with both.

"Cordula..." I said, deferring to my head attendant.

"Alexandria might not have its own books, but that should pose no issue. The aub lent us several to be traded with other duchies."

A quiet sigh escaped me; I could not have been more thankful for the thoroughness of Cordula's preparations. I thought to take a moment to savor the good news, but Rasantark and several apprentice knights burst out of the brewing room before I could. They met my eye and rushed straight toward me.

"Lady Hannelore!" Rasantark exclaimed. "Is it true what Professor Rauffen said?! Will you not be playing in the welcoming ditter?!"

"Manners," Cordula warned.

Rasantark knelt before me, and the knights with him followed suit. He apologized for his rudeness and asked again, more politely this time.

"Does that really surprise you?" I responded. "I have never once participated in welcoming ditter. I shall spend the time brewing for my upcoming classes, as I always do."

Those who intended to take part were given priority access to the brewing room. Those who did not carried out their brewing during the match. My decision not to play was perfectly normal to me, but Rasantark was stunned; I could see the shock in his chestnut eyes.

"But we were beyond excited to play with you—with someone who has experienced true ditter...!"

"Perhaps, but my retainers have already made their plans around my lack of participation."

As an archduke candidate, changing my mind on a whim would cause

chaos for those who had planned around my current schedule. Rasantark was my brother's retainer, so I thought he would understand. I was entirely unmoved when he instead slumped over.

Whatever should I do...?

Just as I moved to consult Cordula, Rasantark looked up again. So intense was the desperation in his eyes that I was struck with the urge to avert my own. He was always so troublesome when he got in one of his moods.

I still remember the time he had me blast him with mana so he could test his response to an attack from an archduke candidate!

Lestilaut could have run the test for him, but Rasantark's pleas to have me do it had culminated in a ditter match between my brother's and my retainers. The memory alone put me on guard as Rasantark continued to stare at me.

"You need not participate, Lady Hannelore, but come watch the game, at least. I shall demonstrate my might so that you acknowledge me as worthy of your hand in marriage!"

At once, the room buzzed with excited chatter. Someone even whispered, "This is like something out of a love story."

Indeed, it might appear that way...

Resisting the urge to sigh, I allowed Rasantark to continue.

"Just as Lord Ferdinand and Lord Heisshitze forged an unbreakable friendship through ditter, you forged a friendship with Lady Rozemyne. I wish to grow our love in the same manner. Then we shall marry, and I shall play ditter against Aub Alexandria!"

So proud and excited was Rasantark that his cheeks had gone red. He was far from the only one—many of our spectators watched with rapt interest, taken with the glory of the idea. Sorry though I was to rain on their parade, I considered the whole spectacle a tremendous disappointment. Perhaps to Rasantark, this was the mightiest proposal he could muster, but the future he presented was far from what I desired.

His only wish is to play ditter with Alexandria.

Enjoying ditter within Dunkelfelger was one thing, but playing with Alexandria after my coming of age was completely out of the question. Whether he married me or not, Rasantark's wish would never come true.

"Lord Rasantark intends to prove his worth, and so soon after being

chosen as one of Lady Hannelore's prospective spouses!" one noble girl cooed. "How wonderfully forward of him!"

"If only he had paired those words with the magic tools of courtship. Lady Hannelore would have been moved to tears!" another added. "Perhaps he was too busy preparing his feystone."

"I *must* lend him one of my romance novels. Which one was Lady Hannelore's favorite, again?"

"Lady Hannelore! After such a passionate entreaty, how can you *not* come watch the ditter match?"

My mood grew worse with each bright and cheery squeal. I wanted nothing more than to bolt from the common room at once. I normally leapt at any chance to rave about romance novels, but the thought of being questioned about Rasantark or pressured into being with him made my skin crawl.

I turned to Cordula, then stood, attempting to mask my true emotions with a smile. "Whether I visit the training grounds will depend on how Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time weaves her threads. Do pray to her as well, Rasantark."

My response meant only that I would *try* to attend, assuming I had time to spare after brewing, but Rasantark beamed nonetheless. Guilt ate away at me as I exited the common room; so intense was my desire to avoid the ditter match that even his brightest grin made me feel despondent.

My apologies, Rasantark. A marriage founded on ditter does not appeal to me in the slightest.

Once we were back in my chambers, Cordula gave me a wry smile. "You might not appreciate having suitors thrust upon you, but you cannot simply continue to avoid them. Unless you are honest—with them and yourself—you will never come to a decision you can make peace with."

I pursed my lips. No matter how I thought about it, I would never be glad to receive an offer to watch a game of ditter. Rasantark would need to find some other way to impress me.

I spent the start of welcoming ditter in the brewing room, which was almost completely empty. Most students attended the game whether they were taking part or not, and those who refrained tended to be the sort who would rather hole up in their rooms.

“That should do it,” I said.

“Indeed, milady. So let us go watch the game. The subordinates of Light do not look kindly upon those who break their promises.”

Because almost everyone was attending the ditter match, I had been able to complete my brewing even faster than anticipated. As much as it pained me, I no longer had an excuse not to join them.

I prayed so much, to no avail. Could it be that Dregarnuhr despises me already?

Left with no other choice, I trudged back to my room, my feet as heavy as my mood. Then I started toward the training grounds, moving as slowly as I could get away with. I was still en route when I crossed paths with Kenntrips. Only once he had secured my retainers’ permission did he approach me.

“Kenntrips wishes to watch the game with you,” Cordula informed me.

“I do not mind, but... Kenntrips, would you not rather participate?”

Kenntrips was so muscular that it never surprised me when other duchies mistook him for a knight. In truth, he was an apprentice scholar of the sword, and today was one of the few chances he would get to take part in a ditter match. This year in particular would demand a lot from him, as information was even more valuable than usual, so I wondered why he had abstained.

“Many thought the same of you, Lady Hannelore, given your experience with true ditter. Rasantark despaired when he heard it was not so.”

Kenntrips and Rasantark were only half-brothers, but one would never guess it from how close they were. They both had mothers from other duchies, so they had striven to adjust to Dunkelfelger’s ways together.

“Enough about me,” I said. “Scholars have very few chances to take part in ditter, do they not? I remember how much you used to long for opportunities to play.”

Kenntrips seemed taken aback for a moment, then chuckled. He took my hand, and we continued toward the training grounds.

“People change with time,” he explained. “Playing ditter with my dormmates no longer entices me. Instead, I find my entertainment in gathering information. I do enjoy observing the tendencies of each knight and formulating new means of deploying magic tools, but I know no other game will match the thrill of our bride-stealing ditter with Ehrenfest.”

Compared to all the chatter of the past few days, Kenntrips's words were a breath of fresh air. It was strange, though; he sounded entirely like one of Father's scholars.

"I am not the only one who has changed," he said at length. "You have as well."

I gazed down at myself. "Have I?" He was far from the first person to say it, though I was not sure I agreed.

"You have grown into a fine archduke candidate. Upon arriving at the dormitory, I intended to check whether the gathering spot needed to be healed and request your aid if so, but Professor Rauffen informed me you were one step ahead. I express my sincere gratitude as representative of the sixth-years."

"In the past, I always entrusted such administration to Lestilaut..."

Before my brother's graduation, I would never have guessed just how much he had to oversee. Last year had given me a taste, as all the work he set aside in preparation for his ceremony had gone to me. As much as everyone had advised me not to encroach on my brother's duties, since he was slated to become the next aub, I should have observed him more closely or gotten him to help teach me.

"And that is not all," Kenntrips continued. "We have known each other for years, but even I was shocked to hear how Lady Crybaby had made up for her past shame." Nostalgia brought a slight crease to his gray eyes. "I would never have expected you to play true ditter—not even to save a friend."

"Um... I simply thought it was for the best," I said. Hearing that nickname from around the time of my baptism made me embarrassed, to say the least. "As much as everyone praises me for my involvement, getting to play ditter was the last thing on my mind."

In the heat of the commotion, there had not been time to validate the information Lady Rozemyne was bringing us. We had doubted she would try to deceive us, but we had also wondered if she was giving us the whole picture.

She hinted at having the Grutrissheit, but mere words exchanged through the aubs' water mirrors are far from concrete proof.

We had found ourselves in a tricky situation. If, as we had suspected, Lady Rozemyne was to become the next Zent, then we were duty bound to

assist her. Any reinforcements we sent would need a member of the archducal family to lead them, but Aub Dunkelfelger, the Zent's sword, had a greater obligation to the Sovereignty. If the situation there had gone south, then he might have been taken to task for taking knights into Ahrensbach.

In the end, the decision had been made to have *me* lead the reinforcements. I already had good motivation—to clear my name and assist my dear friend. Not to mention, I was the safest option in case something went wrong. Because of my shameful misstep at the Academy, I was well suited to being cut off to spare the rest of our duchy from punishment.

"Ideal choice or not, Lady Crybaby would never have led the charge into true ditter," Kenntrips explained. "As you were, I also found it hard to imagine you marrying into another duchy—especially under such complex and confusing circumstances."

The retainer at the head of our group reached out a hand and pulled open the door to the training grounds. At once, enthused shouts, passionate cries, and all the other sounds of a fervorous ditter match shook the air. So awful was the clamor that I wished to cover my ears—but at that same moment, Kenntrips bent down to whisper to me.

"Given how much you have changed, would you perhaps consider marrying into another duchy? If the idea appeals to you, then I shall do everything I can to help, no matter the cost."

"Kenntrips?"

The very thought stopped me in my tracks. Father's choices for my future husband were as good as a declaration that he wanted me to marry within our duchy. As I stared at Kenntrips, unsure how else to respond, he moved to escort me to my seat.

Kenntrips had protected me since I was a little girl, intervening whenever my brother had grown too spiteful. As I gazed upon him now, however, I saw barely a trace of emotion on his face. I narrowed my eyes, watching him carefully. Maybe he was testing me.

I waited for Kenntrips to take the seat beside me, then gave him a sound-blocker. "Are you suggesting that I marry into Korinthsdaum? That is beyond cruel." As my brother's retainer, he should have known that Lord Sigiswald was a man of ill repute. The main reason my father wanted me to marry a Dunkelfelger man was to refuse the former prince's proposal.

“Not at all, Lady Hannelore. I meant a duchy of your choosing.”

“Were it that easy, Father would have arranged it long ago.”

Kenntrips crossed his arms in thought and turned his attention to the training grounds, still clutching his magic tool. I watched as well, my eyes drawn to the whirlwind of highbeasts soaring through the air. As well as full armor, participants wore colored cloth over their capes to make it clear which team they were playing for. I could recognize some of them from the shape or color of their mounts, but they were hard to tell apart otherwise.

That must be Rasantark.

He rode atop a blue winged horse—a fitting choice for Dunkelfelger, I thought. I watched him for a short while before Kenntrips spoke again.

“As much as Lord Lestilaut and the aub might want to keep you in Dunkelfelger, sparks would fly if they tried.” His lips barely moved, and he kept his eyes firmly on the game ahead of us.

“What do you mean?”

Kenntrips’s mouth twisted in a thin smile. “Perhaps I have said too much. I would not wish to trouble you with information that has yet to be substantiated.” He tried to change the subject by remarking on Rasantark’s location and performance in the game, but his blatant attempt to deflect only further piqued my curiosity.

“I care not about the veracity. As it stands, I shall not spare a single thought for something as irrelevant as Rasantark’s performance.”

After some hesitation, Kenntrips faced me again. “Perhaps if you tell me something I wish to know in return...”

“Such as?”

“Well, I am curious what those taking the archduke candidate course think of Yurgenschmidt’s new aubs. Even as an apprentice archscholar, such information is out of my reach. If you assist me, then I might be convinced to reconsider.”

Hearing the slight frustration in Kenntrips’s voice took me back. It was with exactly that tone he had bemoaned being forced not to take the knight selection exam, for becoming an apprentice scholar meant he could no longer play ditter as freely. Now he felt the same frustration over not being able to gather information from the archduke candidate course. I could not help but giggle at the comparison.

“What?” Kenntrips asked, his brow furrowed.

“Nothing. I simply find it endearing to see a part of you that has not changed.”

“There is much about me that will not—*cannot*—change. Although... that goes for Rasantark far more than it does me.”

Kenntrips pointed, steering my attention to Rasantark’s highbeast. Rasantark must have spotted us, for he was waving aggressively in our direction. It brought to mind a declaration he had once made while gesticulating in the same manner: “I shall serve Lord Lestilaut and play ditter!”

Indeed, Rasantark has not changed in the slightest.

“Very well,” I said. “I shall find out what you wish to know. As long as you uphold your end of the bargain.”

“Professor Rauffen, I can’t wait to finish my practicals so I can play ditter too!”

As we all sat in the dining hall, today’s game of welcoming ditter behind us, an excited first-year cried out. It was Raufereg, brimming with the enthusiasm one would expect of a ten-year-old. One by one, the other first-years shouted their agreement.

Raufereg might not have had the same hair or eye color as my brother—he was the son of Father’s second wife, after all—but the way he acted reminded me exactly of a young Lestilaut. He gave me the impression that he was a bit of a troublemaker.

My brother must have been the same way when he was a first-year.

“Excellent,” Professor Rauffen said, pleased to have motivated the new students. “Make the most of ditter while you can, everyone. You won’t have as many opportunities to enjoy it when you get married and move to other duchies. Elsewhere, not even the knights play anywhere near as much as we do.”

“What?! That can’t be!” one of the first-years cried.

“How else are knights meant to spend their time?!” another added.

As cruel as Professor Rauffen’s announcement must have seemed to those passionate about ditter, it was important to keep the apprentice knights grounded in reality. Otherwise, they would go on to cause all sorts of trouble for their partners. In most cases, they would react by refusing to leave the duchy at all, but I pushed that from my mind and smiled at the

completion of yet another yearly tradition.

“Lady Hannelore,” Raufereg called.

“Yes?” I replied, setting down my cutlery.

Raufereg started to approach me—a rookie mistake, as it prompted Heilliese and my other guard knights to take up defensive positions between us. We might have been related, but our mothers were of separate factions and seldom interacted, which meant we had spoken on a scarce few occasions. My entire body tensed up.

Our fellow students, still infused with the fervor of welcoming ditter, watched with interest as Raufereg knelt in front of me. From where I was seated, I could see only his blue cape and blond hair. Unease spread through my chest as I fumbled to grasp his intentions.

“Raufereg, what are you...?”

“It was through the guidance of the married supreme gods that I met you,” he began. “Lady Hannelore, I wish for you to be my Goddess of Light.”

The world around me started to spin, and the stir that ran through the crowd only confirmed my suspicions. Raufereg had just proposed to me. Was he even old enough to understand what he was saying?

“My sincerest apologies,” I said, my eyes widening as I gingerly cocked my head at him. “I must not have heard you properly. Could you say that again?”

Raufereg must have sensed the impending rejection because he continued, “I realize I am far too young, but I am told you seek a husband who can keep you in our duchy. I wish for nothing more than to participate in true ditter, so I ask that you consider me among your suitors. I trust you will understand my passion, as someone who has already experienced the wonders of true ditter.”

A boy his age loving ditter was no surprise to me. A boy his age *proposing*, on the other hand... Was it not obvious that I would never agree to marry him? Not only was he my half-brother, but he was also four years my junior.

“The aub chose my marriage candidates for me,” I said. “Your name was not among them.”

“Even so! If you marry into another duchy, you will cease being able to play ditter!”

Here we go again. Do my own suitors value ditter above me?

Not even my mention of the archduke had convinced Raufereg to budge. I could feel the other students watching me closely, waiting to see how I would respond. I sensed they would judge me harshly if I turned to consult Cordula.

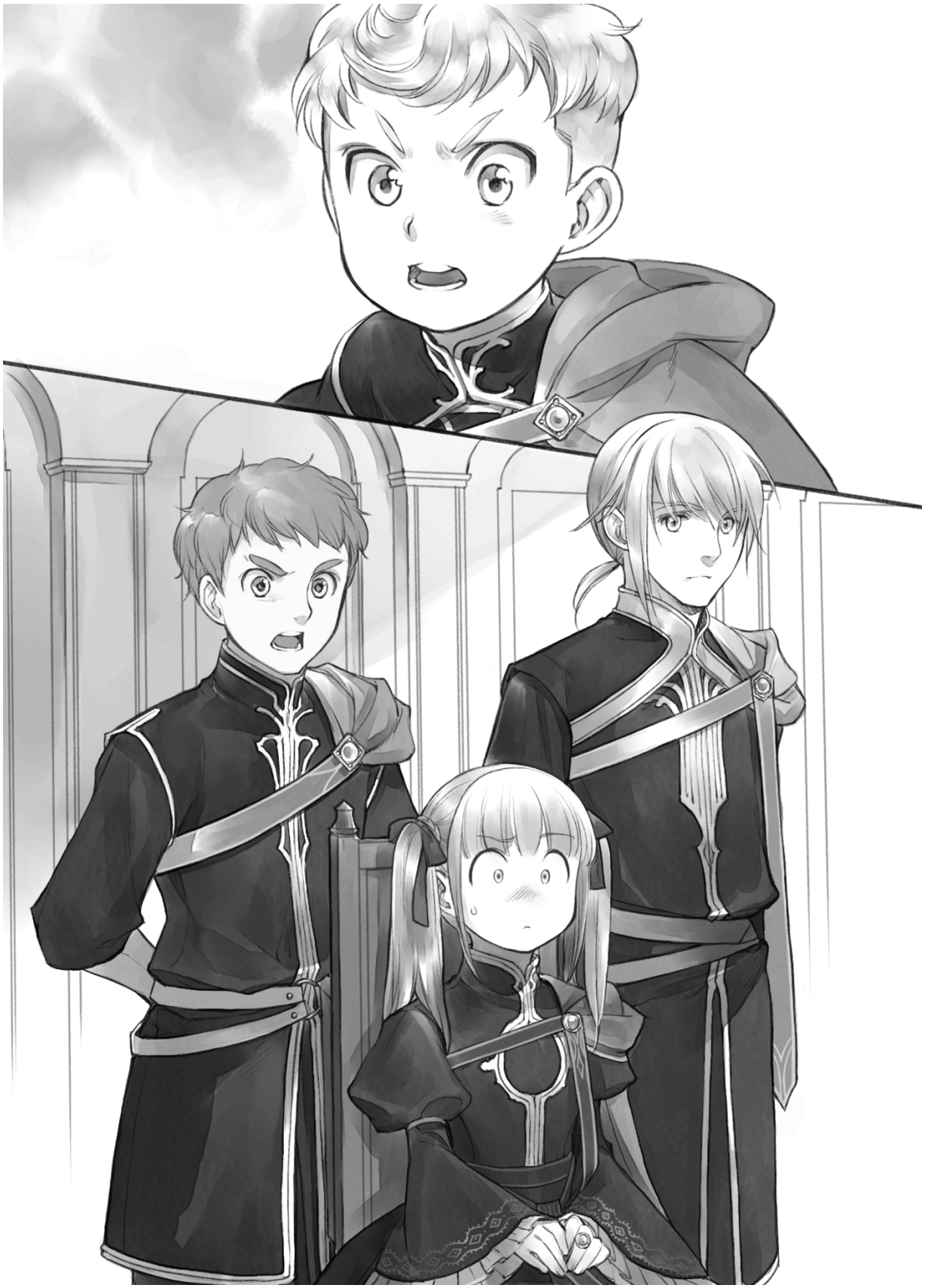
I never expected this to happen. How on earth am I supposed to react?

A single mistake in my treatment of this situation would result in persistent demands for proposal challenges. I swallowed... just as Rasantark and Kenntrips called out Raufereg's name and carefully began to approach him.

"Although it is perfectly normal for first-years to be swept up in the intensity of welcoming ditter, you seem to lack the blessing of Verfuhremeer the Goddess of Seas," Rasantark said from my right, insisting that Raufereg calm down.

"You might be an archduke candidate, but you have no authority to interfere with the aub's decision," Kenntrips continued from my left, a cold smile spread across his face. "If you wish to be considered, then you must speak with him first."

"I see Lord Lestilaut took arrogant retainers," Raufereg spat. "How can mere archnobles interfere with a conversation between archduke candidates? Stand down."



In terms of status, it was both rude and irregular for archnobles to inject themselves in a conversation between archduke candidates. Still, Kenntrips and Rasantark were unfazed; their eyes wandered away from Raufereg and instead focused on his retainers.

"As long as the topic pertains to Lady Hannelore's hand in marriage, we have the right to participate as her prospective grooms by the aub's decree," Kenntrips said. "You might not know this, since you have just begun attending the Royal Academy, but there is an order to things before one can propose. I would advise you to consult your retainers on this matter."

Seeing them in action, I realized that Kenntrips and Rasantark had probably been chosen as my prospective partners because they had the capacity to stand up to any archduke candidates seeking my hand in marriage. They were, in that regard, in an excellent position to protect me.

Though I doubt Father expected an archduke candidate of our own duchy to propose to me before lessons even started.

I sighed, able to feel my brother's and father's consideration for me. It would surely be best to reject Raufereg here and now.

"My apologies," I said. "I cannot accept a proposal from a child who does not even know the proper way of doing things."

I thought my refusal was clear: I was turning Raufereg down because he was simply too young for me. But when our meal came to an end and I could speak openly with Cordula, she explained just how sorely I was mistaken.

"The aub decides your partner, milady, so we taught you how to refuse men of other duchies rather than those of our own. Perhaps this was yet another example of your poor timing, but any man of Dunkelfelger would interpret your rejection as an assurance that they need only learn the proper process for you to accept them."

Does that not mean I failed to reject Raufereg?!

The Advancement Ceremony and Fellowship Gathering

The academic year began with the advancement ceremony. We feared what Raufereg might do—we had it on good authority from one of his retainers that he was desperate for a ditter match—so we would depart for the auditorium as early as we reasonably could. By arriving there first and taking our place at the front, as our rank required, we hoped to minimize his contact with other duchies.

“Attach this magic tool to Raufereg so that he does not besmirch our duchy’s good name,” I told the overeager first-year’s retainers. “Aub Dunkelfelger and Lady Reichlene have both given their approval.”

The magic tool in question would steal the voice of whoever was wearing it, preventing even the most zealous ditter fan from challenging anyone and everyone around them. Such devices had saved our students’ hides more times than we could count. Dunkelfelger could not function without them.

“Raufereg and I are expected to act in accordance with our status as archduke candidates of the country’s top-ranked duchy,” I continued, driving the point home for his retainers. “He might be a new student, but if he says or does anything untoward, the aub will punish him—and you—as severely as he deems necessary.”

The retainers all nodded, their faces taut with worry.

“Now, let us go,” I announced, looking over the blue-caped students gathered in the common room. They numbered almost two hundred in all—an impressive sight, to be sure.

Before we could depart, Kenntrips and Rasantark stepped out from the crowd and extended their hands to me.

“It is our duty as your betrothed to escort you.”

“My betrothed...?” I repeated. “You seem to be getting ahead of yourselves.”

They had put me on the spot, almost pressing me to choose between them. I was unsettled, to say the least, but I put on my best smile and resisted the urge to back away.

“Oh?” Kenntrips raised a teasing eyebrow at me. “Lord Raufereg could attempt any manner of unscrupulous behavior. Would you not appreciate the company of those who can restrain him?”

“I would,” I said on instinct.

Kenntrips took my left arm without missing a beat. Rasantark took my right. Then the pair led me out of the dormitory.

Er, wait, um... Won’t we stand out a little?

Perhaps I was being dramatic, I thought; my anxiety was always at its worst before a social gathering. But alas, despite my best attempts to ease my nerves, we drew even *more* attention than I had anticipated.

And it is all your fault, Rasantark!

“Your safety is my main focus, Lady Hannelore. Have you not always yearned for a knight to protect you from Lord Lestilaut?” he asked, a sentimental spark in his eyes. He was speaking loud enough for our retainers—and all the other students—to hear him. Nobody said anything, but I could sense them all staring at me.

“Is this really the time or place to dredge up such... ancient history?” I asked, urging him to stop. He seemed not to notice. Amusement seeped through everyone’s expressions, making me wish the ground would open up and swallow me whole.

“Everything went according to plan, up until my becoming an apprentice knight, but I never thought you, of all people, would give in to ditter and partake in a true game. Having no other choice, I altered my objective so we could enjoy it together.”

Please, no more! It was wrong of me to play real ditter. I understand that well enough!

“Leave it there, Rasantark,” Kenntrips interjected. “You might bring Lady Hannelore to tears.”

“Er... Tears of elation?”

“Of embarrassment.”

Do not just state the obvious, Kenntrips! Now we have even more *eyes on us!*

I wanted nothing more than to retreat to my hidden room, but we stuck

to our plan and proceeded to the auditorium. We were first to arrive, as expected. Though we kept our eyes forward, we soon heard the students of other duchies enter behind us.

“The downside of arriving so early is that I cannot greet my friends before the ceremony...” I said.

“Perhaps not, but you have the fellowship gathering, your lessons, and social events for that. Would it not be better to speak with your friends away from the troublesome first-years, who are still so ignorant of the cultures of other duchies?”

“Certainly. Their presence is anything but calming.”

I was conversing with my retainers when a buzz suddenly spread through the room. The students of the new duchies must have arrived. Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed the gray capes of Blumenfeld start lining up beside us.

Blumenfeld, the duchy ruled by Lord Trauerqual, had Lord Hildebrand as its first-year archduke candidate. There was no chance of us seeing each other—I was surrounded by students to shield me from Raufereg, and Lord Hildebrand was surrounded by his own retainers—but we would exchange greetings when we reunited for the fellowship gathering.

“Blumenfeld is split into two large groups,” Kenntrips whispered, eyeing the students carefully. “The atmosphere around them is anything but good.”

“They must have separated into those from the Sovereignty and those from Old Ahrensbach,” noted Luitpold, one of my apprentice scholars. “The group from Old Ahrensbach includes nobles of Old Werkestock, so they must be fairly resistant to their new aub’s rule.”

Rasantark turned around with a start. “Lady Hannelore, Korinthsdaum has arrived. Rest assured, I shall watch them closely for any suspicious movements.”

I do *have guard knights, you know.*

Of course, I elected not to voice that thought; it seemed cruel to put out his enthusiasm. I exchanged a glance with Heilliese, who had the beginnings of a smirk on her face, before leaving Rasantark to lookout duty.

Students of Korinthsdaum organized themselves behind us, wearing capes of a gentle brownish-red hue. The remarks they made were completely inappropriate for a third-ranked duchy—so much so that our

apprentice knights straightened up and sharpened their attention. I suspected that Korinthsdaum's lack of an archduke candidate was to blame.

"Lord Lestilaut and the aub were right to caution us..." Rasantark said. "Already, Korinthsdaum believes their rank makes them invincible."

"It falls to us to protect the lower-ranking duchies," Heilliese added.

I nodded in response. Though I knew not what Lord Sigiswald had said to his nobles as Aub Korinthsdaum, I understood the risk that they would make unreasonable demands of the duchies beneath them.

Though it seems a bit pathetic that we of Dunkelfelger must prioritize keeping Raufereg under control over watching Blumenfeld and Korinthsdaum.

The chatter by the auditorium's door reached its loudest point yet. The students' whispers and murmurs were quiet in isolation but formed quite the din when they all spoke together.

"I see the capes of a new duchy, but... is that truly Lady Rozemyne?!"

"The aub warned us to prepare ourselves, but to think her transformation was this drastic..."

The students could not be blamed for their surprise; Lady Rozemyne had taken ill and vanished from the Royal Academy roughly ten days into the last academic term. She had been present for Lady Eglantine's transference ceremony the following spring, but only a few archduke candidates had been allowed to attend.

"Lady Hannelore, introduce me to Lady Rozemyne," Raufereg said.

"This is no place to cause a scene," I shot back with a warning tone. "Be still until the fellowship gathering."

"Just think of Alexandria and Dunkelfelger playing dit— Ngh!"

Raufereg choked, and a quiet sigh escaped me. The magic tool was operating as intended. We could rest assured that, at least for now, our greatest troublemaker would not cause us any further problems.

The advancement ceremony began with a professor's greeting. We were told that the rise of a Zent with the Grutrissheit had eased Yurgenschmidt's mana shortage and that there was a chance students would return to obtaining their schtappes when they came of age.

"But relying on magic tools for dit— NGH!" Raufereg clutched at his throat. His complaint had been cut short, but I understood what he had wanted to say. Magic tool weapons were harder to use than schtappes,

which would put students at a disadvantage during training and ditter.

"Perhaps," Kenntrips said, having also understood Raufereg's complaint. "But students will obtain more powerful schtappes as a result. A slight inconvenience during one's school years seems a small price to pay."

"Indeed," I agreed. "He is entirely correct."

Though their true objective is likely to prevent the rise of another underage aub such as Lady Rozemyne.

One could not overstate the danger of someone being able to obtain a duchy without the means to rule it. In that regard, it made perfect sense for the Zent to raise the age at which students could acquire their schtappes.

On top of the aforementioned change, the Royal Academy's curriculum would return to its previous state. Nobles appeared strongly in favor of a slower, steadier process, but there was genuine concern that as time went on, fewer and fewer professors would remember the old courses and methods.

The advancement ceremony concluded, and many of the new students grumbled about the prospect of a longer wait before they could obtain their schtappes. I paid them no mind as I departed for the Small Hall with my apprentice attendant Andrea, my apprentice scholar Luitpold, and my apprentice knights Heilliese, Ultsdorf, and Nadimarie. Raufereg followed with his own retainers, frustration clear on his face as he prodded at his magic tool.

On our way out of the auditorium, we passed the students of Alexandria. They stood in neat rows alongside their aub, wearing their new capes with pride. It eased my worries to see just how clearly Lady Rozemyne had won their hearts.

"Lady Hannelore and Lord Raufereg of Dunkelfelger the First have arrived," announced the white-caped Sovereign scholar by the door.

We entered the Small Hall to find the seats that had once been reserved for the royal family still at the far end of the room. Zent Eglantine and Lord Anastasius occupied two of them, with Lady Rozemyne sitting beside them in a third. Alexandria the Sixth had its own seats elsewhere, so her placement must have meant to signify her special position. Having her sit with the Zent couple made perfect sense; as a divine avatar, she had brought Zent Eglantine the Grutrissheit and become the country's first underage

aub.

To be frank, had she been sitting at her duchy's table, I would have felt especially uncomfortable when it came time to speak with her.

As the duchy at the very top of the rankings, we were expected to initiate the fellowship gathering. We would kneel to those who ranked above us, then return to our seats and wait as others greeted us in turn. Under normal circumstances, it was a rather methodical process, but Lady Rozemyne had returned to the Royal Academy an archduchess. Aubs always stood above archduke candidates, no matter their duchies' placements. We ranked above every other duchy in Yurgenschmidt, but even we would have needed to rise from our seats and kneel if she had come to greet us.

Had she come here alone, that might have been marginally acceptable. However...

Alexandria had a second archduke candidate: Lady Letizia. Had the pair come to greet us, we would have needed to kneel for Lady Rozemyne, then rise so that Lady Letizia could kneel for us.

One main purpose of the fellowship gathering was to teach the most dominant students of each duchy how to properly approach those above them in status and the duchy rankings. In that regard, it certainly was better to have Lady Rozemyne sit with the Zent couple than confuse the new students by seating her with Lady Letizia. It was an excellent opportunity to demonstrate that, although she was still a student, Lady Rozemyne's status as an aub set her apart from everyone else. Those who thought they could simply approach her—or who assumed they could follow her example and become underage aubs themselves—would quickly realize they were sorely mistaken.

Was it Lord Ferdinand who decided on this seating arrangement, perhaps? No... I should not like to think he has that much influence over the Zent.

Archnobles and archduke candidates of the lower-ranking duchies began filtering into the hall. I waited until everyone was seated, then took Raufereg and our retainers to the table at the front of the room.

Zent Eglantine seemed a tad weathered—from the burdens of her station, I assumed—but it did nothing to tarnish her beauty. In fact, she looked as resplendent as ever. Lord Anastasius had also changed, appearing

more drained than before. Supporting the Zent could not be easy.

My attention turned to Lady Rozemyne, who sat beside them. Her dark-blue cape resembled the black of night and went perfectly with her equally dark tresses. I knew she had moved to a new duchy upon becoming its archduchess, but it was strange to see her not wearing Ehrenfest's color.

Still, seeing her up close, my eyes are drawn elsewhere.

Resting upon Lady Rozemyne's chest was the necklace that showed she was now formally engaged. Elaborate metalwork held a most exquisite feystone—the work of Lord Ferdinand, to be sure.

But that is not all.

Slender chains spread across the backs of her hands, adorned with a series of tiny rainbow feystones. They did not shine at the moment, but they were the same ornaments she had worn during the transference ceremony.

Could these, too, be tools that Lord Ferdinand made with his mana?

The chains reached as far as her upper arms, as though her fiancé wished to stake his claim for all to see. I considered that scary in its own right, but more frightening still was the thought that Lady Rozemyne could need such protection in the first place. If someone as knowledgeable as Lord Ferdinand expected trouble, then trouble there would surely be!

And yet, Lady Rozemyne appeared completely unperturbed. Her features bloomed in a pleasant smile. I knelt before her and the Zent couple and crossed my arms over my chest. My retainers did the same behind me.

"I am overjoyed that, once again, Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has woven our threads together and blessed us with a meeting. This is Raufereg, the son of Aub Dunkelfelger's second wife."

My introduction complete, I signaled my half-brother with my eyes, urging him to perform his first-time greeting.

"Zent Eglantine, Lord Anastasius, Lady Rozemyne," he intoned, "may I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?"

"You may."

"It is an honor to meet you," he continued, reciting what he had been taught. "I am Raufereg of Dunkelfelger, here to learn to become a proper noble fit to serve Yurgenschmidt. May the future be bright."

"Raufereg," Zent Eglantine said, her eyes tinged with nostalgia, "you truly do resemble a young Lestilaut." Her omission of his title served to

remind us that she really was the country's highest authority.

"Lady Hannelore," Lady Rozemyne addressed me, the corners of her mouth still upturned. She had waited patiently for Zent Eglantine to finish. "It would seem that another archlibrarian has been sent to the Academy. Let us meet them for a tea party when Professor Solange is free. Each year, I look forward to our meetings. And you might be pleased to hear that Alexandria has a new book. Just the one, but I cannot wait to share it with you."

Even now that she had matured, Lady Rozemyne spoke of the same innocent topics as last year. It was really quite alluring.

"Oh my..." I said. "Alexandria has started making books? I am most eager to see the result."

"You two..." Lord Anastasius interjected, his face twisted in a grimace. "The Sovereignty is far from accustomed to all the recent changes. Try not to make a mess of things, won't you?"

Is that glare truly necessary? I am anything but a troublemaker.

Lord Anastasius's rebuke sent an unpleasant jolt through my stomach, but Lady Rozemyne appeared unfazed. She placed an elegant hand on her cheek and turned to look at him.

"Ferdinand warned me as well—and of course, I mean to be careful—but matters tend to escalate in the strangest of ways. It is quite unfortunate."

Seeing her in profile, I noticed that her usual hair ornament was nowhere to be seen. Just as many rainbow feystones dangled from its replacement, but the metal around them bore a more intricate design, and several new feystones dotted the stick. It was clearly more extravagant than its predecessor, a gift from Lord Wilfried, and there was only one man who could have prepared it for her.

He loves her dearly. That much is clear to see.

As I understood it, ornaments with mana chains were harder to wear than those without, as the presence of the creator's mana was all the more intense. If, as I suspected, Lady Rozemyne's accessories were all made by her fiancé, then their quantity and extravagance seemed to declare that she was fully comfortable with his mana.

Surely she sees the truth of her situation, enveloped in his mana as she is. Or will she continue to assert that she loves him only "as family"?

I returned to my seat, somewhat certain that she would.

It was not long before Lord Hildebrand came over to greet us, now an archduke candidate for Blumenfeld the Second. He had new retainers, from what I could see. Perhaps the old ones had been punished for his errors, or only a select few had been able to move from the Sovereignty.

As the former prince knelt before us and crossed his arms over his chest, I was struck with an odd sense of anxiety. Then I spied the schtappe-sealing bracelets on his wrists. Anyone unaware of the circumstances would assume nothing of them, viewing them merely as accessories.

"Lady Hannelore," he said, "once again, Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has woven our threads together and blessed us with a meeting."

"It is good to see you again," I responded. "I am glad to see you well."

Lady Magdalena had asked me to look out for Lord Hildebrand, as he and I were both members of the Royal Academy's library committee. Now that Professor Solange had another librarian to assist her, however, I doubted that our work together would continue much longer.

Owing to his sex, that will afford me even fewer opportunities to socialize with him. If we can meet as members of the library committee, at least, then I can ask him about Blumenfeld and the other members of the former royal family.

As an aub, Lady Rozemyne would also jump at the chance to gather such valuable information. More importantly, though, the existence of the library's archduke-candidate-exclusive archive had been made public during the last Archduke Conference, and the presence of high-status committee members would be crucial to keeping the other students under control.

Lord Hildebrand departed, and the archnobles of Korinthsdaum the Third arrived to replace him. I expected an unsavory remark or two—their fellow students had spouted them freely in the auditorium—but they said the usual first-time greetings and nothing more. The duchy's archnobles, at least, seemed to understand the importance of discretion.

The land now known as Korinthsdaum had previously belonged to the Sovereignty, so its nobles were less burdened by the mana shortage. They looked much healthier than those of Blumenfeld, I thought.

Then came Klassenberg the Fourth: Lady Gentiane with her retainers. Last year, she had ranked above us. Seeing her kneel before me now was a potent reminder of how much things had changed.

“I pray that we get along,” she said, then departed with a smile. Raufereg stared at her intently as she went.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“No,” he responded. “It’s just that Lady Rozemyne and Lady Gentiane carry themselves differently from any other girls I’ve met.”

Was this how Lestilaut first became enraptured by Lady Eglantine?

The women of Klassenberg acted nothing like those of Dunkelfelger. Perhaps that was why the men of our duchy were so drawn to them.

May this fascination with other girls push every romantic thought of me from Raufereg’s mind.

Next to arrive at our table was Drewanchel the Fifth. Lord Ortwin approached us with a group of archduke candidates in tow. So large was their duchy’s archducal family that each time a candidate graduated, another seemed to enroll in their place. Lord Ortwin explained that many of them had been adopted into the family for their talents and abundance of mana, and that they could expect to be made giebes after graduating. Completing the archduke candidate course would enable them to better understand and make use of the charms within their giebe estates.

Lord Ortwin took his leave, and Lady Letizia of Alexandria the Sixth took his place. Because Detlinde, Alstede, and so many other members of Old Ahrensbach’s archducal family had been imprisoned for heinous crimes, her words and deeds were under immense scrutiny at all times.

From what I had seen in the auditorium, Lady Rozemyne was doting on Lady Letizia to some degree. As if to confirm my suspicion, the latter shot a worried glance at the front table and received a warm, reassuring smile from her aub in response.

I do not envy Lady Letizia’s position, but I am glad to know that Lady Rozemyne will protect her.

Lady Letizia and I had exchanged first-time greetings at Ahrensbach’s castle during the Lanzenave War, and there was no need to repeat them. She knelt, focusing her attention on Raufereg.

“Lord Raufereg, may I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?”

“You may.”

“I am Letizia, an archduke candidate of Alexandria. May our

relationship be long and prosperous.” She turned to me, her expression uneasy. “Lady Hannelore, I am told that Lady Rozemyne intends to welcome me into the library committee. I pray that we get along.”

I gave her the kindest smile I could and replied, “Indeed. I am sure we will.”

Hauchletzte the Seventh came to greet us in turn. A third-year male archduke candidate escorted two girls to our table, which reminded me that Raufereg had failed to escort me. I must have forgotten to mention it.

Next came Ehrenfest the Eighth. Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte were its only representatives; Lord Melchior had attended the transference ceremony as Ehrenfest’s High Bishop but was not yet old enough to be at the Academy. Although we had met only briefly during our celebration in Ehrenfest, he had struck me as a responsible young man with a firm grasp of his duties. I compared him to Raufereg and sighed at how our duchy was failing its young ones.

This obsession with ditter needs to stop!

“Once again, Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has woven our threads together and blessed us with a meeting,” Lord Wilfried said. “Rozemyne—er, *Lady* Rozemyne—being made an aub has thrown your duchy into chaos as much as it has ours, I suspect, but I pray we remain on good terms.”

Lady Rozemyne’s new status required even her own siblings to use her title in public. I understood their confusion; trouble of this nature was common when someone got married, but it was unheard of during one’s stay at the Royal Academy.

I pray that Lord Wilfried is okay.

He had, in essence, lost his fiancée to Lord Ferdinand. Most men would reel at the very thought, but Lord Wilfried appeared entirely unfazed.

“We have brought you a book from Ehrenfest,” he told me. “Elvira insists that you have it.”

“Sister—erm, Lady Rozemyne—was looking forward to its release,” Lady Charlotte added. “It would be delightful if we could all have a tea party together.”

Upon her breast, I spotted a necklace with the same crest I recalled seeing inside Ehrenfest’s books. The lack of a feystone meant it could not have represented an engagement; it was made entirely of metal.

“Lady Charlotte, is your necklace related to books in some way?” I

asked.

She gave a beaming smile and stroked the accessory in question. “Indeed, it is emblazoned with the same mark as the books printed in the Rozemyne Workshop. It is Lady Rozemyne’s personal crest, and I wear it to demonstrate that we remain connected even now that she has moved away.”

“I asked the smith to give mine a cooler design,” Lord Wilfried chimed in, presenting his own necklace. It bore zero resemblance to Lady Charlotte’s, but knowing they each had one warmed my heart nonetheless.

“I pray we have another positive year together,” I said, then watched them leave as they went to greet Lord Hildebrand.

“So *that’s* Ehrenfest’s cowardly, irresponsible—”

“Enough, Raufereg. This is neither the time nor place,” I warned, a sudden intensity in my smile. “Dunkelfelger is not like other duchies. Remember that, lest you make blunders of your own.”

He remained silent for a moment, then said, “My sincerest apologies.”

Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger are not *the same.*

I repeated those words in my head as I continued to receive greetings, a stabbing ache in my chest all the while.

Sharing Intel and Starting Classes

Once the fellowship gatherings were over, we made our way to the dormitory's meeting room. It was time for the sixth-years, archduke candidates, and archducal retainers to come together and exchange information. Because the gatherings were held according to status, there were bound to be differences in what we had learned. Consolidating our findings would be crucial for future socializing.

"Lady Hannelore, how were the archduke candidates?"

"The representatives of the former royals' duchies were more grounded and approachable than their behavior during the advancement ceremony led us to assume. Moreover, the lower-ranked duchies such as Berschmann and Lindenthal seem displeased that Sovereign land was meted out to Drewanchel and Blumenfeld. Beyond that, things are largely as our reports from the Archduke Conference claimed."

The lower-ranked nobles had voiced only their shock that the borders had been redrawn without their say or knowledge, but their frustration had been perfectly clear. Luitpold nodded in agreement before weighing in.

"In terms of trade, Berschmann and Lindenthal enjoyed a considerable advantage from being so close to the Sovereignty. It is no wonder that they are upset. They did not express it, but middle duchies such as Lehmbruck and Neuehausen must also feel dejected. Over the next few years, we will need to pay close attention to the impact of the Sovereignty being reduced to the Royal Academy's grounds."

"Lady Hannelore, do tell us about Aub Alexandria," Kenntrips said, focusing his gray eyes on me. "We must pay closer attention to her than to anyone else this year."

Lady Rozemyne had stolen a foundation through true ditter, protected the Sovereignty from foreign invaders, and then bestowed the Grutrissheit upon Zent Eglantine. We had fought together in the Lanzenave War, but even I found it hard to believe how much she had achieved. The other duchies must have been at a complete loss.

Sharing intelligence was the best way for us to determine how we should interact with Lady Rozemyne going forward. I spoke of how she had sat beside the Zent couple, the shocking number of protective charms she had worn, and the way other duchies had probed about her.

"Furthermore," I continued, "Lady Rozemyne seems to be doting on Lady Letizia. She means to add her to the library committee, for one thing. And as she has taken nobles of Old Ahrensbach as her retainers, she must be keeping an eye out to ensure they are not being mistreated."

"How was her relationship with Ehrenfest?" Kenntrips asked.

"Largely unchanged, from what I could tell. She promised to hold a tea party with Lady Charlotte to properly introduce Lady Letizia." I noticed grim looks on his and the other archnobles' faces. "Is there a particular reason you wish to know?"

"Much has changed in Ehrenfest since the Archduke Conference. Lord Wilfried seems to have lost much of his status within the duchy, and... Ah. I suppose they would not speak of such things in his presence."

The archnobles exchanged glances, then shared what people were saying about Lord Wilfried and the situation in Ehrenfest. Rumors abounded that his Goddess of Light had abandoned him, that Lord Ferdinand had stolen his fiancée, that his future as the archduke had been taken from him by his younger brother, and that the new favorite to become aub had attended the transference ceremony in High Bishop robes.

"All suitable punishments for an irresponsible coward. Bride-stealing di — Ngh!"

"Speaking of suitable punishments..." I said as Raufereg's magic tool once again served its purpose.

Back in Dunkelfelger, bride-stealing ditter was a way for men to forcefully obtain a woman's hand in marriage when either—or both—of their families refused to permit their engagement. My brother had issued his challenge out of a desire to take Lady Rozemyne as his first wife. Ehrenfest had agreed, albeit only for the chance to make me Lord Wilfried's second wife, and then seized victory in short order.

However, when it came time for Ehrenfest to claim their prize, they had refused my hand in marriage. Had they not wanted it from the start, then they should never have requested it, but we could not blame them for their mistake; our duchies had misunderstood each other from the outset and only

realized when it was too late. It was an accident that had come about because of choices made by children.

Ehrenfest had its own politics to deal with, and while the contract between our duchies had been nullified, the damage had already been done. To the people of Dunkelfelger, besmirching the result of a ditter match was as serious as breaking a vow made to the gods.

As far as our duchy was concerned, Lord Wilfried was a coward. He had proposed to me, won the right to my hand in marriage, and then refused to accept what was rightfully his. He had won me over with sweet words, not might, and then spinelessly cast me aside. Meanwhile, I was the shameless fool who had been seduced into betraying her allies, then ended up with nothing to show for it.

“I erased my shame through true ditter,” I said. “Should the same redemption not apply to Lord Wilfried, who also took part and protected his duchy’s foundation?” Our knights might not have been there to witness it, but to my knowledge, he had fought to keep Ehrenfest’s foundation safe alongside the rest of the archducal family.

“Even the rumors about Lord Wilfried are mistaken,” I continued. “I went to Ehrenfest for their victory celebration, and there I discovered that his engagement to Lady Rozemyne was dissolved much earlier than we thought, owing to the situation with Lord Sigiswald. Anyone who claims his fiancée was stolen or ran away from him is just plain wrong. Lord Wilfried *encouraged* her to rescue Lord Ferdinand.”

I thought back to my short stay in Ehrenfest. The atmosphere had been electric as everyone rejoiced over Lady Rozemyne’s union with the then Prince Sigiswald. Had they really not understood that her breaking the chain of his proposal magic tool meant their mana did not match? It had frustrated me to no end, as had Aub Ehrenfest for approving their engagement before any color-mixing was performed.

“It was because Lady Rozemyne was due to move to the Sovereignty that Lord Melchior was assigned to be High Bishop,” I explained. “Even now, I suspect Lord Wilfried is set to become the next Aub Ehrenfest. I have heard nothing that would suggest otherwise.”

“Please try to calm down,” Cordula said. “I understand how you feel, but your knowledge extends only as far as the celebration. Perhaps things changed during the Archduke Conference.”

Rasantark raised a hand, then spoke of a trip that Father and Lestilaut had taken to the temple upon their return from the conference. “Not even the knights who escorted them were allowed to attend their meeting. Thus, there can be no mistake that something of grave importance was announced during the conference. Let us prioritize learning the truth of the matter.”

“Well said, Rasantark,” I agreed. Perhaps the situation really had changed since our celebration in Ehrenfest.

I wonder what Lady Rozemyne thinks of everything being said about Lord Wilfried, a young man so considerate that he granted me a choice in our bride-stealing ditter match and offered her the encouragement she needed to rescue Lord Ferdinand.

The next day marked the start of classes. Students of higher grades had very few lessons in common—even shared written lessons were divided into courses—so there was very little chance of us all coming together again.

I instructed the new students to do their best with their written classes, then departed our dormitory. On my way to the archduke candidate course, Kenntrips gave me a “subtle” reminder to keep my ear to the ground.

“Do not simply waste your time, uncertain when or how to speak to anyone,” he said.

“Kenntrips, this is my fifth year; was repeating the same warning that you gave me in my first really necessary? It seems a tad rude, if you ask me.” As a new student, I might have wasted a day or two too anxious to approach anyone, but it would not happen again.

Kenntrips and Rasantark both laughed.

“Truth be told, I was thinking the same thing as Kenntrips,” Rasantark noted. “But can you blame us? Your first year was the only time you and Lord Lestilaut left the dormitory together.”

Indeed, because they had previously served my brother, this was their first time accompanying me to my lessons. “Still,” I said, “there is no need to treat me like a new student. I, too, have grown.”

“Then I am eager to see how your talents have matured,” Kenntrips replied, amusement dancing in his gray eyes. “I trust you will secure us plenty of new intelligence to report to Lord Lestilaut.”

I took a step back, stunned. If my attempt to gather information ended in

failure, Lestilaut would never let me hear the end of it.

"In the event that I *do* blunder, I would appreciate you both keeping it a secret," I said at last. Yes, it was a crude request, but at least nobody else was around to witness it.

"Ah, Lady Hannelore. Good day."

Lady Rozemyne?! Oh, what must she think of me now?!

I gasped and turned around to see her almost prancing toward me, a sparkle in her golden eyes that told me she was on the verge of releasing a blessing. Her spirits were as high as when I had ordered a hairpin in Ehrenfest, or when she had passionately described her plans for a library city.

She must be thinking about books.

"Good day, Lady Rozemyne," I replied as she joined me. She was the aub of a greater duchy, and I an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger the First, so our combined retinue was uncomfortably large. Only when we reached our destination would they disperse.

I hastened to the door Luitpold had opened for me, then waved my hand to dismiss my retainers. Kenntrips and Rasantark shot me quick looks of concern before going to their respective buildings. Lady Rozemyne entered the classroom behind me and similarly instructed her retainers to leave.

"You may all go to your lessons," she said. "Strive to succeed."

We walked across the classroom, completely alone. I considered asking Lady Rozemyne what she thought of the rumors about Lord Wilfried but quickly decided against it; there was a risk he could arrive at any moment.

"You seem to be in a good mood," I said.

"Yes, indeed. I simply cannot wait for our practical lessons."

"Hmm...? I was under the impression you had passed them all."

"I have, which is why I now have permission to go to the library instead."

With that, Lady Rozemyne's high spirits made perfect sense. While the rest of us were focusing on our practicals, she would be in the library, discussing its future with the librarians.

"As you surely know, it was announced during the last Archduke Conference that the archive accessible only to certain archduke candidates contains old, valuable documents," she continued. "We expect more archduke candidates and their archnoble retainers to visit the library to view

them. The librarians mean to decide their best path going forward."

"Indeed, as only those registered to supply the foundation can enter, a disturbance of some kind seems inevitable."

No more than seven suppliers could be registered to a particular foundation. In the past, duchies with larger archducal families had prioritized registering adults over minors, whom they advised to focus on compression and growing their mana organs, but times were changing. Ever since Lady Rozemyne's announcement that supplying mana while praying allowed one to obtain more divine protections, I suspected more duchies were urging their students to contribute.

Of course, those same duchies had probably removed their students from the registration before their return to the Academy. At least for the winter, it made more sense to replace them with an adult who could actively contribute to the foundation and ease the burden on everyone else.

"As well as that," Lady Rozemyne continued, overjoyed, "we plan to sort the books received from the palace library, organize any duplicates, and start distributing Sovereign documents. Most appropriate work for a committee member, is it not?"

Pleased though I was to see my dear friend so excited, my concern got the better of me. "But what of your retainers? You will not be there alone, will you?"

Lady Rozemyne might have padded out her retinue with nobles of Old Ahrensbach, but that did not change the fact they were students. They could escort her to the library before lessons but would not be able to stay with her.

"Your retainers have their own classes, do they not?" I pressed. "Have they also passed them all...?"

"Oh, no. I would not thrust that upon them." Lady Rozemyne stuck out her chest, brimming with pride as she declared, "Rather, I shall rely upon the mighty retainers that Ferdinand made for me."

Retainers he... made *for her?*

As I cocked my head in confusion, Lady Rozemyne suddenly clapped her hands together. "Ah, that reminds me!" she exclaimed. "Lady Hannelore, how shall we give you your hairpin order? I could have an attendant deliver it to your dormitory, or we could wait until a tea party."

At once, my mood brightened. The hairpin I had ordered in Ehrenfest

was designed to match Lady Rozemyne's, and its colors would complement my hair. I had wanted one ever since seeing the hairpin my brother had given to Eineliebe.

"If you would not mind, then having it sent to my dormitory would be wonderful," I said. "I cannot wait to see it, and the longer we can match, the better."

Winter was an important season for aubs to gather intelligence. For that reason, I suspected that by the time I was done with my classes and could start holding tea parties, Lady Rozemyne would already be on her way home.

"In that case, I shall send it as soon as today's classes are done," she declared. "We can match from tomorrow onward."

Archduke candidates would complete their shared written lessons within two mornings. They would not obtain the same grades, but they would all pass, at the very least. It was crucial to focus one's time at the Academy on practicals, as they could not be completed elsewhere. Therefore, one normally finished studying for the written lessons at home in one's duchy.

Still, Lady Rozemyne stands in a league of her own. To think she would pass the rest of the practicals she needs to graduate without even being able to practice them.

She had also obtained perfect scores in her written lessons, but that was to be expected. Our fellow students were more taken aback by the maturity of her appearance and the number of ornaments she wore. I assumed the latter were proposal and courtship magic tools meant to show her partner's obsession, but Lady Rozemyne had insisted they were all protective charms.

She claims that Lord Ferdinand made them as a precaution, as not even an aub can bring adult guard knights to the Academy, but he went too far. He used chains made of mana because they were "easiest to manipulate"? Merely an excuse, to be sure!

I elected not to voice my suspicions—it would only be rude when Lady Rozemyne thought otherwise—but I could not blame the other students for looking uncomfortable as a result.

"Lady Rozemyne."

We had just finished our morning lessons when Lord Wilfried called out.

Lady Rozemyne turned to look at him.

"It feels so... strange for you to call me that," she said. "Is there something that you need?"

No sooner had the pair started speaking than they seized the attention of every other student in the room. Some took their time putting away their mana pens, while others feigned checking for any belongings they might have missed. I, too, listened in on their conversation.

"Do you intend to gather more stories this year?" Lord Wilfried asked. "Philine and the other apprentice scholars are concerned about where the compensation will come from..."

"Philine might be my retainer, but she is still a member of Ehrenfest," Lady Rozemyne replied. "This is a problem best resolved quickly. Shall we settle it at lunch or dinnertime the day after tomorrow? I will invite you, Lady Charlotte, and my retainers."

"That will do. I shall inform them."

Contrary to the rumors, they seemed to get along as well as ever. How glad I was to have been proven right; from the start, I had expressed my doubts that Lady Rozemyne would "abandon" him.

That afternoon, we started our practical lessons. Lord Anastasius was our teacher, while Zent Eglantine was in charge of the archduke candidate course for sixth-years. Never had I expected the ruler of our country to remain a professor.

"As it turns out, the archduke candidate course was first conceived as a way for the Zent to educate their successors," Professor Anastasius said, explaining why he and his wife were teaching. He then gave us our first task: in only four days, we had to recreate the end state of our garden boxes from last year.

"So we need to create a city with entwickeln, correct?"

"Should we expect to register feystone citizens again?"

The other students spoke among themselves. For the past few years, I had stood beside Lady Rozemyne. Now that she was done with her practicals, however, I would need to perform the lesson without any company at all.

How it pains me to be so alone. And with nobody to speak with, how am I to gather information? I can already see my brother laughing at me!

Kenntrips and Rasantark might have been my engagement candidates,

but they were my brother's retainers first and foremost. They would report each day's events to him, so my current situation was unfortunate indeed.

"I shall use a rejuvenation potion," someone behind me declared. One by one, the archduke candidates of lesser duchies were stepping back to rest. I could not turn around to look at them, as I needed to focus on my own garden, but I could hear them chatter as they enjoyed their break.

O Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time, hear my prayer! Please give me a chance to participate!

Alas, I did not yet need to rest. I kept channeling mana into my box as Lord Wilfried and Lord Ortwin stepped aside as well. It took a short while longer, but I eventually used up enough mana to do the same.

"I, too, shall use a rejuvenation potion," I told Professor Anastasius, then went to the seats at the side of the room with my small vial in hand. "Lord Wilfried, Lord Ortwin, allow me to join you."

"Certainly." Lord Ortwin stood up at once and escorted me the short distance to a seat. Practicals were performed while standing, so I welcomed the opportunity to rest my legs.

As I downed the last of my rejuvenation potion, I noticed that Lord Ortwin was eyeing me. "Is something the matter?" I asked him.

"I have heard rumors that, following the change of curriculum, duchies such as Lehmbruck and Ehrenfest will choose their next aubs from those who have acquired these new, more powerful schtappes."

Instinctively, I turned to Lord Wilfried. He shot Lord Ortwin a glare and smacked him on the arm.

"Come on, Ortwin," he said. "You were just saying there were loud voices in Drewanchel pushing for the same thing. In the future, those of us who obtained our schtappes in our first year will have the weakest schtappes in the country." He looked at me. "How are things in Dunkelfelger?"

I could only blink in response. Never had I expected the change in curriculum to have such a profound impact. Thoughts ran through my mind of the other duchies that had considered changing their aubs.

"My elder brother is still slated to become our next archduke," I said. "Nothing has changed there."

Lord Ortwin's light-brown eyes widened in moderate surprise. "Is that so? I thought Lord Raufereg from the fellowship gathering would be

considered to replace him. It is rumored that he has taken a shine to you, and I assumed your duchy would be just as eager as Drewanchel to take advantage of the new generation of aubs."

"Raufereg will never be the next aub, and I will never marry him," I said, rejecting the idea with a shake of my head. "The age gap is much too great." He also had a temperament far better suited for a knight than an archduke candidate. There was no place in the realm of diplomacy for someone who thought only of ditter.

Most of all, Father entrusted my brother with the foundation during our game of true ditter.

I was unsure of what the process had involved, but Lestilaut had stayed in the foundation's hall while Father fought in the Sovereignty. It went without saying that he would become the next aub.

"He might be younger than you, but he seemed the logical choice," Lord Ortwin said, utterly confused. "Your marriage would keep you in Dunkelfelger, preserving its connection to the divine avatar, while simultaneously securing it an aub with a new schtappe."

A small wave of annoyance washed over me. I would never have expected someone to seriously entertain the idea of me marrying a boy four years my junior.

"Much is changing about the Royal Academy's curriculum, no?" I responded. "Father believes that those raised in a decade or so, in an era of peace when the curriculum has stabilized, will be the most ideal candidates to become aub. My brother has come of age and been Starbound, so his children should enter the Academy during that period."

"I see," Lord Ortwin said. "That is one way of thinking about it."

I nodded. There was appeal in having an aub with a more powerful schtappe, but when it came to ruling a duchy, it seemed wiser to focus on temperament and administrative capacity. As far as I was concerned, there was zero chance of Raufereg being raised into a suitable archduke.

"My father will remain in power for some time, and it is not as if my brother lacks the necessary talents to rule," I said.

Lord Ortwin lowered his eyes in thought and muttered, "Perhaps I could convince them with that same rhetoric..." Maybe he strove to become his own duchy's next aub.

Although he did not seem too invested in the position last year...

I tilted my head, thinking back to Lord Ortwin’s past actions. I was still deep in contemplation when he suddenly stood, straightened his back, and called my name.

“Yes?” I replied.

“If you have no intention of marrying Lord Raufereg, and Lord Lestilaut is still expected to become the next aub... might you come to Drewanchel?”

I stared at him, struck speechless. He had spoken so casually that, for a moment, his intention had completely escaped my notice. The top of his reddish-purple head sank beneath my line of sight, and two light-brown eyes gazed up at me. It took me even longer to realize he was kneeling.

“By your grace, Lady Hannelore, may I strive to become your God of Darkness?”



Propositions

I would rather you didn't!

Lord Ortwin had no proposal feystone, and while his phrasing allowed me to voice my thoughts on the matter in response, I had never expected anyone to say such a thing to me in class. Lord Wilfried was shocked as well; he looked between us as if disturbed.

"You never said anything about having feelings for Lady Hannelore," he said. "And look how surprised she is. You could have at least started this conversation in private."

Lord Ortwin stood, then shook his head with a slight grin. "Were we anywhere else, her retainers would have prevented my approach. And if someone spotted us alone, it would damage Lady Hannelore's reputation. That is not my intention—I do not mean to force an answer out of her."

"Good points," Lord Wilfried said, then gave me a bright smile. "Fear not, Lady Hannelore—I shall make it clear that nothing is going on between the two of you."

How else could I respond but with an awkward "Thank you"? I took the sound-blocker that Lord Ortwin held out to me and awaited whatever he had to say.

"My apologies for accelerating this process; it was not my wish to surprise you." He squeezed his sound-blocker and sat back down. "However, this is my only opportunity to speak truly and hear your honest thoughts."

So he did not expect an immediate answer from me. That was somewhat nice to hear, I supposed.

"To my knowledge," he continued, "you have received a proposal from Korinthsdaum."

Have I...? I know Father is on guard against such a proposition, but I am not aware of one having already been made.

Still, I gave a—rather noncommittal—nod. I had not been told of everything that had occurred during the Archduke Conference; something

must have happened to put Father on his guard and give Drewanchel this impression.

“Lord Sigiswald must be eager to expand his archducal family, which currently comprises only his wife and himself...” Lord Ortwin said. “But he lacks any measure of sincerity or consideration. Drewanchel knows that well.”

I did not know much about how Lady Adolphine had been treated during her marriage—the matter was kept between Drewanchel and the royal family—but the outright hostile expression that had come over Lord Ortwin’s face was enough. My desire to marry anyone but Lord Sigiswald was stronger than ever.

He must only have his eye on me because no greater duchy has a female archduke candidate in her final year, and I am the closest to coming of age.

Despite being a middle duchy with a former royal as its aub, Korinthsdaum was doomed to fall in the rankings. For that reason, a union with Lord Sigiswald would do nothing to further Dunkelfelger’s interests. Still, the former royals’ authority was strong for the moment, and they had to be treated with the appropriate respect—at least until next year. Rejecting them before then would prove a tad draining.

“It is thanks to the problems my elder sister faced that Drewanchel is so well positioned to counter pressure from Korinthsdaum,” he concluded.

“I thank you ever so much for your concern, but I can evade their pressure simply by remaining within Dunkelfelger,” I said, trying to steer our conversation away from its current path. “Though I must admit, Lord Ortwin, I never realized that you aim to become an archduke.”

“Much of my own situation has changed as well. In Drewanchel, one does not need to be closely related to the aub to be chosen as his or her successor. That is to say, now that she has returned to the duchy, my elder sister could at any moment be thrust into an unfavorable situation.”

Although she had been given land to rule as reparations for her divorce, Lady Adolphine was not guaranteed good treatment from any future aubs. I could practically feel Lord Ortwin’s determination to protect his family.

“My sister’s desire to establish a research city within Drewanchel appeals to me immensely,” he said. “I also wish to trade actively with Alexandria’s laboratory.”

“And you believe that my friendship with Lady Rozemyne would make

such negotiations progress more smoothly?”

Lord Ortwin blinked, then chuckled and shook his head. “As nice as that would be, I do not expect much from you in that regard; I doubt Lord Ferdinand or Lady Rozemyne would give much quarter to anyone. Rather, that is work for the scholars.”

As strange as it might have sounded, it gladdened me to hear that he was not underestimating Lord Ferdinand or Lady Rozemyne. I was also pleased to know he did not expect as much from me as I had anticipated.

“Your acuity is impressive, Lord Ortwin. You must be aware, then, that my father has already chosen my suitors.”

A woman’s father had the last say in whom she wed. Lord Ortwin must have known that it was pointless to propose to someone whose potential grooms had already been chosen, so what had driven him to approach me?

“My knowledge is less extensive than you expect—and plagued with conjecture, I fear. Still, there are some things I *do* know.” Lord Ortwin began to count on his fingers. “Your father would have given you multiple options, you seem not to have chosen from among them, your half-brother Lord Raufereg proposed to you despite being four years your junior, and your eyes waver whenever the word ‘ditter’ is spoken.”

For someone who claims not to know much, he is scarily on the mark.

I pressed a hand to my cheek. I had intended to come across as a proper archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger should, but my true emotions had seeped through nonetheless.

“From those facts,” he continued, “I determined that there must be some circumstance or unhappiness on your part that caused you not to choose a partner before others could start proposing to you. Furthermore, if your decision has been delayed, I expect there might be room for you to accept said proposals. If you wish it, then you might even be allowed to leave Dunkelfelger. Am I correct?”

Drewanchel’s capacity for gathering intelligence and deducing truths left me pursing my lips, unable to say a word. I could not risk carelessly confirming or denying any of his beliefs.

“My apologies,” Lord Ortwin said. “I did not intend to trouble you here. And as your true feelings are clear, I did not wish to propose to you at all.”

“Come again?” I asked, blinking at him in confusion.

Lord Ortwin shot a subtle look at Lord Wilfried, which told me

everything I needed to know. I swallowed hard, and a chill ran down my spine.

“It is common knowledge that Dunkelfelger lost its bride-stealing ditter match because of you. I would never have expected you to want to marry Wilfried, owing to his duchy’s rank and the fact that his engagement to Lady Rozemyne received the king’s approval. Truth be told, the news shook me to my core.”

I squeezed my sound-blocker tighter and shot a furtive glance at Lord Wilfried. He seemed a little uncomfortable but also terribly curious about our conversation. Although he did not seem to know what we were saying, I doubted my heart could take much more.

“That is enough, Lord Ortwin. Ehrenfest was a lower-ranking duchy to begin with; it should not be compared to the higher-ranking duchies used to Dunkelfelger’s proposals and bride-stealing ditter challenges. Lord Wilfried is completely unaware of my feelings.”

“So I would imagine. Otherwise, he would not be watching us with that strange expression. If you had only confessed to him, he would have proposed to you—out of guilt and obligation, if nothing else. Has your decision to hold your tongue not caused you an immense amount of anguish back home?”

I averted my eyes, staring down at my feet. He was correct, but what else could I have done? Aub Ehrenfest had told us personally during the Interduchy Tournament that an engagement with Dunkelfelger would only trouble his duchy. I could not bear the thought of putting a kind soul such as Lord Wilfried through so much misery.

“You speak of the past,” I said. “I do not seek such a proposal.”

“It is not too late if you do. As slim as the chance might be, Wilfried could use Dunkelfelger’s support to regain his position as the next aub.”

My heart stirred. Perhaps I really could be of use to Lord Wilfried and Ehrenfest. A rare sense of hope had sparked into existence within me.

Lord Ortwin gave a chuckle. “If you do not intend to emulate Lady Magdalena when it comes to securing what you desire, then perhaps you might choose me instead? I can eliminate Korinthsdaum’s pressure and swear to cherish you as my first wi—”

“You two—return to your gardens,” Professor Anastasius said, causing me to jump. “The lesson is not over.”

Lord Ortwin gave me a reassuring smile. “Fear not, Lady Hannelore; we will not be chastised.” He then let go of his sound-blocker and turned to Professor Anastasius. “It is our right as top-ranking archduke candidates to emulate royalty.”

“Indeed, which is why I chose not to interrupt you sooner,” our teacher shot back, then gestured to our desks with an intense grimace. “Your mana should have regenerated by now. Go back to your places.”

From their interaction, I assumed that then Prince Anastasius had proposed to Lady Eglantine during one of their classes together.

Lady Eglantine must have found that most troublesome.

Many noblewomen dreamed of such a proposal; it was straight out of the stories we so eagerly consumed. I, too, had treasured the thought, but receiving even a taste of what Lady Eglantine must have gone through had made me realize how uncomfortable it was to be in such a situation without retainers to rely on for help.

“I thank you for looking the other way,” Lord Ortwin said. “And thank you as well, Wilfried. It was because of you that I got this chance to speak with Lady Hannelore.”

“Did it go well...?” Lord Wilfried asked.

“Who knows? I took her by surprise when her father has already chosen her suitors. Not to mention, I do not intend to press her for an answer; what happens next is entirely up to her.”

“Alright. As long as you aren’t being a pest,” he said, concerned for my sake.

Lord Ortwin clapped a hand on his friend’s shoulder and gave him a light push back to his desk. Then he reached out to me, silently requesting my sound-blocker. I watched Lord Wilfried go as I relinquished the tool.

No sooner had the weight of the sound-blocker left my fingers than Lord Ortwin took me by the hand and pulled me toward him. I could only stare at him, taken aback by his sudden move. His light-brown eyes carried the intensity of someone driven into a corner, and seeing them so much closer than expected prompted me to gasp.

“For now, my feelings might not be returned, but I have the patience and determination to wait for that to change.”

Come again...?

So surprising was his declaration that I could not respond. I stared at

him, attempting to discern his intentions, at which point he started and placed a hand over his mouth.

“Ah. Allow me to escort you to your seat,” he said, adopting a more neutral expression as he led me by the hand. His eyes wandered about as if searching for a way to ease the tension.

“Um, Lord Ortwin...” I muttered.

“My apologies. I should not have said that—not at this juncture. I would rather you focus on the advantages we could provide for both our duchies,” he said, speaking much faster than usual. He kept his head down such that his reddish-purple bangs fell over his eyes, evidently regretting his mistake.

So strong was his discomfort that it spread to me as well.

U-Um... Could it be that he proposed for more than just his duchy’s sake?

My heart was racing, perhaps out of surprise. I spent the rest of my lesson with my head in the clouds.

“Cordula...” I said, “matters have become even more complicated.”

“I see you have regained the power of speech, milady. You had not said a word since your return,” my head attendant replied, her voice tinged with exasperation as she set about preparing tea. “Kenntrips was convinced that something drastic must have happened to render you in such a state. Might I ask you to elaborate? You did not accidentally upturn your garden, did you?”

“I would never make such a blunder. Rather, um... Lord Ortwin of Drewanchel proposed to me during class.”

“Excuse me? He *proposed*?” Cordula repeated, speaking sharply.

“Not formally with a feystone, but he put the idea forward,” I said at once. “He is not rushing me to answer; he said simply that he wishes to know how I feel. How I... feel...?”

From the start, Lord Ortwin had asked only about my emotions; he had paid no mind to how our marriage would potentially benefit our respective duchies. Slowly but surely, the pieces were falling into place.

“Cordula... might I be as blind to the feelings of men as Lady Rozemyne?” As nobles, we were trained to mask our emotions; I should have seen the truth of the situation as soon as he brought up bride-stealing ditter.

Or, no... Perhaps when he said my eyes move every time the word "ditter" is spoken.

"You seem emotionally moved, milady... Might you be tempted to accept?" Cordula asked, crossing her arms with a contemplative frown.

"N-No! Not in the slightest! And in any case, the matter of my fiancé is far too complex to be decided purely based on my own wishes. It is just that... this is the first time a man has harbored feelings for me. I was taken aback, is all."

"The... first time?" Cordula's eyebrows almost touched above her nose. "Goodness, what a clumsy child you are."

"Erm, Cordula?" It was rare for her to speak so harshly.

"It matters not. Forget I said anything. Still, you did not refuse him on the spot, did you? Though he insisted that you were in no rush to answer, there is a chance that he mistook your hesitation for interest. Your father might have chosen your candidates, but an archduke candidate of Drewanchel would be more than—"

"I responded exactly as you taught me to," I said, wary of the lecture to come. "But because of Raufereg's proposal, he seemed to assume that anyone could throw their hat in the ring. He spoke much of how Drewanchel was immune to Korinthsdaum's pressure."

Cordula pinched her brow and shook her head, her displeasure on full display. "You are the friend of the divine avatar, and the daughter of the top-ranking duchy's first wife. We feared that many would attempt to propose to you here; to think that not even the aub's selection of suitors would stop them. First Lord Raufereg, now Lord Ortwin... Men truly are unpredictable."

It seemed a stretch to lump Lord Ortwin with Lord Raufereg—the latter had proposed to me purely because he wanted to stay in Dunkelfelger and play ditter to his heart's desire—but I agreed with the overall sentiment. The events of my recent practical had come as such a surprise that my heart still pounded in my chest.

"For these men to have proposed out of the blue, Liebeskhilfe the Goddess of Binding must be intent on playing tricks around you."

Liebeskhilfe...?

In an instant, I recalled my appeals to her, and the blood drained quickly from my face.

“Cordula... Something has occurred to me.”

“Milady?”

“Now that you mention it, I prayed to Liebeskhilfe before coming to the Academy. I, um... did not request a romance as dramatic as those in the storybooks, but I *did* ask for more choices.”

My head attendant said nothing.

“And in the time since, I have received an increasing number of propositions, despite Father’s plans. Perhaps this truly is the work of a goddess.”

Given all we had witnessed, no one could claim that the gods were mere fantasies. Praying at the Royal Academy was known to cause great beams of light to shoot up into the air—and if not even that sounded convincing enough, Lady Rozemyne had obtained the Grutrissheit and undergone a stunning transformation through the power of Anwachs.

“I never thought this would happen,” I said, my eyes brimming with tears. “Whatever should I do, Cordula? I do not wish for any more choices.” My hands were full enough without Liebeskhilfe’s trickery bringing me yet more propositions.

Cordula looked thoroughly troubled as she considered my predicament. “This might not be much of a solution, and for that I apologize, but perhaps you could pray in gratitude to Liebeskhilfe and state that your desires have been met in excess. If that does not change things, then you could pray to Verfuhremeer the Goddess of Seas.”

“R-Right,” I replied with a nod. “I shall pray to them both, if necessary.”

O Liebeskhilfe, Goddess of Binding! I thank you ever so much for the blessings you bestowed upon me. You have done enough! Because of you, I now have more options than I ever thought possible. I do not require any more.

“Praise be to the gods!” I exclaimed just as an ordonnanz shot into the room. The white bird settled in front of me.

“Lady Hannelore, this is Rozemyne. Have you returned to your dormitory? I intend to have my head attendant, Lieseleta, stop by with your hairpin order.”

I watched the ordonnanz repeat its message twice more, then looked to my head attendant. Because of Lord Ortwin’s proposal, I had forgotten about Lady Rozemyne’s promise entirely.

“We attendants shall go to the tea party room and make welcoming arrangements,” Cordula said. “You may inform Lady Rozemyne that the room is open, then join us there at once.”

On that note, she departed, taking several of my attendants with her. I tapped the feystone with my schtappe and replied to Lady Rozemyne before going to the tea party room with the rest of my retainers.

Hairpin Shockwaves

“This is from Lady Rozemyne,” Lieseleta said as she handed a box to my head attendant. “She wishes to express her deepest gratitude for your assistance in rescuing Lord Ferdinand.”

Cordula and the others started checking the contents, but my eyes were drawn to Lieseleta’s chest. Upon her breast was a necklace signifying that she was engaged. It must have been recent; from what I could remember, it had not been there before.

Lieseleta had served Lady Rozemyne in Ehrenfest. Would all of Lady Rozemyne’s retainers move to join her in Alexandria? What did moving to another duchy truly entail? Question after question drifted through my mind.

“Here you are, Lady Hannelore.”

My retainers must have concluded their inspection. Snapped out of my trance, I peered into the box they held out to me. Inside rested two hairpins covered with small rlyzinies in bloom, far more stunning than the mock-up shown to me by Lady Rozemyne’s personnel. They must have tweaked the design with my hairstyle in mind. Normal rlyzinies were light purple and white, but these started red and turned white gradually, both to complement my hair and to match the divine color of winter. They could not have been more adorable.

“Please, allow me to demonstrate how they are worn,” Lieseleta announced, then carefully slid the two ornaments into my hair.

My attendants let out awed gasps and sighs. I had seen others wear hairpins such as these, but this was my first time wearing my own. A smile came unbidden to my face.

“How do they look, Cordula?” I asked.

“They suit you extremely well, milady. I thought the same thing when I saw Lady Eineliebe with hers, but there can be no mistaking the talent of Lady Rozemyne’s personnel. One would think the rlyzinies were real if not for their color, and they make your hair look all the more beautiful.”

My other attendants followed suit, lavishing me with praise. While they listened to Lieseleta instruct them on how to style my hair with the new accessories, I gazed into a small mirror that had been brought into the room. I could not see exceptionally well from my current angle, but the colors really did complement my hair. Was it truly okay of me to accept such a splendid gift?

"Lieseleta, do give Lady Rozemyne my thanks," I said.

"So I shall. She will be attending the scholar course tomorrow, and she looks forward to your hairpins matching."

"As do I."

Given the opportunity, perhaps I shall wear them during dinner.

Lieseleta soon departed, and the tea party room was cleared out. I waited in my own room in the meantime; I could not eat without an attendant to serve me.

"Just a little while longer," I was told.

"I do not mind," I said, tilting my head slightly to hear the rustle of the tiny rlyzinies. I stood before my mirror and admired them, and the more I gazed upon them, the more a gentle smile spread across my lips. Soon enough, I was giggling.

The flowers were so detailed and wonderful, and they suited my hair so unbelievably well. Lady Rozemyne's hairpin craftswoman had seemed to have come of age just recently, but she already had more talent than most built up over their entire career.

I wonder, will Lord Wilfried and Lord Ortwin also praise my new accessories?

"How wonderful. It would move me to receive a hairpin such as yours from my escort partner."

I turned to see Heilliese gazing enviously upon my new accessories. Dunkelfelger had trade rights with Ehrenfest, so premade hairpins were available back home, but they simply could not compare to those made to order. Concerns about color and size were especially common.

"We archnobles have no means by which to order our own, so even the premade variety are a delight to have," she said. "But even so..."

Heilliese sighed. My brother and those formerly of the royal family had enjoyed a rather unique privilege in being able to order hairpins through Lady Rozemyne.

“I should like to order my own, if possible, but there is no one in Dunkelfelger who can make them,” Heilliese continued. “How long will it take our craftspeople to learn? I cannot envision them being ready in time for our graduation ceremony.”

We would graduate together, and indeed, there was no good reason to assume that our duchy would have trained hairpin-makers before then. The two of us were still speaking about the matter when my apprentice attendant Andrea returned.

“Lady Hannelore, my apologies for the wait,” she said. “Let us move to the dining hall.”

By the time my retainers had arrived, several students had already eaten their food and departed the hall, leaving us with plenty of space. I spied Kenntrips and Rasantark, both with nearly clear plates in front of them, but Raufereg was nowhere to be seen.

“Lady Hannelore. You certainly... took your time today.”

As soon as the students in the dining hall noticed me, they looked to Kenntrips and Rasantark, uncomfortable expressions on their faces. My two suitors started when they saw me.

I cocked my head in confusion, causing the rlyzinies adorning my hair to sway and further emphasizing my new accessories.

“Lady Hannelore, um... May we have a moment of your time once you have eaten?” Kenntrips asked. The sudden tension was bad enough, but he looked genuinely unwell.

I swallowed in surprise, unsure what grave occurrence had inspired this response. Then I turned to Cordula. I might not have had anything scheduled after dinner, but Kenntrips’s request was abrupt, to say the least. A change of plans would require my retainers to adapt, so I was unsure whether it was okay for me to agree.

Cordula thought for a moment, then smiled. “I believe that will be fine. They wish to speak with you as soon as they can, and you have something to tell them in turn.”

I do? To what is she referring?

Before I could ask, Kenntrips put down his cutlery and stood, his face no less grim than before. “We shall prepare a meeting room. Enjoy dinner at your leisure, Lady Hannelore.”

He signaled to his adult attendant, then strode out of the room.

Rasantark finished eating and departed just as quickly. I was lost for how to respond.

“Now then, milady... Let us entrust those preparations to the two lords. Focus on your meal for now.”

I took my seat. The other students seemed equally disturbed; they shot me less than furtive glances as they ate, then also took their leave.

“Something is clearly amiss,” I said, my head swimming even as I ate.

Heilliese and Andrea merely exchanged glances. If there was something they wished to tell me, then they must not have been able to broach it here. I made a mental note to ask them later.

“Speaking of which, Cordula...” I continued, “what did you mean when you said I have something to tell them?”

“The matter with Drewanchel, of course,” my head attendant responded, exasperated. “As your engagement candidates, they need to be informed. You failed to completely refuse the proposition, did you not?”

I averted my eyes and popped a small piece of herb-roasted hatel into my mouth. Indeed, it had slipped my mind that I would need to update them.

Kenntrips promised to assist me if I wished to leave for another duchy. Is he a man of his word, I wonder?

I shook my head. To even have such a thought made it seem like I was prepared to accept Lord Ortwin’s proposition, when that was anything but the case.

“Is something the matter, milady?” Cordula asked, bringing me back to my senses. I must have been poking at my hatel in a trance because, when I peered down at my plate, I saw that it was something of a mess.

I forced an innocent look and elegantly cut into my food, hoping to salvage the situation. “E-Erm... I do not see Raufereg anywhere. I suppose we are safe to keep him in the dark?”

Cordula’s eyes wandered to the doors. “Indeed, Lord Raufereg was not formally chosen by the aub. Not to mention, he is to blame for Lord Ortwin’s actions in the first place. You are free to ignore him.”

Eep! That is one terrifying look!

After finishing my meal, I went to the meeting room where Kenntrips and Rasantark awaited me. Rasantark was only half seated, as though

primed to bolt toward me at any moment, while Kenntrips's incessant finger tapping belied his calm exterior.

"Cordula, Heilliese—stay with me, if you would. The rest of you, please leave the room."

The meeting room was small, so I sent most of my retainers away. We were about to have a rather private conversation, in any case, and they had their own matters to attend to.

I took the seat that was offered to me, and Rasantark finally settled into his chair. Kenntrips squeezed his gray eyes shut before sighing.

"Lady Hannelore, this might be blunt to the point of being rude, but I must ask nonetheless—were those hairpins a gift from Ehrenfest?"

"Indeed," I said. "From Lady Rozemyne, to be precise. She declared them proof of our friendship and an expression of gratitude for my assistance in her true ditter match. Do you remember the hairpin my brother gave to Eineliebe? Well, mine were made by the same craftswoman." I reached up and touched the accessories in question. "Wonderful, are they not?"

The pair exchanged puzzled expressions.

"From... Lady Rozemyne, you say?"

"Not Lord Wilfried?"

Why would they be from...?

"Ah!" I looked up with a start. "If they were meant as a gift from all of Ehrenfest, not just from Lady Rozemyne, then indeed, I will need to thank Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte too." I had been invited to Lady Rozemyne's personal library rather than to the castle to place my order, so I had assumed the hairpins were solely from her. More likely than not, they were actually a gift from the duchy as a whole.

"That is not what we meant..." Kenntrips said, massaging the bridge of his nose as if to soothe a headache. "We are asking whether they came from your escort partner for the graduation ceremony."

My... escort partner?

"O-Of course not," I said, rejecting the notion without hesitation. "How could they have, when I don't even have an escort partner yet? Not just Lady Rozemyne but the female students of Ehrenfest and Alexandria wear such hairpins whether they have a partner or not. Can I not do the same?"

Cordula sighed. "I see the source of your confusion, as Lady Rozemyne

wears her own hairpins and promised to give you some of your own so the two of you could match, but still... To the people of Dunkelfelger, hairpins from Ehrenfest are understood as gifts from escort partners given to women about to come of age."

In my excitement to have received new hairpins, I had paid no mind to how they might be perceived. I clapped my hands in a moment of clarity and exclaimed, "So everyone thought I had chosen a partner from outside my engagement candidates!" No wonder those in the dining hall had treated me so strangely.

Heilliese slumped her shoulders. "I attempted to warn you before, but I see I was not clear enough." When she remarked on my hairpins back in my room, she had apparently been trying to inform me of what they signified.

My apologies...

"I understand your reasoning, but all duchies other than Ehrenfest will come to the same mistaken conclusion we did," Kenntrips said with a troubled smile. Truly, I had allowed my happiness to blind me.

It was never my intention to put my engagement candidates through such anguish. Honest!

Rasantark's expression was gloomy to a ghastly degree, and his usually spirited chestnut eyes glared at my hairpins with vexation. It starkly contrasted the relief that Kenntrips now exuded.

"Rasantark," I said, "could it be that these hairpins do not suit me?"

"No, they suit you exceptionally well, to the point that I now understand how one can fall victim to the Goddess of Chaos."

The Goddess of Chaos tended to represent complex feelings of envy and resentment, so his words hardly felt like a compliment. What had inspired such strong emotions in him?

Surely he does not wish for a hairpin of his own, as Heilliese does.

"Just my wretched luck," he cursed. "To think my greatest rival in love would end up being Lady Rozemyne..."

"Lady Rozemyne?" I asked. "Do you mean to say that you have feelings for Lord Ferdinand?"

"Is that some kind of cruel joke?! I find it anything but amusing! I am a candidate for *your* hand, Lady Hannelore!"

Seeing the tears in his eyes, I apologized without a second thought. But how else was I meant to interpret his apparent rivalry with Lady

Rozemyne?

“You expressed your envy of Lady Eineliebe’s hairpin before, so I planned to have one delivered through Lord Lestilaut once our engagement was settled,” Rasantark explained, his voice almost a shout. “And yet... Lady Rozemyne’s personal hairpin craftswoman has made you maximal-quality hairpins to your exact specifications! How can I ever hope to compete?!”

The expression “my mind went blank” was surely invented to describe situations such as this. Rasantark’s words inspired a strange sensation within me, as though all the blood in my body had reversed its direction. It rushed to my face, and a loud thumping rang in my ears.

“Um, if you would allow me to ask... Is that to say *I* am the one you have feelings for, Rasantark?”

He stared at me, wide-eyed. Kenntrips looked just as taken aback.

“Is that really a surprise?!” Rasantark exclaimed at last. “As a candidate for your hand and one in the process of courting you, I thought it went without saying that you are the sole object of my affection. I have made it very clear that I wish to protect you, fight alongside you, and so on!”

I paused, trying to think of any times he had conveyed his feelings for me. None came to mind.

“I recall you declaring that you wished to marry me so you could play ditter with Alexandria,” I said, rendered uncomfortable by my suitors’ pointed stares. “That is to say... I thought you cared more for ditter than for me.”

Rasantark clapped a hand to his head, stunned silent by the fact that his meaning had been lost on me.

“Lady Rozemyne invested eighteen large golds without batting an eye when the matter of translating Dunkelfelger’s history arose,” Cordula weighed in. “Few men will have the budget to compete with such lavish hairpins. Still, as they are from Aub Alexandria, and you have promised to match, I would advise that you continue wearing them.”

Rasantark clutched at his chest and grunted. As always, when the rest of us were dancing around an uncomfortable truth, Cordula showed no mercy in taking us to task.

“E-Erm, Cordula...” I said, “this was not my intention.”

“Face the facts, milady—this is the consequence of your thoughtless

acceptance of a new hairpin when the knights were entranced with true ditter.” It seemed that I was being scolded as well as Rasantark.

“But I had no engagement candidates at the time, and would it not have been improper to refuse a gift? I never thought things would escalate as they have.”

I had wanted a new hairpin, and the celebration in Ehrenfest had seemed a wondrous time to speak with Lady Rozemyne and decide which colors and flowers would suit me best. Never had my intention been to wound the hearts of the men chosen to court me.

Rasantark was the picture of melancholy. I no longer knew what to say to him.

“Not only did you fail to consider matters thoroughly, but your timing was also rather poor...” Cordula went on. “Or perhaps it was excellent. There can be nothing better than your hairpins for rejecting proposals from other duchies.”

“Proposals from other duchies?” Kenntrips echoed, turning so suddenly that his hair swayed. “Even though she has candidates chosen by the aub?”

“Indeed. Earlier today, Lord Ortwin of Drewanchel proposed to milady during class. She was stunned to learn that a man was taken with her. Had the two of you made your own feelings more apparent, this would not have happened. How ungraceful.”

“What?! Drewanchel proposed during class?!” Kenntrips exclaimed, repeating the words in shock.

“Does he mean to challenge us to bride-stealing ditter?!” Rasantark bellowed, his chestnut eyes gleaming. “I ACCEPT!”

“Be calm, Rasantark,” Cordula said. “It was not a formal proposal, and milady turned him down.”

“I see. Well, Lady Hannelore, Lord Ortwin is bound to yield when he sees your hairpins and comes to the natural conclusion,” Rasantark mused with a reassured sigh.

In contrast, I found my own mood growing exceptionally dark. As my head attendant had said, I had informed Lord Ortwin of my engagement candidates and dodged his proposal. Perhaps my hairpins really would stop him from pursuing me, but it seemed cruel to deceive him when he had ultimately worn his heart on his sleeve.

I suspect it will pain Lord Ortwin to see me wearing these hairpins the

day after he proposed to me.

He would not let it show, but still. Thinking back to the look he had given me upon noticing his mistake, I could only imagine how much it would eat away at him.

I do not wish to hurt him. Explaining that Lady Rozemyne gave me the hairpins should prevent any further misconceptions. Although... I am surprised that I feel so compelled to act in the first place.

Kenntrips brought his eyebrows together in a frown. “Lady Hannelore, what did Lord Wilfried say of this proposal?”

“Hmm? Lord Wilfried...?”

“Did he not attempt to stop it or present himself as a suitor?”

My heart ached, and my throat became so parched that I found it hard to answer. Lord Wilfried had done nothing to interfere. At most, I could say that he, ever the gentleman, had ensured that Lord Ortwin’s behavior would not harm my reputation. Did I truly need to report that he did not even consider me someone he might wish to propose to?

“He did nothing of note...” I said at length. “Lord Ortwin used a sound-blocker, and we were in the middle of class.”

“I see.”

Our bride-stealing ditter match with Ehrenfest was a thing of the past. I wished my peers would understand that and stop bringing up Lord Wilfried at every opportunity.

The next day, I donned my new hairpins and went to class, my heart pounding for more than one reason. Lord Wilfried was there when I arrived, but I saw no sign of Lord Ortwin.

“Are those the new hairpins you ordered to match Lady Rozemyne?” Lord Wilfried asked, having noticed them right away.

“Indeed, they are.”

It was not rare in Ehrenfest for women to wear hairpins of this nature. For that reason, Lord Wilfried said nothing of escort partners; instead, he informed me that Lady Charlotte had also received a new hairpin and that Ehrenfest was training new craftspeople to make them. We went on to discuss how I had placed my order.

“Oh?” he said. “I didn’t know you spoke to the craftswoman directly. Well, her eyes see well and true—red rlyzinies certainly do suit you, Lady

Hannelore.”

“You are too kind.” As glad as I was to receive his praise, I could not help but feel a little embarrassed.

“Lady Hannelore, are those Ehrenfest hairpins...?” Lord Ortwin asked when he eventually arrived, eyeing them with the same concern that Kenntrips and Rasantark had shown before.

“Lord Ortwin, these hairpins—”

“They sure are,” Lord Wilfried interjected, sticking his chest out with pride. “Who else but Rozemyne’s—excuse me, *Lady* Rozemyne’s—personnel would conceive of an idea as ingenuous as using red rlyzinies?”

Lord Ortwin looked between his friend and me before putting on a weak smile. “Indeed. They suit you well...” he said, his voice just as strained as expected.

“Erm, Lord Ortwin... The truth is—”

“They truly do suit you well. I celebrate the ripening of your rafel.”

My rafel...?

Lord Ortwin must have thought I had chosen my escort partner—and that I had picked not one of my marriage candidates, but Lord Wilfried.

“You are mistaken,” I said, frantically shaking my head. “This was—”

“You three again?” Professor Anastasius griped as he entered the room, waving us away with a grimace. “Hurry to your places already.”

Lord Ortwin slid past me on his way to his desk, moving as though to avoid me. I headed to my own, having lost my chance to clear up the misunderstanding.

Professor Anastasius! You normally arrive much later! This poor timing is unbelievable!

I thought to take my breaks when Lord Ortwin took his and speak with him then, but I never managed to catch him. He also returned to his dormitory for lunch immediately at fourth bell; by the time I had turned around, he was gone.

Ngh... He is avoiding me, without a doubt.

I was no more fortunate that afternoon and returned to the Dunkelfelger Dormitory having had not a single chance to clear the air. Little did I know, things had taken an inconceivable turn in my absence.

“Lady Hannelore, is it true that you accepted a proposal from Lord Wilfried?” my retainers asked as soon as I entered the dorm, looking

anxious, one and all.

“Come again?” I asked, cocking my head at them. “Wherever did you hear that?”

“Losrenger and Lindenthal told us during our afternoon classes.”

“Both lesser duchies have archduke candidates, so I understand the source of the rumor, but I cannot even begin to imagine how that misconception came about...” Lord Ortwin would never say something so careless, I thought, but perhaps he had spread word that Lord Wilfried was escorting me.

“Did we not predict exactly this, milady?” Cordula asked, a beacon of calm amid the chaos. “Only a select few men could provide handmade hairpins of such high quality. And as yours are in the Ehrenfest style, of course people have assumed they came from Lord Wilfried.”

The blood drained from my face. Would such rumors not cause him all kinds of trouble?

“Whatever shall I do?” I asked my head attendant. “This is far from ideal.”

“We all know how poorly he has treated you. Let him be a shield to block further proposals,” Kenntrips said. He had come to despise Lord Wilfried more than anyone since our game of bride-stealing ditter, and the anger in his voice brooked no protest. “It is unfortunate that the hairpins came from Lady Rozemyne. Had they been from Ehrenfest as a whole, we could have pressured Lord Wilfried to take responsibility.”

“Enough of that, Kenntrips.”

“You wish to marry into Ehrenfest, do you not? If that is your desire, then I intend to do all that I can to aid you.”

“I do not wish to succeed through such methods,” I said with a glare. Putting an even greater burden on Lord Wilfried and Ehrenfest was not my intention in the slightest.

Kenntrips sighed and gave a shrug. “In that case, perhaps you could consult Lady Rozemyne. Professor Rauffen informed us she would be present for music lessons and dedication whirl practice. You could ask her for a way to clear up this misconception, be it by wearing the hairpins only when you have lessons together or by having her announce that she gave them to you.”

“Indeed, that is what I shall do. I trust she will aid me, considering that

Lord Wilfried is involved. I thank you ever so much.” But despite my agreement, the green-haired apprentice scholar wore an exceedingly complex expression—one of dazed sorrow and inner turmoil. “Kenntrips?”

“Being kind to Lord Wilfried is all well and good, but do try to be more faithful to your own desires. If not, we will each be bound to a star we did not wish for.”

On that note, he moved to pass me. The smile he wore was steeped in sadness, so I could not help but grab his sleeve.

“Lady Hannelore?” he asked, looking down at me curiously. Perhaps I had just imagined the sorrow in his expression, but I could not bear to say I had grabbed a man’s sleeve without purpose.

“E-Erm... You spoke only of what *I* want. I wish to know your desires as well.”

“You should already know them,” Kenntrips said with a laugh. Then he pulled his sleeve free and went on his way.

I should already know...? But I cannot even begin to fathom what they might be.

Music and Questions

Our first music lesson was finally upon us. Despite my best efforts, I had failed to understand Kenntrips's wish, the rumors about Lord Wilfried and me continued to spread, and Lord Ortwin remained ignorant of the truth about my hairpins.

I shall consult Lady Rozemyne!

Speaking with her would solve everything except the matter with Kenntrips, I thought as I made my way to the music classroom. Archnobles and archduke candidates took the lesson together, so the room felt much busier than usual.

"There she is," Heilliese said, indicating a young woman in a dark-blue cape. She had found our target so quickly because the latter's hairpin matched my own. "Lady Rozemyne's hairpin uses a red-to-white gradient of rlyzinies, as yours do, yet the colors still appear unique."

"The woman who made them took great care to choose shades of red that best suited the wearer. Mine is bright pink, whereas Lady Rozemyne's is more of a deep crimson."

Indeed, although our hairpins used the same design, their colors set them apart and ensured that they suited us both.

"Good day, Lady Rozemyne," I said as I approached her, the flowers in my hair swaying with each step.

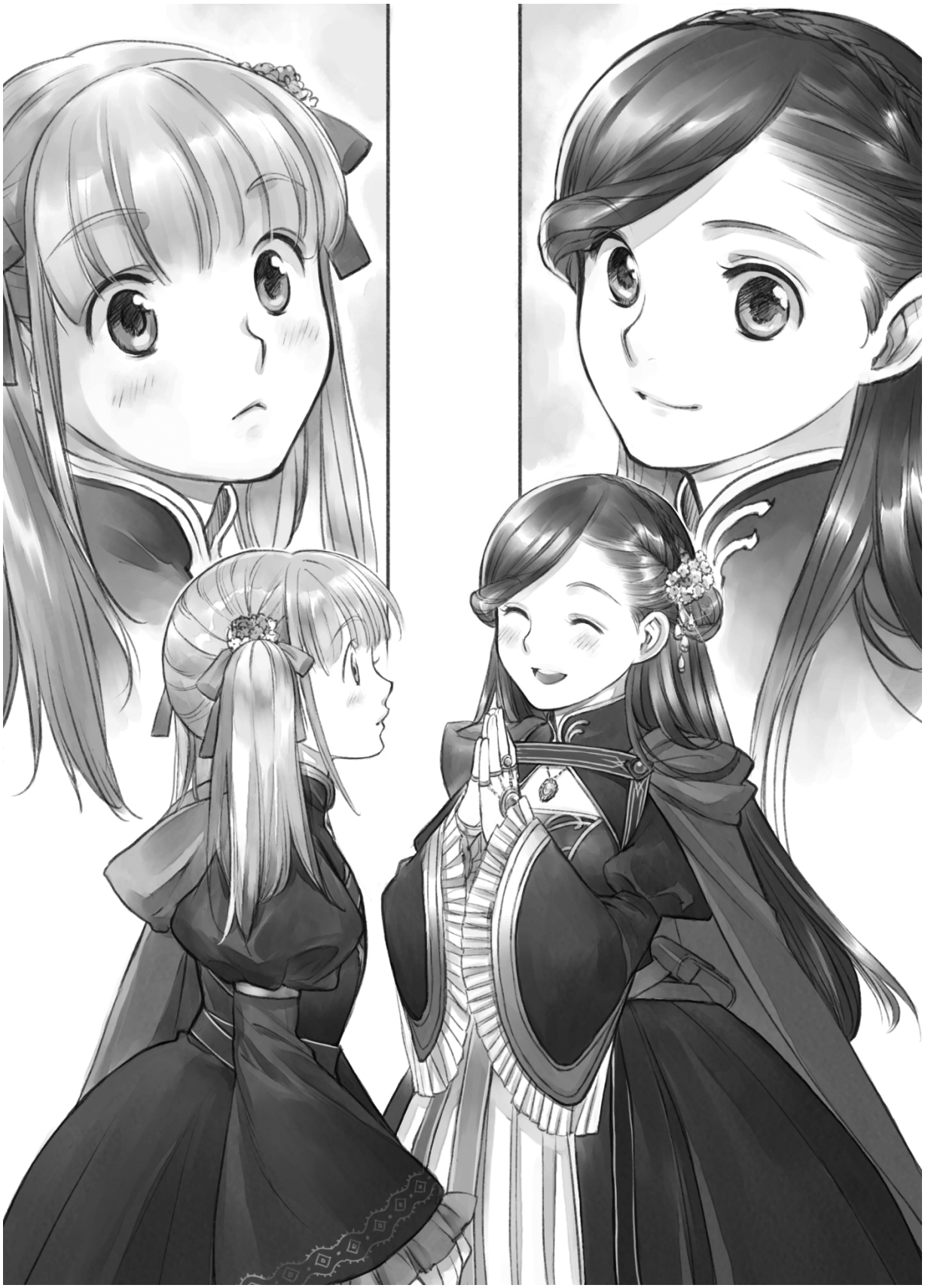
"Good day to you too," she replied. "Lord Wilfried informed me—through a very angry ordonnanz—that the hairpins I gave you caused a great amount of trouble for you both. I apologize for not anticipating this."

"I was just as careless. While I rejoiced over my new hairpins, my engagement candidates complained that they could not hope to top them."

I conveyed my exchange with Rasantark, trying to add humor where I could. Lady Rozemyne laughed, then clapped her hands together.

"In that case, once you have chosen your escort partner, perhaps I could arrange for another special order to be made. I might have beat them to it, but I assume you would still want a hairpin from your partner, no? One can

never have too many.”



Lady Rozemyne beamed, proud of her idea. She sported a new hair ornament each year and had worn hairpins bearing the season's flowers and divine color when I visited Ehrenfest. They always paired wonderfully with her rainbow feystone hair stick.

"I see you are wearing both your hairpin and your hair stick today," I said. "Do you plan to wear more hair ornaments for our graduation ceremony?"

"No more than this, but I do plan to have a new hairpin made to suit my coming-of-age dress. I also intend to use materials found in Alexandria to release a new line of specialty products"—a mischievous grin spread across Lady Rozemyne's face—"but that is the most I can say for now. Do look forward to them."

As I understood it, Lady Rozemyne was the innovator behind so many of Ehrenfest's recent trends. The very notion had once seemed absurd to me, but at this point, I thought she was capable of pretty much anything.

"With you at the helm, Lady Rozemyne, I expect Alexandria to produce new specialty exports by the day. Your smile is so bright and joyful that I feel your happiness as though it were my own."

"I have established the library city of my dreams, obtained access to all manner of seafood, and restored connections that I nearly lost for good. I could not be more content."

I wished I could obtain such happiness, then remembered the extreme lengths that Lady Rozemyne had gone to for what she wanted. My expression turned neutral as I fell into thought.

No, I do not think I could mimic her.

I placed a hand on my cheek and sighed. Lady Rozemyne peered at me in response, amusement gleaming in her golden eyes. Her sudden growth spurt meant she now stood a little taller than me. It saddened me to have lost my one advantage over her.

"Well, Lady Hannelore? What do you think?" Lady Rozemyne pressed. "Would you like the partner you choose to order you a new hairpin?"

"If you would not mind, then yes."

Lady Rozemyne's kind gesture would ease Rasantark's misery. And although it would not heal the wounded hearts of the men who saw Lady Rozemyne's and my matching hairpins, it would at least make the pain less severe.

“Would you welcome an order from me?” asked someone I recognized.

“Lord Ortwin? Erm...” Lady Rozemyne’s eyes settled on me.

I merely stared at our new arrival, unsure what to say. He must have overcome his previous misconception. Then I saw Lord Wilfried behind him, fists clenched in support, and my relief gave way to dark, heavy misery.

“As long as Lady Hannelore has chosen them, I do not mind who the order is from,” Lady Rozemyne answered.

“Oh? I must inform the aub at once,” came the voice of a Korinthsdaum archnoble.

We all turned to look. It was anything but rare to gather information by eavesdropping, but to openly announce what one had just heard? Lady Rozemyne and I exchanged glances.

Was that not exceptionally rude?

I furrowed my brow, unable to hide my displeasure, at which point Rasantark marched over from where he must have been watching nearby.

“Should you not learn a tad more before relaying anything to Aub Korinthsdaum?” The smile plastered across his face did not reach his eyes, which instead gleamed with the light of a predator eyeing his prey. “Reporting only what you just heard might lead him to mistakenly assume that his proposal to Lady Hannelore has been accepted. Her father chose two candidates for her hand, and no nobles of other duchies stand among them. If anyone else hopes to marry her, they will need to prove their worth through a game of bride-stealing ditter.”

“Rasantark, enough,” I said, not wanting to cause more of a fuss during class. “We must remember that Lord Sigiswald of Korinthsdaum is a former royal. He should need no reminders for how those not chosen by Aub Dunkelfelger must petition for my hand in marriage.”

The archnoble grimaced and slunk away without another word. If, after this, Lord Sigiswald doubled down on his proposal to me, I suspected my father might lead Dunkelfelger’s ditter-starved knights straight into Korinthsdaum.

I can only pray that they know better than to make fools of themselves.

“That will do. Please allow me to spend class with my friends,” I said, instructing Rasantark to step aside. But for some reason, he moved to stand beside Heilliese. “Rasantark...?”

“Do let me stay. There might be others who mean to trouble you,” he insisted, his smile genuine this time. “Archnobles will not stand down unless they come face-to-face with one of your chosen candidates. If I abandon you now, Cordula and Kenntrips will decry me as a failure.”

Rasantark was now focused on Lords Wilfried and Ortwin. He seemed liable to goad Drewanchel into bride-stealing ditter, but as I racked my brain for a way to keep him in check, Lady Rozemyne burst into laughter.

“Your candidates really must cherish you, if not even Korinthsdaum or Lord Ortwin gives them pause,” she said. “I must admit, I was a little worried about the character of the potential partners chosen for you, but I see now that I need not have been concerned.”

I turned back to Rasantark with a start. Not long ago, I had been convinced that he had proposed to me purely for the sake of ditter, but now I saw the truth. He even kept a respectful distance while I greeted and spoke with other archduke candidates. Had the Korinthsdaum archnoble and Lord Ortwin not spoken of my hairpins, he would never have stepped forward so defensively.

In some regards, he is not what I am looking for. But he is still going out of his way to be considerate.

Until this point, I had put very little thought into Rasantark’s and Kenntrips’s hopes and emotions. Yet here was Rasantark, doing his best to protect me as one of my engagement candidates. Perhaps now was the time to take them both seriously.

“Indeed,” I said at last. “They do cherish me, from what I can tell.”

In hindsight, I was not showing them as much consideration as they were showing me. I would need to thank them for knowing how much to advertise themselves as my chosen suitors when interacting with other duchies.

“I did not think you would say as much, Lady Hannelore...” Rasantark mused. “Does this mean I can start ordering a hairpin through Lady Rozemyne?”

“Please do not interrupt us,” I said.

In an instant, my newfound appreciation faded away. I glared up at Rasantark with a menacing smile, and he reflexively stepped back, insisting that he had only been talking to himself.

“I see there is a variety of instruments being brought to class this year,” Lady Rozemyne said. Rather than everyone having a harspiel, roughly half of the room held flutes or percussion instruments.

“Indeed, as we have entered our fifth year, we must start preparing for the songs offered to the gods during the graduation ceremony. Students not chosen for the sword dance or the dedication whirl are made to either perform or sing. Those skilled in instruments other than the harspiel are attempting to catch the professor’s eye.”

“I suppose we really are close to graduating... I spent the bulk of my fourth year in the Garden of Beginnings, so I scarcely feel like a fifth-year.”

I am surprised she feels like a student at all, considering her recent inauguration as an aub. Not to mention her tendency to return home halfway through the academic term.

Although I chose not to say it, I suspected that leading Dunkelfelger into war and becoming the ruler of an entire duchy were largely to blame for Lady Rozemyne not feeling the appropriate age.

“As it stands, I am glad to have grown, but my initial response was nothing but resentment for the gods...” Lady Rozemyne muttered with a sigh, turning her gaze upward. It felt as though she were looking at the gods themselves, so I straightened my back on instinct.

“Speaking of the graduation ceremony—which goddess will you be whirling as?” I asked, hoping to bring her eyes back down. Lords Wilfried and Ortwin must have overheard, as they approached without a moment’s hesitation.

“I, too, am curious,” said the former.

“Based on the duchy rankings, I would think that you should be the Goddess of Light, Lady Hannelore,” the latter added. “But with Lady Rozemyne being an aub...”

Just as the performers of the sword dance were chosen from the knight course, dancers for the dedication whirl were chosen from among the archduke candidates. Each year, archduke candidates would speculate on who would whirl as which god.

Unfazed by all the eyes on her, Lady Rozemyne placed a hand on her cheek and gave a troubled smile. “I shall not be participating in the graduation ceremony’s dedication whirl. Instead, I will join those playing music.”

“Come again?”

Her answer caused not just me but every archnoble in earshot to stare at her in shock. It was the last thing any of us had expected. She had whirled so enchantingly since her very first year at the Academy, so not one of us had thought she would not be onstage for the ceremony.

“Is there a reason for that?” I pressed.

“When I whirled for the Zent’s transference ceremony, I completed my offering to the gods. There is also a good chance that my whirling would open the path to the Garden of Beginnings, so to ensure everyone’s safety, it seems best for me to abstain. Involving the gods would create quite a mess for Ferdinand and the Zent to clean up.”

Her primary concern is summoning the gods themselves?

Lady Rozemyne smiled and tried to make light of the situation, but her reasoning for abstaining was so far removed from my every expectation that I knew not how to respond. My own concern over which goddess I would perform as felt childish in comparison.

Lord Ortwin and I were rendered utterly dazed, forced to devote all of our focus merely to masking our surprise. Lord Wilfried, on the other hand, was used to Lady Rozemyne’s antics. He frowned and stared at her quizzically.

“Are you sure playing music is safe when your songs fire out bless— I mean, when your songs produce many blessings as well...?”

More than his impolite speech, it was the object of his concern that stunned us all. Certainly, when Lady Rozemyne played in class, the wondrous light of a blessing suffused the room alongside her music. Both whirling and playing an instrument counted as offerings to the gods; would the result not be the same in both cases?

“We should not need to worry as long as I am not atop the whirling stage or the ritual carpet, so I plan to play my instrument in the corner, far away from them both. I might still produce a blessing, but it should create a pillar of light at most.”

As trivial as you make it sound, creating such a spectacle would normally require the mana of an entire group of nobles.

In the Dunkelfelger Dormitory, pillars of light formed only from the rituals before and after ditter, and only when there were more than ten players involved. Lady Rozemyne could make them on her own, and she

considered them tame compared to what she was truly capable of. No wonder she was known as the divine avatar and had received the Grutrissheit from the gods themselves.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Lord Ortwin said, “would it not seem out of place for Aub Alexandria to perform in the corner?” It would cause a commotion among the other students, especially when she had sat beside the Zent during the fellowship gathering.

“I understand your concern, but Ferdinand would never permit me to perform somewhere as dangerous as the center,” she explained. “Not to mention, sitting in some gaudy chair far from the stage would only exacerbate the idea that I receive special treatment.”

Lady Rozemyne was determined not to take the stage. I wondered if she would manage to persuade others to her way of thinking—few would consider playing an instrument as dangerous as she did.

“In any case,” she continued, “I intend to remain very much in the background. A few blessings and pillars of light should blend right in during the ceremony.”

Oh, Lady Rozemyne! There must be a limit to how abnormal one can be!

So grand were her “dramatics” that my head started to spin. A student aub permeating the auditorium with blessings and music could never blend in with her peers. She would create more of a scene than Lady Detlinde had with her own performance. The more Lady Rozemyne strove to blend in, the more she would inevitably stand out.

“Well, all that aside, I doubt we have much reason to worry...” Lord Wilfried said. “Uncle will make sure everything works out.”

“Indeed, he will communicate with the Zent to ensure as much,” Lady Rozemyne insisted. “Not to mention, we have an entire year before our graduation ceremony.”

Somehow, the pair before me seemed completely on the same page. Many had taken to bad-mouthing Lord Wilfried since the cancellation of his engagement, but the concern he showed for Lady Rozemyne proved just how kind he truly was.

“Now then, everyone,” Professor Pauline began, “your tasks this year are to play the song to be performed during the graduation ceremony and a song that you composed with your music tutor. I am always delighted to

hear so many new pieces. What have you all prepared, I wonder?" Especially brief songs would be rejected, but otherwise, we were free to devote our music to gods of our choosing.

"Is this to say that, each year, there are as many new songs produced as there are students?" Lady Rozemyne asked me.

"Not quite. This is a requirement only for archnobles and archduke candidates." Many laynobles and mednobles lacked a dedicated music tutor to consult. Even if they had one, as they were studying so intensely for their graduation, they would not even have time to compose their own songs.

Because so many students had such limited exposure to music, the professors had a hard time determining where everyone's talent lay. They had to decide who should spend what little time they had on the harspiel and who should focus on other instruments instead. Professor Rauffen said as much each year when he had to announce how the instruments were being distributed.

"Is that so?" Lady Rozemyne asked, cocking her head at my explanation. "Professor Hirschur rarely ever visits the Ehrenfest Dormitory, so I know painfully little about our teachers' hardships. In truth, it feels strange having a supervisor who actually spends time in the dormitory she oversees."

A female supervisor had been sent from Alexandria to replace Professor Fraularm, but as I had not taken the scholar course, I had yet to actually see her. Kenntrips had informed me that she had lost her husband during the Lanzenave War.

"I cannot even imagine a dormitory without a supervisor," I said.

"I doubt most would need to."

Without a dormitory supervisor at hand, what did the students of Ehrenfest do when they had inquiries about classes, wanted to retake exams, or received challenges to ditter matches? Did they have to contact Professor Hirschur by ordonnanz?

I was still deep in thought when Lady Rozemyne raised a hand. "Professor Pauline, I have a question," she said. "For the latter task, would it be acceptable to use a song I have already composed?"

Our teacher paused. Under normal circumstances, the answer would naturally be yes. My brother had told me what to expect long ago—back when he was in his third year—so I had finished my composition well in

advance. It was a fairly common practice, but Lady Rozemyne had gone above and beyond, and her previous songs were already rather popular. Professor Pauline must have been eager to hear something brand-new.

“I shall accept any song that you have not already debuted,” she said at last.

“Hmm... I wonder which one I should choose,” Lady Rozemyne mused aloud.

At once, I was overcome with the urge to look away. Had she truly composed so many songs that she knew not which one to play? Having to devote attention to my other classes meant I had only recently finished my own composition. I intended to hone it with my tutor, but it would be beyond me to make another entirely from scratch.

“Rozemyne,” Lord Wilfried whispered, not caring to address her formally.

“Yes, Wilfried?” she asked in just as low a voice.

“Professor Pauline means a song made with your instructor, not with Uncle. Do you have any?”

“Of course. Rosina always yearns for new songs, so we have made plenty without his involvement. I see music as more than just a means to bargain with him, you know.”

I exchanged a look with Lord Ortwin. Evidently, we both had the same question in mind.

“Have you made plenty *with* his involvement, Lady Rozemyne?” Lord Ortwin asked hesitantly. “Erm, since the time you were in Ehrenfest, I mean.”

Lady Rozemyne nodded as though it were a matter of course. “I would hum melodies of my own creation. Ferdinand would arrange them to be played on the harspiel and give them lyrics,” she explained with a smile. “He did the majority of the work, so the accolades are squarely his.”

In other words, she must have worked with him on the love songs she had already debuted.

“Um, what of the songs you composed with Lord Wilfried...?” I asked.

Lady Rozemyne blinked at me in confusion. “There are none. Not once has he asked to have a new song composed for him. Isn’t that right, Wilfried?”

“Yeah,” he attested. “This is my first time actually needing one.”

“It feels a bit late to sneak you one of mine, so please work closely with your tutor to create your own.”

I had wished to point out how strange it was to compose love songs with a man to whom one was not engaged, but Lady Rozemyne must not have understood me. Had she really not made a single song with Lord Wilfried when they were together?

She composed with her music tutor while Lord Ferdinand was absent, but not with Lord Wilfried? Could it be that, when they were engaged, Lady Rozemyne scorned and belittled him without meaning to?

My heart lurched. Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne’s engagement born of mutual love was something to celebrate, but I feared that almost no consideration was being shown to the latter’s previous partner.

“The professor appears to be free,” Lady Rozemyne said. “I shall go take my exam.” She then departed with her harspiel in hand, ready to pass yet another subject on the very first day of class. Professor Pauline insisted that she begin with her song to the gods.

As soon as Lady Rozemyne readied her instrument, the other students stopped practicing to focus on her. It was normal for her playing to receive special attention, but this year, she commanded a greater presence than ever before. In her more mature, more stunning form, she could enrapture an audience before she played a single note.

“I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world...”

No sooner had Lady Rozemyne started to play than the blue ring on her slender white finger shone with the light of a blessing. Hearing her extol the virtues of the gods made it all too clear how much her voice had changed; her clear yet immature way of speaking had given way to the gentle, high-pitched tones of a woman. Many could only sigh in awe of what they were witnessing.

“I was told you had a hard time adjusting to adult harspiels after your transformation, but that was superb,” Professor Pauline opined when Lady Rozemyne reached the end of her first song. “I shall now hear your original composition.”

“At once,” Lady Rozemyne said. “I devote this next song to the supreme gods.”

She launched into her next piece: a vow to spend eternity with one’s

bound partner. The story behind her engagement to Lord Ferdinand had been announced during the Archduke Conference, so every duchy knew it well. Her performance felt like a celebration of their storybook romance and the joy it had brought them both.

"After receiving the protection of the Goddess of Water and the guidance of the God of Fire, Lady Rozemyne must have eagerly awaited the ripening of her rafel," one female student said.

"At one point, I feared it had fallen into the hands of Forsernte the Goddess of Harvests," added another. "I hope to one day read about these events in one of Lady Elantura's books."

"Absolutely. I cannot wait for this year's volume."

The girls were clasping hands over their mouths, whispering among themselves with sparkles in their eyes. I, on the other hand, was struck with a slight sense of unease.

This was one of the songs Lady Rozemyne composed without Lord Ferdinand, was it not? Does that mean it was created when she planned to spend eternity with Lord Wilfried? Or would she have sung it to Lord Sigiswald when her engagement changed? No, I doubt it... She had abandoned everything to rescue Lord Ferdinand.

The divine colors of the supreme gods dancing through the air made it clear that Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand would have a long and prosperous future together. Their dazzling light only emphasized the cruel darkness into which Lord Wilfried had been thrust. I glanced at him, but his eyes were cast down, making it hard for me to gauge his emotional response to the song.

What does Lady Rozemyne think of his current situation? Is there anything I can do to help him and spare him the anguish of any further hardships?

My fists clenched, I gazed up at the light and darkness swirling about her performance. I was overcome with a vague, lasting frustration toward one of my dear friends, and thinking on my own would do nothing to resolve it or the matter at hand. Rather than act on mere assumptions, it would surely be best to ask Lady Rozemyne what she and Ehrenfest intended to do.

"Lady Rozemyne," I said upon her return, my resolve steeled, "there is

something I wish to discuss with you at length. Although this is rather sudden, might I ask for your time this coming Earthday? I shall prepare the tea and such."

"The day after tomorrow?" Lady Rozemyne asked with a giggle. "Ferdinand will need to approve, but I see no reason for him to oppose us associating. Given the chance, I should also like to introduce you to my new retainers. They really are adorable."

Tea Party Consultation

“I thank you ever so much for your invitation, Lady Hannelore.”

“Thank you ever so much for coming, and for granting me this time on your day of rest.”

“Worry not—as it so happens, this is the only day when my retainers can move freely at this hour.”

I turned my attention to those who had accompanied my friend into the room, and my eyes widened in an instant. All around her, there were magic tools that resembled Schwartz and Weiss.

Goodness! “Adorable” was an understatement!

“Eheh. Meet my retainers, made recently by Ferdinand,” Lady Rozemyne crowed. “The light-green one is Adrett. His main job is to search for documents in the Library of Alexandria. The brown one is Risa, and the red one, Nelly. They were designed to protect the library from attackers without damaging any of the books within. They would normally be stationed back home, but they serve as my knights here at the Royal Academy.”

Each time Lady Rozemyne introduced one of her shumils, she gave its feystone an appreciative stroke. She reached toward the last of the group.

“This light-blue one is Dinan. He is their captain of sorts, capable of both library work and guard duty. He can even speak, to an extent. Dino, this is Lady Hannelore, a friend of mine.”

Dinan turned his sharp little eyes on me. “Hannelore. Friend of master. Memorized,” he said. “Dino” must have been something of a nickname.

“Oh my. How adorable!” I exclaimed. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Dinan.”

“I asked to have guards shaped like Lessy, but the idea was refused, as such creatures would unsettle my fellow students,” Lady Rozemyne explained. She spoke as though hoping I would side with her, but I had to agree with Lord Ferdinand; having tiny versions of the grun she used as her highbeast wandering about the Academy would cause problems, without a

doubt.

As we continued our conversation, Cordula and the others checked over the sweets Lady Rozemyne had brought from Alexandria and placed them neatly on the table. Only when my head attendant gave me the signal did I insist that Lady Rozemyne sit down.

“We brought some sweets for you to try—our own twist on a recipe we purchased from Ehrenfest,” I announced. “You once used Dunkelfelger rohres to make pound cake, did you not? Well, these are rohre cookies.”

Our court chefs had gone through extensive trial and error to make the best use of the recipe we had purchased during the spring Archduke Conference. Their excitement had resulted in a vast array of cookies for me to try—much to my own excitement.

It was thanks to the chefs’ research that we knew to chop the dried rohres up rather than put them in whole. They had taken the recipe one step further, sandwiching cream and rohres between two thin cookies, but we had elected not to go that far today. As wonderful as the treat was, it was hard to eat elegantly. More experimentation was in order before we could start serving it at tea parties.

Still contemplating the kitchen’s reports, I took a demonstrative bite of one of our cookies. Lady Rozemyne picked one up in turn, tried it, and then spent a good moment chewing with a contemplative look on her face.

“I see you have done wonders with the recipe,” she said at last, beaming from ear to ear. “You even reduced the sugar content to account for the sweetness of the rohres. I am so pleased to know you have such experimental chefs.”

She can tell that much from a single bite?

“From Alexandria, we have brought rikose tarts,” Lady Rozemyne continued. “We, too, have used one of our duchy’s specialty ingredients to help make Ehrenfest’s recipe our own. In truth, I wished to incorporate Old Ahrensbach’s more popular recipes, but I doubt we will achieve much on that front. Sugar is too hard to obtain now that the country gate to Lanzenave has been closed.”

My dear friend seemed troubled, and for good reason. Old Ahrensbach’s trade with Lanzenave had allowed it to dominate the sugar trade. Now that its gate was shut, its saccharine treats were far too costly to make.

“Old Ahrensbach relied too heavily on sugar, intent on flaunting their

status as the only duchy with an open country gate," Lady Rozemyne said. "Based on just how much they imported, we suspect the archducal family and nobles saw goods made with local products as fit only for commoners."

She wished to pivot to recipes that used the duchy's specialties, but most of Old Ahrensbach's nobles preferred the flavors they were used to.

"Old Ahrensbach's nobles are accustomed to Lanzenave spices and sugar, so I cannot simply tell them to stop wishing for more," Lady Rozemyne explained. "Though, I must admit, it is thanks to their passion that we are making such fast progress on developing our own spices."

Alexandrian nobles were immersed in research, eager to continue eating the recipes they had grown up with. Lady Rozemyne's description of their laboratories warmed my heart.

"We have made the most progress with sugar, so we should start exporting some next year," she informed me. "Dunkelfelger has the perfect climate for its production, so perhaps we could negotiate during the next Archduke Conference."

Does she want me to pass this information on to Father before then?

"Because of everything that happened, the honey found in the north of Klassenberg and Gilessenmeyer has been in especially high demand this year," Lady Rozemyne said. "I expect even greater changes to come next year, when the Zent starts reopening the country gates."

This year, the Zent had put her all into redrawing the country's borders and preparing the new duchies. She had announced during the Archduke Conference that next year, when things were more stable, she would restore our contact with the world outside of Yurgenschmidt.

"Is Dunkelfelger ready?" Lady Rozemyne asked.

"Our people have eagerly awaited the reopening of our country gate ever since your visit. However, as we acquired more land when the borders were redrawn, we are focusing our efforts there for the time being." It would probably be a while before we asked the Zent to open our gate; it was more important that we integrate the Old Werkestock nobles and prepare our newly attained territory.

"There were no changes to Hauchletzte's and Gilessenmeyer's borders, so I suspect they will ask for their gates to be opened first," Lady Rozemyne mused. "Gilessenmeyer in particular will want to regain their honor posthaste."

I nodded in agreement, then asked my retainers to pour me some more tea. They acted at once, also putting new sweets on the table to replace the ones we had eaten. It must have been clear that the nature of our conversation was about to change because Lady Rozemyne's attendants refreshed her drink before taking a noticeable step back.

Determined, I gave Lady Rozemyne a sound-blocker.

"So, what did you wish to discuss?" she asked.

"I think you could stand to be more considerate of Lord Wilfried."

"More considerate of him...?" Lady Rozemyne echoed, her head tilted to one side. I could not tell whether she was scrutinizing me or truly did not understand my meaning.

"It comes across as rather rude to have made love songs exclusively with Lord Ferdinand when you were engaged to another," I said, referring back to our conversation in music class.

Lady Rozemyne gave a troubled smile. "I started making songs with Ferdinand before my baptism, and we kept making them until circumstances saw him sent to Ahrensbach. Perhaps my appearance at the time made it seem harmless enough, but nobody warned me that what we were doing might be problematic. The harspiel concert we held was well received, and many asked for more songs."

I had pictured Lady Rozemyne as the mature young woman before me now, but she had been but a child when she and Lord Ferdinand started composing music together. Still, she must have cared for him even at that age, so my concern for Lord Wilfried remained.

"We created music of other genres, but love songs just so happened to sell the best," Lady Rozemyne insisted. "I could not make them with my musician, as she was raised in the temple and had too limited an understanding of romance."

"Could you not have made them with Lord Wilfried, though?" I was somewhat taken aback by the idea of marketing sheet music, but the matter at hand was far too important to be put aside. "I cannot help but feel that you prioritized Lord Ferdinand at the expense of your own fiancé."

"My apologies. Lord Wilfried took no pleasure in practicing the harspiel, and I thought it improper to summon him all the way to the temple to compose."

Ah...

I, too, found practicing the harspiel a chore, and the thought of being summoned to help compose music was anything but pleasant. Perhaps, at the time, Lord Wilfried simply had not cared that Lady Rozemyne was making songs with Lord Ferdinand.

"Then I must apologize," I said. "If the idea did not appeal to him, then forcing Lord Wilfried to participate would not have been wise. Might I assume Lord Ferdinand takes an interest in composing?"

"He does, to the point that I could trade songs for favors and rewards. Money and passion are seldom enough to sway him, as the people of Dunkelfelger surely know from how often they tried to entice him into playing ditter."

During our music lesson, I had imagined Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand singing their love for one another while Lord Wilfried was none the wiser. Her mention of "favors and rewards" dispelled any such romantic imagery in a heartbeat.

Yes, I remember now. This *is Lady Rozemyne's true nature. What led me to conjure up thoughts of romance?*

I thought back to a past attempt to speak with her about love stories, and my surprise when she had launched into a passionate rant about the library city she wished to create. Her accessories from Lord Ferdinand, all made with his mana, had felt like proof of their love, but I must have been mistaken. Or perhaps Lord Wilfried had erred in saying that Lady Rozemyne had been in love with Lord Ferdinand from a young age.

"E-Erm, Lady Hannelore... If Wilfried had been interested in new music and recipes, I would have bartered with him as well, or at least sold them to him for the same price I charged my adoptive father. My songs would never have been too valuable to him anyway, as any new ones I produced inevitably reached him through Aub Ehrenfest."

I assumed she was trying to save face, but all this talk of bartering made my head spin. It had never even crossed my mind that she was charging even *Aub Ehrenfest* for her products.

"You sell music and recipes to members of your family?" I asked.

"Of course. Is it not important to demonstrate the value of one's knowledge?"

She needs to demonstrate her value to her own family? I... Oh!

Lady Rozemyne was so exceptionally close with Lord Wilfried and

Lady Charlotte that it had completely slipped my mind, but she had entered Ehrenfest's archducal family through adoption. Unlike the aub's children, she must have constantly needed to prove her worth as an archduke candidate.

I was terribly embarrassed to have learned the truth of the matter—that my issue with Lady Rozemyne had stemmed from my own unfortunate assumption. But at the same time, I could now say with complete certainty that she was largely ignorant to how she was perceived.

"I understand now that your songs were created not out of romance, but as the products of a stark business relationship. However, I maintain that choosing to perform a love song that you made with Lord Ferdinand was unwise. Each time there is an incident of this nature, Lord Wilfried is belittled over having his engagement canceled." If she had gone with a regular song instead, we would not have needed to have this conversation in the first place.

Lady Rozemyne furrowed her brow. "You speak of the song I chose for class, correct? It was a vow to keep a promise made with someone precious to you. What about that was romantic?"

For a moment, we merely stared at one another. We had yet another grave misunderstanding on our hands.

"The focus of your song—a promise between new family exchanged in the supreme gods' presence... Were you not referring to your Starbind Ceremony?" I asked.

"N-Not at all. It was about when I was adopted."

"And your wish to 'always have our hearts as one, no matter the time or place'?"

"Was my desire to stay connected to my old family, even as my status changed..." Lady Rozemyne whispered, shrinking with each answer.

At last, we had reached the truth: Lady Rozemyne had wanted to express not a thriving romance, but her enduring love for her old family. I supposed that was clear now that she had told me, but adoptions were not common enough for most people to make the distinction. I would never have expected such a great disparity between the lyricist's intentions and the meaning assumed by her audience.

"Ngh... Do you think *everyone* saw it as a love song?" Lady Rozemyne asked.

“Before, I saw it as a song expressing elation at being engaged to one’s beloved and impatience for their Starbinding. I sincerely apologize, but... I imagine most others thought the same.”

Lady Rozemyne froze, covering her mouth with her hand. She might not have meant it as a love song, but I could tell the lyrics had come from her heart.

Unsure how else to contribute, I released my sound-blocker and said, “Shall we ease our minds with a spot of tea?” I waved over our attendants, who had been watching us patiently despite the anxious looks on their faces.

“Lieseleta, it seems my song of choice was interpreted as a love song...” Lady Rozemyne muttered.

“Indeed, reports from the archnobles reached the same conclusion. Lord Ferdinand has already been informed.”

“Come again?”

“He stated that, although he doubted you chose a love song on purpose, there is little wrong with your classmates thinking otherwise.”

As disparaging as they were, the rumors about Lord Wilfried were of no consequence to Lord Ferdinand or Lady Rozemyne, nor would they impact the pair’s royally decreed engagement. Thinking back to the Lanzenave War, Lord Ferdinand would not care at all as long as no harm came to his fiancée.

No doubt Lord Ferdinand actively wishes to cause confusion, as he made perfectly clear before.

Lady Rozemyne sipped her tea, enjoyed a few more snacks, and then picked up her sound-blocker. Thus resumed our private conversation. I understood now that she had no bad intentions; as long as I explained the situation to her, she would surely be more considerate of what Lord Wilfried was having to endure.

“It would seem there have been misconceptions on many levels,” I said. “Lady Rozemyne, are you not aware of Lord Wilfried’s position or the rumors currently surrounding him?”

“I am, but...” Lady Rozemyne placed a contemplative hand on her cheek. “I was made to change fiancés far sooner than many think—the consequence of an unexpected development—so this is anything but a new situation for him. You know this, do you not? You were there for our

celebration in Ehrenfest.”

I thought back to the Ehrenfest nobles speaking merrily about Lady Rozemyne’s engagement into the royal family. Lord Wilfried had seemed strong and unfazed, stating simply that there was no helping a royal decree.

“The royal decree is to blame for this incident, and for the rumors it produced,” Lady Rozemyne said. “I am expected only to treat Lord Wilfried as I always have. Unless he outright asks for my assistance, I do not intend to provide it.”

Was it just my imagination, or was Lady Rozemyne perfectly content with casting Lord Wilfried aside? I had thought her apparent lack of concern came from ignorance of what he was going through, but even now, she exuded none of the worry or passion she had shown when rescuing Lord Ferdinand.

“I shall elaborate, but only to prevent any further misconceptions,” Lady Rozemyne continued. “The current situation is exactly what Lord Wilfried desired, so I doubt he would want my help to begin with.”

“Whatever do you mean?” I asked. The very notion that Lord Wilfried *wanted* everyone to know of his shame seemed absurd to me. I clenched my fists under the table in fear of what my friend might say next.

“Lord Wilfried never wished to marry me. He opened negotiations with the archduke, asking to be removed from his position as the next aub, long before the royal decree brought our engagement to an end.”

It felt as if someone had struck me on the head. Lord Wilfried *wanted* to be removed from his position as the next Aub Ehrenfest?

“But... why?” I asked.

“You will need to ask him. It was quite some time ago, and many things have changed, so I know not what he thinks now. Even if I did, as the aub of Alexandria, I would not be in a position to tell you.”

“That much is true...” I said, but it did nothing to quell my curiosity. “This news is such a shock to me. I thought you two were exceptionally close. It was with envy that I gazed upon your hair ornament and its wonderful rainbow feystones.” She had since replaced it with an accessory from Lord Ferdinand, but I could still picture its splendor.

“Um... That, too, was from Ferdinand,” she confessed. “We only said it was from Lord Wilfried to avoid offending Lady Detlinde. Truth be told, Lord Wilfried has never once gifted me anything.”

“Is that... so...?”

Now that she mentioned it, I could not recall having seen Lady Rozemyne wear an engagement feystone from Lord Wilfried. It was not rare for those engaged at a young age to be unable to prepare one right away and to wait until they developed mana-sensing. I had thought the hairpin was a compromise for her to wear in the meantime, but apparently not.

“The engagement was necessary for Lord Wilfried to become the next aub,” Lady Rozemyne said. “It was a political decision made without considering our mana. We never did anything that even resembled courtship.”

I gathered, then, that their mana quantities had not matched. They could remain brother and sister, even if only through adoption, but staying engaged would ultimately have resulted in torment. I could only imagine the vast rift that must have formed between them when they developed mana-sensing.

The more I thought about it, the more frustrated I became with Aub Ehrenfest for enforcing such an engagement in the first place. Lord Wilfried would never have been satisfied, unable to become the archduke without marrying a woman whose mana dwarfed his own, and Lady Rozemyne would have been doomed to a marriage that could never produce children.

“For the duchy’s sake or not, I cannot imagine a crueler pairing...” I muttered.

“At the time, we were both still developing our mana, so it was ideal for unifying the nobles of the duchy. Is that not the purpose of noble engagements?”

“Perhaps, but you are my friends. I suppose it is good to know that you both supported the cancellation of your engagement.”

“I am glad you understand,” Lady Rozemyne said, a relieved smile on her face.

I was glad as well. If not for our conversation, I might have acted on an unfortunate misunderstanding.

“To summarize, I do not think Lord Wilfried is so bothered by the rumors and his current status that you need to worry about him,” my friend assured me. “Let us set him aside and focus on something more enjoyable —especially as these sound-blockers present such an excellent

opportunity.”

I agreed and elected to put Lord Wilfried out of my mind. It was not right for a guest to feel the need to comfort her host.

“Speaking of engagements,” Lady Rozemyne continued, her golden eyes gleaming as she leaned toward me, “you recently had your suitors chosen for you, did you not? I know Lords Kenntrips and Rasantark by name, but that is all. What kind of men are they? Lord Rasantark really seems to cherish you. Whom do you fancy most?”

“Whom do I fancy...? Well, it is still too soon to say. Is there a reason for your excitement, Lady Rozemyne?”

“Oh?” She tittered, doubtless amused by my response. “Were you not just as eager to ask me about my fiancés?”

“Although I expect to be asked those same questions during every tea party I attend this year, I did not invite you here so urgently to speak about Kenntrips and Rasantark.”

“Perhaps not, but you would do well to prioritize them over Lord Wilfried. No matter what crisis a man might face, showing concern for anyone but your fiancé will only result in you being scolded. Even though it is none of their business, and you cannot help how you feel about him.”

I was so overcome with embarrassment and shame that I wanted to weep. I had asked to speak with Lady Rozemyne out of concern for how she belittled her former fiancé, only to belittle my current engagement candidates in the process. Still, my mind was elsewhere. I could not stop thinking about what Lord Wilfried must be feeling, why he would give up on being an aub, and how I could be of use to him.

I had no right to be annoyed with Lady Rozemyne.

Despite the growing bitterness in my chest, I continued to smile and speak as though everything were fine. I did my best to smoothly turn the conversation away from my engagement candidates and toward what she was doing while the rest of us were in class, whether she would return home early as she normally did, and other such things about her life at the Royal Academy.

“So, will you still be returning to Alexandria for the Dedication Ritual?” I asked.

“Indeed. It is important for the duchy, and as I am leaving all of the winter socializing to Lord Ferdinand, there are many nobles I will need to

meet upon my return.”

It must have been problematic for her to be at the Royal Academy during such a rare opportunity to meet giebes of distant provinces, but as an aub, it was also important for her to unify the Alexandria Dormitory and ensure that those orphaned from the Lanzenave War—Lady Letizia included—were not being mistreated.

“The Royal Academy has its library, and I do enjoy spending time with you,” Lady Rozemyne said. “Even so, I cannot help but miss home.”

“Is that so?”

“Do you not miss your family when spending time here at the Academy?”

Seeing my dear friend cock her head at me, I cocked my own in return. Back home, where everyone had their own duties to attend to, I was used to seeing my family only when we gathered for dinner. My brother had come of age and left the northern building, so most of my time there was spent with Raufereg and Lungtase. Life at the Royal Academy was far more energetic, and mealtimes in the dining hall were always entertaining. Yes, it had its troubles—such as having to anticipate what Raufereg might do next, or how those obsessed with ditter would act outside of their parents’ supervision—but I was never lonely here.

Why would Lady Rozemyne feel differently?

As I understood it, Lord Ferdinand continued to live in Alexandria’s guest chambers, while Lady Letizia was in the temple. I doubted that her life back home was any more exciting than it was here.

“In truth,” I said, “I am relieved to be free of my mother’s grumbling. You live alone in your castle’s archducal living area, do you not? Is it not more lively here at the Royal Academy?”

Lady Rozemyne looked dumbstruck. Was I to blame?

“Under normal circumstances,” I continued, “one might feel a tad lonely away from one’s usual assortment of retainers. But I would imagine most students enjoy being here at the Academy, away from their family—or rather, from their parents.”

“Do you not wish to spend time with your parents, Lady Hannelore?” Lady Rozemyne asked. She spoke cautiously, as if attempting to gauge my reaction, but my answer was so obviously “no” that the very question took me by surprise. “I suppose I did not feel this way last year, but...”

“Ah, yes. This is your first year away from your family in Ehrenfest. Perhaps, being apart from them, you miss Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte?” It had felt somewhat isolating being here without my elder brother, especially when he had dealt with any incidents that arose in the dormitory. Lady Rozemyne must have felt lonely due to not having anyone to consult.

“Indeed, that might be the case...”

“In that sense, I suppose I have not truly been separated from my family. A normal archduke candidate only ever leaves their duchy for marriage, after all. Perhaps I will feel the same if ever I am wed elsewhere.”

I wonder what that would be like...

On many occasions, I had spoken to women who had married into Dunkelfelger, but they mostly complained about how hard it was to adjust to our culture. I myself vaguely wished to leave my home, though I had never seriously considered what moving to another duchy would entail. My education had covered how to act in formal situations as an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger, but I was unsure what my life would be like elsewhere, or how I would truly feel about leaving. Lady Rozemyne’s lonesomeness made me apprehensive about leaping into an entirely new environment through marriage.

“How is Clarissa? Does she miss her family as well?” I asked. We both knew her, and I suspected she was going through more or less the same thing.

Lady Rozemyne thought for a moment, then gave a troubled smile. “She was Starbound in the summer, but I have not seen her yearn for her family in Ehrenfest *or* Alexandria. Perhaps she reserves those emotions for Hartmut, but the Clarissa I know is always in good spirits.”

“That is to be expected, I suppose. This *is* the same woman who wished to marry one of your retainers purely so she could join your service.”

I was eager to know the emotional state of women who had married into other duchies, but Clarissa was far from a useful point of reference. My mind wandered, searching for anyone else I could ask about, at which point the teleportation door connected to the dormitory swung open. A student hurried inside, whispered something in Cordula’s ear, and then departed just as quickly. The slight furrow that appeared in my head attendant’s brow meant it had to be bad news.

Despite my curiosity, I could not interrupt a tea party I was hosting for the sake of a personal matter. I tried to suppress my anxiety as I gestured to my drink, asking to have it refreshed. Cordula brought over the teapot and spoke to me in a low voice as she poured.

“Rasantark and Kenntrips seem to be dueling in the training grounds. The student wished to know whether they had permission. Professor Rauffen has been contacted, but...”

Excuse me? What are those two doing?!

Although fighting in the dormitory was forbidden, ditter played with the dormitory supervisor’s approval was perfectly acceptable. Thus, onlookers were unable to tell whether the duel in question was sanctioned, a continuation of training, or a personal clash. Professor Rauffen would normally have resolved the matter, but he must have been absent; I saw no other reason for a student to interrupt an archduke candidate’s tea party.

Whatever shall I do?

“Lady Hannelore, have Dregarnuhr’s threads been tangled?” Lady Rozemyne asked, having no doubt sensed that something was amiss. “Forgive me, but I must take my leave. I have had my fill of tea and snacks.”

“Please wait, Lady Rozemyne,” I said as she got ready to depart.

“Pay me no mind; knotted threads are best undone quickly. Another tea party shall be held at the library soon enough. We may speak again there. Lieseleta, prepare for our departure.”

Before I could insist otherwise, Lady Rozemyne bade me farewell. Cordula whispered in my ear to let her go, her features set in a bitter smile.

“My sincerest apologies, Lady Rozemyne...” I said.

“Think nothing of it. Had you invited more guests, there might have been a problem, but this was a private tea party between the two of us. There is no need to fret about me when a catastrophe might be brewing.” A mischievous smile spread across Lady Rozemyne’s face. “Furthermore, this is nothing compared to all the times I ended tea parties abruptly by losing consciousness.”

On that note, my dear friend departed with her retainers and shumils. I was both moved by her adaptability and ashamed to have needed to rely on the compassion of my own guest.

“Lady Hannelore, there is no time to wallow in self-pity. We must head

to the training grounds at once," Cordula warned me. "Those two are acting without permission, I would assume."

"Indeed. I did not authorize a duel, and as Kenntrips is an apprentice scholar, I see no reason to believe they are training as knights. Come, Cordula; we must stop them at once. I shall entrust cleaning up the tea party room to Andrea and the others. Heilliese, send away anyone watching the fight or training nearby. I will close the grounds for the time being. Luitpold, prepare a meeting room so that I may interrogate the culprits."

"Understood."

My orders given, I promptly departed with Cordula and my knights.

A Push from Behind

Upon arriving at the training grounds, I found eager students watching from the audience stands. My suspicion was correct—Professor Rauffen truly was absent.

“Kenntrips!” one of the spectators yelled. “Stop running and get some hits in!”

“You’re getting too heated, Rasantark!” roared another. “It’s leaving you wide open!”

Beyond the jeering crowd, I glimpsed flashes of blue capes. What were Kenntrips and Rasantark thinking? Even as apprentices, a scholar would not stand a chance against a knight.

“The grounds are closed!” Heilliese called. “Leave at once!”

“These two did not acquire the proper permission!” Cordula added. “Spectators might be charged with failing to stop errant fighting!”

They started shooing away the students, who scattered at once for fear of being punished by association. Their departure gave me a clear view of the battle: Rasantark was launching attacks while Kenntrips focused on defense.

“That is enough, both of you!” I shouted, but neither of them stopped. Kenntrips merely glanced in my direction, and Rasantark was either pointedly ignoring me or too absorbed in his assault to notice. I turned to my head attendant and said, “Cordula, step back.”

I formed my schtappe, then channeled so much mana into it that Rasantark would *have* to acknowledge me. It crackled in my hand as a bluish-white light glowed at its tip. Only then did the apprentice knight pause, but it was too late—I swung my schtappe down and shouted at the top of my lungs.

“THAT IS ENOUGH!”



A bolt of blue-white mana shot straight toward Rasantark. He dodged at once, his shield arm raised, while Cordula and my knights cried, "*Geteilt!*" A massive explosion resounded moments later, creating shockwaves that spread all the way back to me.

"Lady Hannelore, that was far too dangerous!" Rasantark yelped.

"Yet it paled in comparison to the danger you are causing! Attacking an apprentice scholar without restraint... What in the world were you thinking?! You were not given approval for this, were you?"

Rasantark faltered in the face of my sharp eyes. "But, Lady Hannelore! There are times when men have no choice but to fight!"

"Duels are strictly forbidden. If you wish to battle, then seek permission and do it properly: in a fair, honest ditter match. A knight of Dunkelfelger succumbing to emotion and bringing his might to bear against an unprepared scholar is simply unforgivable. Expect my brother to hear about this."

It was then that Professor Rauffen burst onto the scene. "Forgive me, Lady Hannelore!" he boomed. "You were forced to carry out my work in my absence! Kenntrips, Rasantark—you weren't authorized to duel. Are you prepared to face the consequences?"

"I apologize," Kenntrips said without any further prompting. But his words only angered Rasantark, who leapt on him in a rage.

"Are you serious?!" the apprentice knight yelled. "Tell them the truth! Tell them you never fought back!"

"Rasantark?!" I shrieked, but Professor Rauffen leapt down from the audience stands, seized the knight by the wrist, and threw him aside. He then bound the troublemaker with light, forcing him to calm down.

Was it true that Kenntrips had never fought back? Even when Rasantark had sprung at him and grabbed him by the chest, the apprentice scholar had made no attempt to strike back. Now he simply rubbed the creases out of his clothes. Kenntrips's composure only served to anger his opponent further, as Rasantark continued to roar from where he was restrained on the ground.

"We have before us fortune beyond our wildest dreams!" he exclaimed, his chestnut eyes swimming with a multitude of colors as his fury swelled. "I was so grateful that I wanted to thank the gods with a ditter match. You must have felt the same. Why, then, are you letting our fortune go?! Answer

me, Kenntrips!”

Kenntrips appeared calm as he gazed down at Rasantark, but colors swirled in his eyes too. “There was nothing for me to let go of. Fortune was never within my reach to begin with.”

“It might not be in my hands right now, but I *will* obtain it. I’ll spare no effort. If you won’t even strive for it, then at least have the decency to stay out of my way!”

“I can make no promises. Whether you obstruct me or not, I shall continue to act in accordance with my wishes. We are both merely following our desires—what is wrong with that?”

I could not deduce what they were fighting over, but I *could* tell that Rasantark’s assault was unilateral. Kenntrips remained the model of cold rejection. The two half-brothers had seemed so close before that I had no idea how to mediate a fight between them.

“Lady Hannelore!” Professor Rauffen boomed, tearing me from my thoughts so suddenly that I twitched. “It would be best to separate these two until things between them have calmed down. Kenntrips appears in control of his emotions; could you interrogate him for details?”

“If she’s going to interrogate anyone, it should be—”

“*I’ll* deal with you, hothead,” our supervisor said, cutting Rasantark short. He grabbed the unruly apprentice and hoisted him up with ease. “Kenntrips, go to Lady Hannelore.”

So, he intended to separate the pair by force. Kenntrips rode his highbeast to the audience stands while Rasantark watched me over Professor Rauffen’s shoulder, a look of extreme displeasure on his face.

“Lady Hannelore,” he called as they went, “I apologize, but I must ask that you heal Kenntrips. Cure the stupidity that will ruin his future as a scholar.”

I merely blinked at him. Rasantark had never spoken in such a manner before.

“Kenntrips!” he roared. “I am not giving up!” There was more he wanted to shout, I was sure, but that was the most he managed to get out before he was finally taken away.

“What... in the world was all that?” I asked, looking up at Kenntrips. Despite having focused purely on defense, he was still covered in wounds from the attacks he had not been able to dodge.

“Do you mean to interrogate me here?” he asked. “We will need sound-blockers, at the very least. You might as well ask to be embarrassed otherwise.”

In other words, *I* must have been the cause of their dispute. I was immediately compelled to cover my ears, but this was not something I could simply run away from.

“Luitpold has prepared a room,” I said. “Let us go there. Do you need me to heal you first? I refer to your wounds, of course, not the apparent ‘stupidity’ that Rasantark thought it necessary to mention.”

Kenntrips answered my question by indicating—and then promptly downing—the rejuvenation potion he had on hand.

We moved to the meeting room, where we sat facing each other. Under normal circumstances, a scholar would have recorded our conversation and submitted their work to their professor to be graded, but Cordula understood the gravity of our situation. She placed sound-blockers on the table while shaking her head.

“It is enough for us to know that Elbberg and Brennwaerme have crossed spears,” she said.

Elbberg and Brennwaerme—the God of Mountains and the God of Passion, respectively—had fought over Verfuhremeer the Goddess of Seas. I glared at Cordula for comparing my suitors to them, then handed one of the sound-blockers to Kenntrips.

“I... I shall hear the circumstances of your battle!” I stammered, resisting the urge to sprint out of the room in tears. “P-Posthaste!”

To think I must interrogate a man over a duel held in my name...

“How was your tea party with Lady Rozemyne?” Kenntrips asked, answering one question with another.

“H-Hmm? This is *your* interrogation!”

“Our battle arose from a clash of opinions about your Starbinding. More importantly—did the tea party conclude as you hoped?”

“As I hoped...?” I repeated, blinking at him. I was unsure why Kenntrips took such a keen interest in the matter.

“How has Lady Rozemyne said that she can assist you? And what plans did the two of you devise? As you must be aware, I cannot provide my help without knowing. Oh, and if you had any doubts, Rasantark has no desire to aid you, so you should take great care to keep this information from him.”

I continued to stare at the apprentice scholar. Not a word that came out of his mouth made sense to me. I had not devised any “plans” with Lady Rozemyne, nor had that been my reason for inviting her to a tea party.

“Um... To what plans do you refer?” I finally asked.

“If you asked her to help unite you with Lord Wilfried, then surely one or two ideas—”

“I did no such thing!” I declared, emphatically shaking my head. Was my reputation truly sinister enough to warrant such an assumption?

“Excuse me? And why not?” Kenntrips asked, eyeing me as though I had said something truly absurd. “Did you not urgently invite her to a tea party to request her assistance with Lord Wilfried before she returns home for the Dedication Ritual?”

“No. I thought to ask for her help in repairing his damaged reputation.”

“You held a tea party over something so pointless?”

“It is *not* pointless,” I retorted with a glare.

Kenntrips grimaced as if the very act of speaking to me made his head ache. “Lord Wilfried needs only to find a new fiancée; then his reputation will recover well enough on its own. How can you act so leisurely when you are running out of time? Do you truly wish to marry Rasantark or me? Does the love that inspired you to betray our duchy mean so little to you?”

I could only swallow in response. Each question drove me deeper and deeper into a corner.

“The duty to carry out the oaths made through bride-stealing ditter falls not just to Lord Wilfried, but to Lady Rozemyne as well. If you would only explain that to her, she would not refuse to aid you. And with her support, marrying into Ehrenfest would be trivial.”

Kenntrips spoke as though I wished to marry into Ehrenfest as a matter of course, when the truth of the matter was far less simple. “Because his engagement to Lady Rozemyne was canceled, Lord Wilfried seems to have lost his position as Ehrenfest’s next aub,” I explained. “Therefore—”

“If the loss of one engagement is why he no longer has that security, then he can regain it with another. Coupled with the pressure our duchy could put on Ehrenfest, it would not be at all challenging.”

As correct as Kenntrips was, I doubted the future he spoke of was one Lord Wilfried would desire. I had just been told that he had *wanted* the engagement to fall through, as he hoped to be freed from his position as the

next aub.

“Why are you being so insistent?” I asked. “If you are so strongly against being my suitor, then tell me. I can say as much to Father.”

“I am not against it, I assure you. I yearned for this opportunity even when we were young.”

Kenntrips made his declaration so casually that, for a moment, I could not even process it. A reserved “Um...” was the best I was able to manage.

“Long have I considered it my duty to protect you. Even when you were known as Lady Crybaby, I wished to do everything I could to ensure your safety, whether my attempts to become a knight were successful or not. But in the end, I was not enough. In your game of bride-stealing ditter, you chose not my magic tool but the hand of another.”

I recalled the weapon I had clung to throughout the match. My brother had given it to me, insisting that it would burn everything around me to a crisp on activation and that I should use it as a last resort.

“As I understood it, the tool you prepared was especially dangerous,” I said. “It ran the risk of harming my own knights as much as the enemy’s...”

“Indeed. But while our knights fought back the Sovereign intruders, you were on your own. And rather than taking up arms or using my magic tool, you chose to put your trust in Lord Wilfried. As a scholar, I cannot protect you if you do not use the tools I make. It was then that I understood you have no need of my admiration for you.”

It had moved me greatly to see Lord Wilfried race to my side in his concern. And when he had offered me his hand, my heart had raced in a way I could not even hope to describe. Never had it even crossed my mind that I was trampling on Kenntrips’s feelings for me.

“Kenntrips, I—”

“Marrying either Rasantark or me would make the most sense to ensure stability back home and secure Lord Lestilaut’s position as the next archduke. As we are both your brother’s retainers, it would not require the creation of a separate faction, and taking an archnoble husband would make you unable to become the aub. That is why neither one of your engagement candidates was chosen from your own retainers.”

I nodded. It seemed that Father would never permit me to take an archduke candidate as a groom.

“If you do not join us in supporting Lord Lestilaut,” Kenntrips

explained, “then you risk sowing the seeds of chaos back home. Rasantark stated that if you married one of us, we would not have cause to worry. He also demanded to know why I encouraged you to pursue Lord Wilfried, whom he insists is an irresponsible coward of a man. He told me to put my mind to better use—namely to ensure that you stay in Dunkelfelger. He is very straightforward whenever you are concerned. I regret that I am not.”

A self-deprecating smile played on his features as he continued: “Rasantark is a bona fide knight of Dunkelfelger. He has the utmost faith in you and extols you for the part you played in true ditter. I, however... As much as I care about you, I cannot put my trust in someone who would betray her duchy at such a crucial moment and continue to waver despite having suitors chosen by her father.”

Kenntrips’s admission cut me deep. Although I had since made up for my shameful actions, it did not change the fact I had turned my back on both my duchy and his feelings. Perhaps I had no right to feel wounded, but that did nothing to ease the pain of such a biting remark from someone I had known since I was a child.

“Follow your own path,” Kenntrips said, clenching his sound-blocker so tightly that his hand trembled. “I cannot speak for anyone else, but if your feelings are strong enough for you to cross your own duchy, then I would rather you act in a manner befitting a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate and embrace them rather than keep them hidden.”

“And what do you mean by that...?”

“Remember, if you would, how Lady Magdalena propositioned Lord Trauerqual, or how Clarissa secured an engagement with Lord Hartmut to join Lady Rozemyne’s retinue. Ehrenfest might not understand bride-stealing ditter, but they should have no misconceptions about how the women of our duchy propose.”

For the second time that day, Kenntrips’s normally gray eyes swirled with colors betraying the intensity of his emotions. So passionate was his gaze that I could practically feel it boring into me.

“In short,” he said, “if you cannot obtain Lady Rozemyne’s aid, then propose to Lord Wilfried and secure conditions for your engagement.”

I understood what Kenntrips was saying. For as long as there was a chance I might betray my brother again, it was safer for me to marry into another duchy. Still, I could not agree with his suggestion.

“It is not easy to propose in such a manner; one needs great resolve and a certain strength of emotion. Furthermore, it is not something to be done at the prompting of another. You might be one of my suitors, but that does not mean you can intrude upon matters of my heart.”

Kenntrips’s eyes widened in response to my somewhat harsh rebuke. He put a hand to his forehead, and the tension between us evaporated in an instant. My longtime friend had finally returned to me.

“At the risk of sounding rude, I see you are as laid-back as ever. Our desperation does not get through to you at all.”

“Do elaborate,” I said, my brow furrowed. As far as I was concerned, I understood his worries as my brother’s retainer more than well enough.

“You have entered a most important year of your education. Most students will use this time to choose their escort partner and start thinking about marriage. Some will even arrange formal engagements. You know that, do you not?”

The blood drained from my face as Kenntrips addressed me as one would a child yet to be baptized. If he thought it necessary to explain something so obvious, then I must have been overlooking a most important detail.

“Your father, the aub, instructed you to choose your fiancé, and put Rasantark and me forward as candidates. You have until the Archduke Conference to decide—but if you intend to choose between the two of us, then you have only until the date of my graduation.”

Indeed, to present Kenntrips to the Zent as my future husband without raising any eyebrows, I would need to escort him at the end of winter. Not making up my mind before his graduation would result in Rasantark becoming my fiancé by default.

“Yes, I understand that much,” I said, prompting Kenntrips to continue.

“However, rather than choosing one of us, you are seeking ways to marry into another duchy. You wish to wed into Ehrenfest, if possible, do you not?”

I could not deny the truth: I really was looking for a way out of Dunkelfelger. That was why I had been so pleased by Lord Ortwin’s words, and so disappointed when Lord Wilfried had barely even reacted to them.

“Even if you were to accept Lord Ortwin’s feelings, you would need to decide upon a stance over the socializing season and work out how best to

refuse Korinthsdaum's proposal. You would need to lay the groundwork to persuade both of your parents before the Interduchy Tournament, and convince your father that it is a good idea to let you marry into Drewanchel."

Father had chosen Kenntrips and Rasantark as my suitors. I had assumed I could postpone my decision until the time of Lord Ortwin's and my graduation, but no—unless I made the proper arrangements to change my father's mind, Rasantark would remain my only choice when the next Archduke Conference came around.

Oh my... I have less time than I thought.

"If you decide to pursue Lord Wilfried, then you have even less time," Kenntrips stressed. "You would do well to know that Ehrenfest's archduke candidates are being bombarded with proposals, owing to their connection to Lady Rozemyne."

Ehrenfest ranked eighth in this year's duchy rankings. But before Lady Rozemyne had entered the Royal Academy, it had sat about seven places lower—and in the years before the civil war, it had remained near the very bottom. Thus, all duchies, no matter their rank, were in a position to send proposals to its archduke candidates.

"Someone set to become an archduke or archduchess has the luxury of choosing their ideal partner, due to the long-term considerations they need to make, but other archduke candidates tend to have their partners selected for them, and their marriages serve to improve interduchy relations. I would imagine that, by now, Aub Ehrenfest has given Lord Wilfried several candidates to choose from."

It was not rare to be given a list of suitors. If the rumors that Lord Wilfried did not wish to become an archduke were true, then Kenntrips was almost certainly correct.

"This socializing season, everyone will strive to choose their partners," he said. "Dunkelfelger did not petition Ehrenfest during the previous Archduke Conference, and the fact that Lord Wilfried did not respond to Lord Ortwin's proposition means we can assume you are not among his candidates."

I already know that much...

Kenntrips was merely stating the truth, but his words cut me deeper than the sharpest spear. I wanted to cover my ears and abandon the interrogation

entirely.

“Neither time nor society will wait for you,” he said. “As things stand, Lord Wilfried will already have chosen his partner by the time you resolve to confess to him. What would you do then?”

I cast my eyes down. Perhaps because he had spent so long engaged to Lady Rozemyne, it had never crossed my mind that he might get engaged to another.

And if he does...?

Conveying my feelings to him when he already had a partner would come across as me bludgeoning him with my duchy’s rank and spark all manner of rumors. Under no circumstances could I allow the authority I wielded as a member of the top-ranked duchy to disturb anyone’s peace. An engagement Lord Wilfried had decided on would, by nature, have his approval.

“I simply cannot imagine confessing to him,” I said.

“As I expected,” Kenntrips replied with a nod. “I do not mean to be blunt, but your usual poor timing is not to blame here. You have simply been slow to steel your resolve and speak from the heart. Of course, I expect you to blame your poor timing nonetheless.”

Ngh.

“You will probably bemoan the outcome, agonizing over the mistakes you made and what you could have done to bond with Lord Wilfried. By the time you recover, socializing season will already be drawing to a close, and you will have run out of time to speak with Lord Ortwin.”

Nghhh...

“Out of alternatives,” Kenntrips went on, “you will need to select one of your chosen suitors. You will pick Rasantark, of course, as doing so gives you more time to prepare emotionally.”

“Do not speak as though this is fated to happen!” I exclaimed, my eyes brimming with tears. It was the most I could do to resist; things were bound to play out exactly as he expected.

Kenntrips gazed down at me with all the resignation of a parent scolding their misbehaving child. “You must put your concerns about Lord Wilfried and Ehrenfest aside. If you wish to move there, then you should focus first and foremost on confessing to Lord Wilfried before socializing season begins. Unless you take matters into your own hands, he will not even

consider you an option.”

Hearing such a frank declaration struck me speechless. It hurt to have the emotions I had purposefully kept hidden so callously stepped on, but I could tell that Kenntrips was speaking out of genuine concern for me.

“Would you really be able to accept such a future knowing that you made no attempt to prevent it?” he asked. “You are slow to make choices no matter the situation, and you might appear easily swayed, but you stubbornly dig in your heels when it comes to your final decision. Am I wrong?”

“You understand me too well...” I grumbled through pursed lips.

Kenntrips gave a wry smile. “I have seen you in many situations across the years, Lady Hannelore. That is also how I am aware of the resentment you feel toward Rasantark and me, for you no longer know how to interact with us.” He seemed amused to have read me so well, but that meant my emotions must have shown on my face.

“Resentment...? My feelings are not that strong.”

Not right now, in any case.

“Oh? Is that so?” Kenntrips asked, cocking an eyebrow in amusement. “I seem to recall a rather powerful grimace when Father introduced us as your suitors.”

“I was merely surprised by the implication that I would be staying in Dunkelfelger, despite my intention to marry elsewhere.”

In any case, my reaction could not have been that obvious. Neither my mother nor Cordula saw reason to chastise me.

“To others, it might have come across as general concern, but it was the same expression you made whenever Lord Lestilaut did something to spite you.”

Without thinking, I rested my hands on my cheeks. I really had been disappointed and upset, but I had not expected anyone to notice. I gazed up at Kenntrips, uncomfortable, and watched as a long sigh escaped him.

“So I was fully correct, then?” he asked.

And now he is sure of his assumption. This was not my intention!

Kenntrips gave a resigned smile, as if attempting to ease the panic swelling in my chest. “Do calm down,” he said. “I was already well aware. That is why I continue to remind you—unless you take action soon, you will end up Starbound to Rasantark or me. That is not what you desire, is

it?”

He took my hand and returned the sound-blocker to me. I clung to him in turn, not ready for our conversation to end, and met his look of confusion with a stern glare.

“My reaction did not come from any negative emotions about you or Rasantark. I considered it miserable to remain in a duchy so obsessed with ditter, and the realization that I was soon to be Starbound made me uncomfortable, to say the least.”

Kenntrips inhaled, at a loss for words. Finally feeling some small sense of victory, I took the sound-blocker from him and turned to leave.

“Cordula, my interrogation is over,” I announced. “Let us go.”

Wavering and Resolve

“Milady, what in the world did you and Kenntrips discuss?” my head attendant asked me once we had returned to my room. “As victorious as you looked on the way out, things seemed rather tumultuous for the most part.”

I turned my attention to Cordula, having received my reports from the retainers who had cleaned up the tea party room. “We discussed my situation and the situation at large. He told me I was being naive about a great many things and advised that I open my eyes to the truth.” I made sure to choose my words carefully—I could not outright admit that he had told me to hurry up and convey my feelings to Lord Wilfried so that I could marry into Ehrenfest.

Cordula gave an exasperated sigh. “We went out of our way to give you two a chance to speak privately, and you wasted it with something so obvious? Kenntrips should have spent that time trying to win you over. Why on earth would he squander it?”

“Cordula, is it not cruel to speak as though all of that were obvious?” It was far from an appropriate way to converse with one’s lady.

“Oh, my sincerest apologies,” Cordula said, her tone so insincere that I could not help but sigh as well. “I must say though, milady, I have long agonized over how blind you are to your surroundings. Have you, at the very least, decided whom you will choose?”

I shook my head and answered, “Not yet.” Even with Kenntrips’s encouragement, I had yet to resolve to confess to Lord Wilfried. “It is not so easy for me. Kenntrips said it must be part of who I am. He told me I will probably fail to make up my mind in time and end up with Rasantark by default.”

“Then he advised you on how to avoid that fate, I assume?” my head attendant asked quietly as she poured me some tea. “I, too, wish for you to consider your future carefully and make an independent choice.”

Cordula adjusted the fireplace, then retired to the waiting room with my

other retainers—save the knight outside my door—to give me time to think. An imposing quiet fell over me. I sensed the temperature start to drop and moved closer to the fire, where I watched the flames dance as I sipped my tea. The warm liquid passed down my throat, and a pleasant warmth spread through me.

Knowing that I need to act does not make it any easier.

Archduke candidates married to bring wealth into their duchies, so their aubs commonly arranged their partners for them. It was normal in Dunkelfelger to request proposal challenges from whomever one wished to be with, but completing them served only to secure the approval of the man or woman proposed to. For the engagement to actually take place, they would still need the head of their household, the aub, or a higher authority to give their permission.

Kenntrips had brought up Lady Magdalena's proposal as an example, but her situation was so far removed from my own. Although she had acted against the aub's will, the outcome had proven far better than if she had simply taken a groom from a lower-ranking duchy. Through her defiance, she had brought the long-enduring civil war to a close and earned Dunkelfelger the royal family's favor as the duchy that had secured their victory.

Then there was the power dynamic. As a prince at the time, Lord Trauerqual could easily have turned down the proposition thrust upon him. Ehrenfest lacked that authority. Were I to propose to Lord Wilfried in the same way that Lady Magdalena proposed to her desired partner, I would surely cause more problems than not.

No matter how I look at it, Dunkelfelger has too little to gain from such a union.

If my father had wanted to forge a deeper bond with Ehrenfest, then he would surely have hinted at it when going over recent events with its aub. In such a world, my father might have embraced the idea of me marrying Lord Wilfried, as doing so would improve relations with both Ehrenfest and Alexandria at once.

Instead, however, Father had determined that it was best to keep me in Dunkelfelger. The suitors he had chosen for me made that all too apparent. Even though he valued getting closer to Alexandria, I doubted he cared much about Ehrenfest at all. As things were, even if I did somehow manage

to convey my feelings to Lord Wilfried, I could not imagine getting the permission I would need for the engagement to be made official.

In other words, I was doomed from the start.

The moment that thought struck me, my shoulders slumped, and all the strength seemed to leave my body. Perhaps I could propose to Lord Wilfried, but what good would that do when there was no way my father would ever approve?

In the first place, do I even want to marry Lord Wilfried? I think well of him—very much so—but...

Kenntrips had urged me to take action for a lack of time, insisting that I must want to be with Lord Wilfried because I took his hand during our game of bride-stealing ditter. I was partially inclined to agree with him, but the truth of the matter was that neither Lord Wilfried nor Ehrenfest wanted me.

The more I thought about it, the more my heart wavered. Were my feelings for Lord Wilfried strong enough to warrant proposing to him? Was my resolve strong enough to make securing the adults' permission worthwhile, knowing full well that the man I desired did not wish to become an aub and that Ehrenfest had already suffered immensely at the hands of a bride from a greater duchy? I did not have the intensity of Lady Rozemyne, who had spurred Dunkelfelger to action and stolen Ahrensbach's foundation to save the life of a single man, or of Lord Ferdinand, who had crushed a foreign invasion and manipulated the entire Sovereignty and royal family in return.

If nothing else, I can say that my emotions are not as strong or as passionate as in the stories I enjoy. Whatever I feel right now, it cannot be true love.

I set my teacup down, rose to my feet, and gazed out the window. Snow had started to fall. I could not even begin to imagine how Ewigeliebe must have felt, so consumed with Geduldh that he would cover the world with ice to hide her. The emotions I associated with Lord Wilfried were more vague—happiness when he looked my way, relief when we spoke, sorrow when we did not...

I took a volume of Ehrenfest's love stories from my shelves, then returned to my seat by the fireplace and cracked it open.

"'O Geduldh, mother of life and bringer of bountiful harvests. O

beauteous youngest, clad in green from Flutrane's love, enriched with the passion and strength of Leidenschaft, who watches from the blue sky above, and protected altogether by Schutzaria's mighty shield. O beloved bride, enveloped in the Light that guides and the Darkness that consumes. Amid the promised eternal recurrence, as Schutzaria's shield wears down, Ewigeliebe grows frantic in his impatience for the coming of winter. Those who wait for the Night of Schutzaria seek the compassionate goddess dressed in white, who welcomes all in her embrace. May she forgive the raging tempest that covers with ice and snow the beauty of this world made by the gods.'"

So sweet were the words written before me that my heart pounded in my chest. I yearned to read them again and again. Were my own feelings so intense that I would scorn my chosen suitors and throw both Ehrenfest and my own duchy into chaos? I saw little reason to say so.

And if my emotions are not strong enough, then I should save everyone the trouble and give up on them here and now.

It made no sense to propose when my desires and the value I could provide my duchy were so unclear. For that reason, I decided to lock away the passions that were causing me so much anguish.

My time alone concluded with a simple acknowledgment that the world would not bend to my frivolous whims. I was trapped in a daze, strange emotions swirling in my chest—perhaps because of the decision I had come to, or maybe because I found it so hard to keep my feelings under control.

I went to the dining hall for dinner—not that I had much of an appetite. Rasantark briskly approached me as soon as I arrived.

"Lady Hannelore," the apprentice knight said, "you gave Kenntrips a chance to speak with you alone. I beg of you to grant me the same!" He was red with excitement, but I was hardly in the mood.

I shook my head while taking the seat Cordula had pulled out for me. "My mind is occupied with more serious matters. Please ask me again once a few days have passed."

"Well, I wish to weigh in on them!" Rasantark declared, reluctant to back down even in the face of my refusal. Others in the dining hall turned their attention to us, and it was just as their stares started to overwhelm me that Kenntrips came over to join us.

“Rasantark, cease troubling Lady Hannelore,” he said, clearly exasperated.

“I refuse to hear it from a slouch who keeps squandering his luck,” Rasantark shot back, ready to fight. Even more eyes were locked on us now.

I rose to arbitrate, but Cordula placed a firm hand on my shoulder, urged me back into my seat, and moved between the pair in my stead.

“Earlier today, milady had a tea party with Lady Rozemyne. The two of you fought over that fact, forcing her to intervene, and now you wonder why she is too weary to speak with you? You are permitted no free time until the end of your repentance. Save the discussion for another day.”

Rasantark opened his mouth to protest, then closed it and stood down. He looked displeased with how things had turned out, but there was nothing he could do.

Relieved to have avoided yet another tiring conversation, I pressed my hands to my cheeks and tried to adopt a more neutral expression. Cordula had remarked on my exhaustion, so it must have been clear on my face.

Dinner was served, and everyone started eating. I scanned the hall while picking at my zelene salad and confirmed that I was no longer the center of attention. The respite that followed started to restore my appetite. I scooped up a spoonful of steaming bohnebnis soup—one of my favorites—and slowly brought it to my mouth. The thick, sweet broth eased my weary body as though I had just been blessed with healing magic.

“Lady Hannelore, may I ask you a question?” Andrea said, eyeing me nervously.

I nodded and encouraged her to continue. The unease faded quickly from her expression.

“Do you know Lady Rozemyne’s thoughts on Clarissa? Um... Is she standing out? Has she failed enough to earn her ire? Have her long speeches led to her ostracization?”

Andrea’s questions confused me—I did not think she and Clarissa were close enough to warrant them—but I answered nonetheless. “Lady Rozemyne stated that Clarissa is always in good spirits.”

“I see. I was a little concerned, given how Clarissa can act. I would not want Lady Rozemyne to develop an aversion to our duchy.”

“Oh? Are you seeking the hand of an Alexandrian?”

“I am actually asking for my mednoble friend Herluga. She hopes to be

bound either to Lord Roderick, an apprentice scholar, or to Lord Raimund, a retainer of Lord Ferdinand. Of course, Lord Raimund has entered his final year, so he might have found a partner already."

I nodded along. As I recalled, Herluga's elder sister was close friends with Clarissa. Herluga would no doubt use that fact to seek Clarissa's aid.

"That said," Andrea continued, "I, too, would very much appreciate the chance to forge bonds with those serving Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne."

"You wish to marry into Alexandria?" I asked. She had never said as much before.

"Yes, at the aub's recommendation. He hopes to have more people who can contribute to your friendship with Lady Rozemyne. I appreciate the choice, but her most trusted retainers tend to be mednobles or laynobles, leaving few good partners for an archnoble such as I. Clarissa is willing to help me, having secured a place in Alexandria before any other, but that might not be enough in my case."

Father was advising my retainers on the assumption that I would stay in Dunkelfelger. I supposed that was only natural, considering that he had chosen my suitors for me, but the very thought of the walls closing in around me made it hard to breathe. Still, I knew better than to say anything; Andrea was so clearly overjoyed to be able to choose any husband she wanted within my father's boundaries.

"I hope you find a good partner," I said.

"Indeed. It might not happen yet, but Lady Rozemyne should take more retainers from among the nobles of Old Ahrensbach." A smile graced Andrea's features. "I shall pray to have a chance with one of their archnobles."

Luitpold leaned forward slightly. "Lady Hannelore, I imagine you have scheduled a tea party with Ehrenfest to exchange books as you normally do. Might I ask you to put in a good word for Eduard? He seeks a binding with Ehrenfest."

My throat went dry. He was, in essence, asking me to inquire with Lord Wilfried or Lady Charlotte about an engagement between our duchies. "For you to have made such a request now, can I assume that Father also requested engagements with Ehrenfest?" The very idea seemed absurd to me; my father had nothing to gain from Ehrenfest at the moment.

And yet, Luitpold nodded. “Indeed, he did. He is contemplating whether he can pair Lady Lungtase with the Ehrenfest archduke candidate who attended the transference ceremony in High Bishop robes. To better our chances, he wants as many Dunkelfelgerians to marry into Ehrenfest as possible.”

The blood drained from my face. If what my apprentice scholar said was true, then my assumption that Father did not value Ehrenfest was sorely mistaken. I would have given up on Lord Wilfried if marrying into the duchy was undesirable, but I saw now that I was not completely without hope.

If the aim is simply for a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate to marry into Ehrenfest, could it not be me instead of Lungtase?

My heart, dejected from my lack of options, regained its enthusiasm with a mighty *thump*.

Is there a way I can turn this situation around...?

I placed a hand on my cheek and fell into thought. Despite being my retainer, Luitpold had waited until now to share this information with me. He was watching me closely as if to gauge my reaction.

Even if I tell my retainers that I wish to bind my star to Lord Wilfried’s, I doubt they will provide their aid.

Instead, I resolved to prioritize gathering as much information as I could. Aub Ehrenfest had been reluctant to accept a bride from a greater duchy. I had heard about how such an arrangement with Ahrensbach had thrown his domain into chaos, as had my retainers.

If the consensus in Ehrenfest has since changed, I was not informed. But perhaps my retainers know something I do not.

Ehrenfest policy was of critical importance to my next actions.

“I would not mind consulting Ehrenfest, but they are reluctant to form engagements with greater duchies,” I said. “You are aware of that, no? If there has been some kind of change to that sentiment, fair enough, but I will not assist Father in bothering its archduke candidates. Has my mother given her permission, do you know?”

In response to my sharp look, Luitpold performatively scanned the hall, then nodded. “The order came after the Archduke Conference, so I would imagine that Lady Sieglinde is aware.”

I suppose that Lady Rozemyne becoming Aub Alexandria means

Ehrenfest is already bound to a greater duchy. They must have seen no need to keep their policy as it was.

As I considered this new information, I turned to Luitpold with a look of relief. “Good, then. But I should warn you that my recommendation alone might not be enough for Eduard.”

“Of course. The sooner he knows where he stands, the sooner he can decide on his plans and inform the aub.”

That could mean Ehrenfest has not yet approved an engagement with Lungtase.

It would never have been set in stone—it was a union between two children who had yet to even enroll at the Academy—but I took comfort in knowing that the plan had scarcely advanced at all. At the same time, I felt a surge of anxiety that Ehrenfest might not accept a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate in the first place.

I must convey my feelings and obtain proposal challenges before socializing season begins and everyone else scrambles to secure their partners.

Now that I wanted to take action, Kenntrips’s urgency became my own. Time truly was of the essence.

Having eaten my food, I sipped my tea and racked my brain for ideas.

Before anything else, I must pin Lord Wilfried down and obtain my challenges!

My next step was clear, but how was I to manage it? My target was a boy—even if his future of becoming an archduke had changed, he had still surely received the appropriate education and training. My chances of defeating him in combat felt slim to none.

Not to mention, he protected his Noble’s Quarter during true ditter.

I could remember Lord Wilfried celebrating that fact during my visit to Ehrenfest. Coupled with the wartime victories Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne had secured—even in the face of their shortcomings—I could say without a doubt that Ehrenfest’s archduke candidates were abnormally strong. I would need to go all out to even stand a chance of pinning Lord Wilfried down. Unless I could succeed against Ehrenfest’s archduke candidates and their wiles, I would not even obtain the proposal challenges I so desired.

Am I really capable of doing this...?

So daunting was the task ahead that I almost wanted to cry. I would need to pick the best time and place to make my move, and work out any other techniques that would maximize my chances of victory.

Retainers will prove my main obstacles, without a doubt.

It was hard to imagine securing conditions from an archduke candidate constantly surrounded by his retinue. Were I to even attempt to grab Lord Wilfried, his retainers—and mine—would move to obstruct me. Overcoming them all was as good as impossible. How had those before me won against the odds?

The only archduke candidate I can think of who managed it was Lady Magdalena. But how?

She had been a member of Dunkelfelger at the time of her proposal, whereas Lord Trauerqual had been a prince. *And* she had cornered him in the midst of the civil war, when his knights would have been on high alert. The fact she had succeeded made my head spin.

If I can find out how she did it, I might have a chance as well.

"Lady Hannelore, it would appear your cup is empty. Shall we head back to your room?"

"Indeed..." I said at length, returning to the world around me. I set my empty cup on the table and rose to my feet.

"Um, Lady Hannelore..." one of my retainers muttered, "you look ready to march to war."

"Is that so?"

I forced a look of complete detachment from the thoughts running rampant in my mind. It would not be wise to put my retainers on their guard. At the very least, I could not tell them of my intentions until I knew how Lord Wilfried felt about me.

This would be so much easier if I could trust them to cooperate.

My actions during bride-stealing ditter had thrust me into a deeply uncomfortable position—and of course, my retainers had needed to carry that burden with me. Many of them were still furious with Lord Wilfried for the damage that had come to my reputation. I could hardly announce that I wanted to marry him, especially when Father wanted me to stay in Dunkelfelger and Cordula was already cautious about Lord Ortwin and Korinthsdaum. They expected me to be a good archduke candidate—one

who obeyed the aub and contributed to her duchy.

To have any chance of success, I must do this alone.

Lady Magdalena must have been in the same situation. In matters of marriage, society expected women to act on their fathers' wishes. If one tried to carve her own path, everyone around her would try to intervene, leaving her with nobody to rely upon.

If I wished to end up with Lord Wilfried, then I could not let anything stop me.

Proposal

Morning came, and still, I was lacking for good ideas. I ate breakfast and went to the entrance hall—as I would on any other Waterday—and spied two friendly faces among the gathered students, one with light-green hair and the other with bright orange. Kenntrips and Rasantark would be escorting me to class.

“You appear to have been deep in thought,” Kenntrips said to me.

“I don’t know about that, but you look tired,” Rasantark added. “Did you not eat enough this morning?”

They both extended their hands to me. I said nothing to Kenntrips, who was right on the mark, and glared at Rasantark, for that was not something to say to a lady.

“Perhaps it is *you* who has not eaten enough,” I shot back.

“Yes, perhaps. It seems that nothing can satiate me as of late—which is strange, as we train far less here than we do back home.”

“The chefs complain that no matter how hard they work, it is never enough.”

“Now, Lady Hannelore...” The apprentice knight paused, then shook his head. “Oh, um, never mind. Let us go.”

My two suitors took my hands, and we headed to class. I could tell that Rasantark still wanted to say something, and eventually, he tried to speak his mind again.

“Lady Hannelore, might your schedule be open next Earthday? My friends went to the gazebos the other day, and they spoke at length about how breathtaking the blooming schmelumes were against the snow. Ideally, I should like to see them with you.”

My eyes widened. The solution to my troubles had been right under my nose.

Of course! There can be no better venue than where the Goddess of Time plays her tricks!

The gazebos in question were located past the scholar building. There,

the time spent between lovers passed so quickly that many thought Dregarnuhr was to blame. The structures were rather small—too small to accommodate two people's retinues—so archduke candidates used them for more intimate conversations. They were not totally private, of course, as the visitors' retainers would wait only a short distance away, but their value could not be ignored. A proposal was far more likely to succeed at a gazebo.

I now knew where I would make my move. The problem was figuring out how to invite Lord Wilfried there in the first place. The gazebos were known as a romantic destination; asking him outright would only arouse suspicion.

How concerning...

"Perhaps because a true Zent has risen to power, the gardens are more abundant than before, and there are more usable gazebos," Rasantark explained. "So, how about it?"

"I admire your enthusiasm, but maybe this isn't the best time to ask her," Kenntrips said. "Lady Hannelore looks petrified."

Hearing my name snapped me back to my senses. My retainers all wore troubled smiles.

"Rasantark," Cordula said, clearly vexed, "do you really think she could accept such an invitation with Kenntrips present?"

"Ngh..." The apprentice knight almost reeled at the attack. "But he's already *had* his time alone with Lady Hannelore!"

"An interrogation in the dormitory is by no means the same as visiting a gazebo," my head attendant continued. "That said, there is some truth to your complaint. Milady, if you have not settled on Kenntrips as your fiancé, then you should treat him and Rasantark equally."

I paused in thought. "I cannot help but feel that my chance meeting with Kenntrips is being exploited. Nonetheless, one still needs to schedule arrangements of this nature. Might we wait until after dinner three days from now?"

"Absolutely," Rasantark said, positively beaming.

Kenntrips sighed. He must have interpreted my response as more of my usual indecision.

Our retainers would not be with us during lectures, leaving me no better chance to speak with Lord Wilfried. Lord Ortwin had used that very same

opening to propose to me.

If our conversation goes well, we might not even need to visit the gazebos. Securing time alone with him might be easier than I think.

The ideas that had refused to come to me when I was agonizing alone in my room now came freely. My spirits started to rise; perhaps, at long last, Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time had given me her blessing.

I shall make sure to thank her with a prayer!

Before anything else, I needed to look into Ehrenfest's internals and ask Lord Wilfried whether I could speak with him after class.

There is no sense in proposing if his duchy's stance on marriage has not changed.

It had not been too long ago that Aub Ehrenfest had expressed a complete lack of interest in accepting wives from greater duchies. I went over to Lord Wilfried as soon as I entered the classroom.

"Lord Wilfried, might I have a moment of your time? I wish to ask about Aub Ehrenfest's policy on engagements."

"Of course," he said. "What do you want to know?"

Grateful that he had not cut our conversation short, deeming it an improper subject for class, I continued, "There is someone in Dunkelfelger who wishes to marry an Ehrenfest noble. I would like to know your duchy's thoughts on such an arrangement, preferably before socializing season. In truth, I tried to ask yesterday during my tea party with Lady Rozemyne, but she could not answer due to her status as Aub Alexandria."

"I suppose not," Lord Wilfried said, then smiled as if having remembered something.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I was just thinking that when Uncle first went to Ahrensbach, we had to scold Lady Rozemyne for carelessly leaking Ehrenfest intel to him. It would seem she learned her lesson." He looked contemplative for a moment; then I spied a glimmer in his dark-green eyes. "This might become a rather involved conversation. Could we perhaps continue it after class?"

He had taken the words right out of my mouth. While devoting a silent prayer to Dregarnuhr, I said, "Certainly. I would not mind that at all."

"Professor Anastasius would scold us if we were mid-conversation when he arrived."

"Oh, absolutely."

We were laughing together when Lord Ortwin entered the classroom. As he came toward us, Lord Wilfried waved a hand and concluded our conversation.

“Good morning, Wilfried, Lady Hannelore.”

“Good morning, Lord Ortwin,” I said.

“I am told you had a tea party with Lady Rozemyne yesterday. How fares Alexandria?”

“Lady Rozemyne is doing her utmost, with support from Lord Ferdinand. But as I cannot elaborate here, I shall return to my desk.”

Flattered though I was by Lord Ortwin’s confession, Father had already selected my suitors for me. I thought it best to keep my distance, so I exchanged only the usual greetings before taking my leave.

“Ortwin, lend me your ear,” Lord Wilfried said as I departed, his excitement clear in his voice. I could not help but envy how close they were.

“Excuse me? You are going to the gazebos? With two other archduke candidates?”

Our retainers could not believe their ears when I informed them of our plans. To be honest, I was surprised too. I could not wrap my head around why Lord Ortwin was coming with us.

“We need to work a few things out before socializing begins,” Lord Wilfried explained. “To prevent any unwelcome misconceptions that would come from Lady Hannelore and me going alone, Lord Ortwin has agreed to tag along.”

“Could this matter not be settled over a tea party?” his retainers asked.

Lord Wilfried shook his head and smiled. “I’m afraid not. I hear the schmelumes around the gazebos are in bloom, and I’ve yet to have an opportunity to see them.” His tone brooked no protest, leaving his retainers to express their exhaustion through facial expressions alone.

“Did you agree to this, milady?” Cordula asked me. I had no choice but to nod.

“On behalf of Luitpold, I wished to consult with Ehrenfest about their stance on marriages with greater duchies,” I explained. “Lord Wilfried proposed that we continue the conversation after our lesson. I assumed he meant in the classroom.”

Cordula swallowed down the urge to rebuke me; in the presence of so many nobles from other duchies, she could do nothing to stop what had already been set in motion. She doubtless wished to say that it did not matter whether such a meeting was held in the classroom or a gazebo—and she would, when she inevitably lectured me back at the dormitory.

Please! That look is terrifying!

My head attendant was right in her evaluation; I wanted to speak with Lord Wilfried away from our retainers, to better understand the situation in Ehrenfest and obtain the engagement tasks I so desired, so the classroom and a gazebo were both perfectly appropriate choices. The problem was that I had never expected Lord Ortwin to join us.

"Lord Wilfried, Lord Ortwin," Kenntrips said, "as one of Lady Hannelore's chosen suitors, I must ask that you allow me to join you. If you cannot, then you will need to reschedule the meeting for another day."

"Kenntrips..." I muttered.

"As both her potential fiancé and a student of Dunkelfelger, I cannot allow Lady Hannelore to go somewhere that might damage her reputation—not without an escort."

Lord Wilfried exchanged a look with Lord Ortwin, then nodded. "You are welcome to accompany us. We have no desire to tarnish Lady Hannelore's honor."

And so, I started toward the gazebos with my two fellow archduke candidates. Three groups of retainers came with us.

"Lady Hannelore, thank you for setting aside this time to speak with me," Lord Wilfried said.

"No, thank you. It was I who inquired in the first place."

"I appreciate the invitation to join you," Lord Ortwin added. "Drewanchel is very much interested in your duchies' current attitudes."

I glanced at Kenntrips, who walked silently beside me. He slid something small and round into the palm of my hand.

"Please, focus your attention on Lord Wilfried," he murmured. "I shall distract Lord Ortwin."

I stole quick looks at the two boys in question. Based on their complete lack of a reaction, I assumed that what Kenntrips had given me was a sound-blocker.

"Whatever do you mean?" I asked, attempting to play dumb.

“Do you really expect that to work? This morning and during dinner last night, you had the countenance of a knight preparing for ditter.”

“Are my intentions that obvious?”

“If they were, then Cordula would already have dragged you back to the dormitory.”

It seemed that Kenntrips intended to aid me without informing the others—a most dangerous act, considering my father’s wish to keep me in the duchy. I could not understand why he would take such a risk.

It makes no sense.

Still, I chose not to ask any further questions. Rather than interrogate Kenntrips, I needed to capitalize on this singular chance to propose to Lord Wilfried. I had thought I would need to face this battle alone, so having an ally to support me warmed my heart.

“I appreciate it,” I said. “Please do your best to keep Lord Ortwin busy.”

“He will consider it to mean you have rejected him. Is that acceptable?”

“He was very kind, and I do not wish to hurt him... but I cannot squander what might be my only chance to propose to Lord Wilfried.”

“Then I shall provide my full support,” Kenntrips declared, and retrieved the sound-blocker from me.

We passed through the scholar building and emerged outside, in an area completely free of snow. Herb gardens spread out before us, and beyond them, a vast field of vibrant flowers. The white stone underfoot guided us in the direction of several gazebos. I had seen this place from above while passing on my highbeast, but this was my first time approaching on foot.

“So, which is the gazebo by the schmelumes?” Lord Wilfried asked, cocking his head. There were quite a few to choose from. Lady Rozemyne had said the Royal Academy was once a holy land where the original Zents lived; these large gardens must have been where they came to hold events and rest.

“I have never seen a schmelume before,” I said. “How do they look?” I assumed they would be hard to find, but Kenntrips and Lord Ortwin both pointed to a singular gazebo.

“Oh? You know where the gazebo is, Kenntrips?” I asked.

“I do. It is the same one Rasantark wished to show you this morning. We might not be alone, but I feel a tad awkward about being here instead, considering my role in thwarting his plans.”

I thought back to Rasantark's enthusiasm and sighed. "He will surely be furious..."

"Shall we leave, then?" Kenntrips asked, but that was out of the question. I gave him a stern prod on the arm and proceeded toward the indicated gazebo.

Amid the grounds of the snow-coated Academy, a single garden shone with the colors of spring. Four of us entered the gazebo from which one could see the schmelumes most clearly, while our retainers waited around it.

"Those are schmelumes," Lord Ortwin told me, indicating a patch of red. Each flower seemed no larger than the palm of my hand, and the petals that adorned them were small and plentiful. A group of ten to twenty schmelumes sat together in bloom. "You could not see them before; last year, this entire garden was blanketed in snow. They can be found in northwest Drewanchel, and the layknights commonly use them for pain relief. As they bloom with the melting of the snow, some even say they are remnants of Geduldh after Flutrane's rescue."

"What a beautiful shade of red!" I exclaimed, gazing upon the schmelumes. "One can definitely see Geduldh within them."

Kenntrips sighed and took my hand. "If you wish to admire them, then please sit here, Lady Hannelore. Let us finish this discussion quickly, lest we further inconvenience everyone's retainers." He gestured to the seat farthest from me. "Lord Ortwin, if you would."

Lord Wilfried frowned. "Why do *you* get to decide the seats?"

"Lord Ortwin proposed to Lady Hannelore despite knowing she has engagement candidates," Kenntrips retorted. "For that reason, I cannot allow him to sit with her."

Unable to retort, Lord Wilfried took his seat next to me. There was a sour expression on his face; he must have been offended that a mere archnoble would speak out in such a manner.

Kenntrips shot me a knowing look. The stage was set. He would contain Lord Ortwin while I pinned down my target.

But sitting will make this awkward. Perhaps if I raise my hips and twist my waist toward him...

Lord Wilfried occupied the seat beside me, yet there was still some distance between us. I measured the gap and considered the best way to prevent his escape, at which point Lord Ortwin held out sound-blockers to

Lord Wilfried and me.

“To preserve Lady Hannelore’s honor, we have permitted you to attend, but this is a conversation among archduke candidates,” he said, his eyes trained on Kenntrips. “I would appreciate your cooperation.”

Kenntrips nodded—and with that, our discussion could begin.

“A member of my duchy seeking an engagement has expressed an interest in Lady Charlotte’s or your introduction,” I said. “But as I understand it, Aub Ehrenfest does not wish to take brides or grooms from greater duchies.”

“Is that so?” Lord Ortwin asked with interest. This matter was as relevant to his duchy as it was mine. “As we speak, there are many in Drewanchel who share that interest in Ehrenfest nobles.”

“Indeed,” I said. “As an archduke candidate, I wish to know Ehrenfest’s stance so I can best advise my duchy. For the sake of avoiding any unpleasantness, an explanation would be greatly appreciated.”

“But of course,” Lord Wilfried answered with a smile, adopting a more formal tone to match the topic at hand. “Due to our relationship with Alexandria, it has been deemed urgent that Ehrenfest learn to carry itself as a top-ranking duchy. The Zent’s decree prevents nobles from leaving, but Aub Ehrenfest intends to welcome brides and grooms from top-ranking duchies, with Dunkelfelger being foremost among them.”

As expected, the birth of Alexandria had forced Aub Ehrenfest to change his stance. If he sought deeper relationships with greater duchies and needed a connection to Dunkelfelger in particular, then an engagement between Lord Wilfried and me could prove beneficial after all.

“I see. In that case...”

Seizing my chance, I pounced on my target without the slightest hesitation. I pinned him to the ground, using my full weight to prevent a counterattack. We were face-to-face, his wide, dark-green eyes right in front of my own.

“I wish to become your Goddess of Light,” I declared. “Give me engagement tasks.”

Lord Wilfried merely blinked at me. His trembling lips opened a crack, and he whispered, “Wh-What...?” I saw his focus wander to Kenntrips and Lord Ortwin, but I refused to surrender. Even as he writhed and squirmed beneath me, I kept him firmly in place.

“Lord Wilfried. Give me tasks.”



“Tasks? What do you mean?” Lord Wilfried sputtered. He had not refused me, but neither had he acquiesced; he appeared simply confused. However was I to proceed?

“Lady Hannelore, Lord Wilfried must not know about Dunkelfelger proposals,” Lord Ortwin said. He was the picture of calm—contrasting the knights outside the gazebo, who began shouting our names barely a moment later.

“Lady Hannelore?!”

“Lord Wilfried, is something wrong?!”

The walls of the gazebo reached only as high as our shoulders when we were seated. From the perspective of those waiting outside, two of us had suddenly vanished. Their anxious voices grew louder.

“Everything is fine. Lady Hannelore merely stumbled,” Kenntrips assured the knights, waving them away with one hand while urging me to stand with the other. “Lady Hannelore, are you okay?”

“My sincerest apologies, Lord Wilfried. Thank you for easing my fall,” I said, dropping my sound-blocker and scooting away. I had made my move assuming that he knew about Dunkelfelger proposals. If that was not the case, then there was no point in continuing.

Rising slowly to his feet, Lord Wilfried shot me a look of pure confusion.

“Lord Wilfried, are you okay?!” his guard knights exclaimed.

“Yes, thank you. Stand down; we have more to discuss.”

“Understood.”

Having sent away his knights, Lord Wilfried surveyed the gazebo, clearly disturbed by the fact that only he was taken aback. Lord Ortwin gave an exaggerated shrug in response; the look in his eyes told me he was planning something.

“Seems I’m the only one in the dark,” Lord Wilfried said, his expression turning from confusion to determination as he handed out sound-blockers. He gave one to Kenntrips as well. “I suspect you, too, have something to say.”

“Thank you,” the apprentice scholar replied.

Once we were all carrying sound-blockers, Lord Wilfried allowed himself to sigh. “Well? What in the world was that?”

“Do you really not know?” Lord Ortwin asked. “That’s how the women

of Dunkelfelger propose to men their fathers would not want them to marry.”

At long last, Lord Wilfried grasped the truth. He turned to me, eyes even wider than before, then swiveled back to Kenntrips and Lord Ortwin, looking deeply uncomfortable. “Lady Hannelore proposed to me?! H-How are you all so calm?!”

Kenntrips’s composure made sense—we had planned this attack together, after all. Lord Ortwin’s, on the other hand, took me by surprise as well. An amused grin spread across his face.

“What can I say? It was impactful, to be sure, but I took her by surprise in much the same way. Interpreting her proposal today as an act of revenge helped to dampen the blow.”

“You did?” Lord Wilfried asked, cocking his head to one side.

I glared at Lord Ortwin. “Revenge” had not been my intention; this had merely been my only opportunity to act.

“Furthermore,” he said, “I now see potential for success in my future.”

I wondered what he meant. The sudden glint in his light-brown eyes was a little bit intimidating.

“I came here expressly to support Lady Hannelore,” Kenntrips said.

“Really...?” Lord Wilfried asked. “Should you not have been *stopping* her?”

“My reasons are my own. Rather, I am surprised you do not know about Dunkelfelger proposals.”

Lord Ortwin raised an eyebrow at me. “Were you not too quick to act? It stands to reason that if Wilfried was ignorant of bride-stealing ditter, he would also be unaware of your duchy’s proposals.”

“Perhaps, but I lacked the time to investigate,” I said with a glance at Kenntrips, who had urged me to make my move sooner rather than later.

The apprentice scholar crossed his arms and examined Lord Wilfried closely. “Clarissa’s union with Lady Rozemyne’s retainer was the product of engagement tasks. As you were engaged to Lady Rozemyne at the time, I was certain you would have been informed.”

“A woman of Dunkelfelger employed such means to join Lady Rozemyne’s retinue?” Lord Ortwin mused aloud, nodding in response to the explanation. “That assumption is entirely reasonable, then.”

Lord Wilfried said nothing. He looked as confused as ever.

Again, Lord Ortwin raised an eyebrow. “Someone from another duchy entered your fiancée’s retinue. That should have prompted you to investigate, especially when you would most likely have shared retainers once you were wed.”

“I didn’t know...” Lord Wilfried muttered, grimacing out of regret.

“Clarissa’s actions were deemed so serious that when she went to greet Lady Rozemyne during the Interduchy Tournament, Lady Rozemyne’s guardians and Aub Ehrenfest began looking into her,” Kenntrips explained. “We saw no reason to believe you would not have been aware.”

Lord Wilfried frowned and said, “Rozemyne didn’t tell me.” I could hear the pain in his voice.

How could he not have known? He was the next aub and Lady Rozemyne’s fiancé.

The entire situation seemed so curious to me. In the Dunkelfelger Dormitory, Clarissa had spoken openly and with pride about how Lady Rozemyne had asked about the manner of her proposal. We had never considered that the fact she had obtained engagement tasks would be largely unknown in Ehrenfest.

“Well, if he didn’t know, he didn’t know,” Lord Ortwin said. “The important part is what comes next. Wilfried, are you going to accept Lady Hannelore’s proposal?”

“Is what they said true?” Lord Wilfried asked me, still clearly uncomfortable.

I was racked with embarrassment, having leapt on someone who had not even understood my reason for doing so. I would have liked to dismiss the whole thing as some kind of mistake, but I suspected this was the only opportunity I would ever have.

“Yes, it is,” I said. “I ask to be given engagement tasks.”

Wilfried’s Answer

In response to my request, Lord Wilfried placed a hand on his forehead and sighed, looking even more troubled than before. “Lady Hannelore, what should one do when giving tasks is out of the question? It is not possible for us to be wed.”

“Excuse me?” I asked, so taken aback that my mind went blank. “But you said moments ago that Ehrenfest seeks engagements with greater duchies.”

An amused grin pulled at the corners of Lord Ortwin’s mouth. “What reason do you have to refuse her, Wilfried? If you marry Lady Hannelore, then becoming the next Aub Ehrenfest will prove trivial. You can regain all that you lost when your engagement was undone.”

“No one wants me to become the next aub,” Lord Wilfried shot back.

“You are mistaken,” I said, pushing through my heartache. “*I* want you to. I wish you would desire it as well.”

Lord Wilfried’s eyes widened in disbelief, then wandered the gazebo as he searched for his next words. I could barely contain my nerves.

“Um, the thing is,” he said at last, “as surprising as it was, I am grateful you confessed. During my engagement with Rozemyne, I wished time and time again to have a fiancée like you instead.”

“Lord Wilfried...” was the most I could manage in response. It astounded me to know he had thought about me that way during his engagement. As I gazed upon him, I felt Efflorelume the Goddess of Flowers begin to dance within my chest.

“I, uh, never even considered that someone might like me. But...” Lord Wilfried paused, then cast his eyes down as if debating whether he should continue. “As I am now, I do not have the right to desire you.”

“Come again...?”

In the blink of an eye, Schneeahst the God of Ice had arrived and blown Efflorelume away. I was lost for words, and my body trembled as my heart was frozen solid.

“Because you are no longer the heir apparent?” Lord Ortwin asked. “If so, marrying Lady Hannelore would—”

“It’s worse than that,” Lord Wilfried interrupted. “Back in Ehrenfest, Melchior and Charlotte are competing to be the next aub. It’s already been decided that I will oversee the province of Gerlach and its surrounding area as giebe once I come of age. My father has instructed me to marry the daughter of an archnoble giebe, be she from Ehrenfest or another duchy.”

“This makes no sense...” Lord Ortwin muttered, his tone dubious. “I knew the cancellation of your engagement made things worse for you, but you were fully removed from consideration?”

Lord Wilfried responded with a tepid nod. I could not help but clap a hand over my mouth; how agonizing it must have been to endure such treatment from his own father.

“That cannot be...” Lord Ortwin said. “Such treatment is reserved for those who have committed a crime!”

“Indeed. I made a grave mistake when I was young. It was only through Lady Rozemyne’s aid that I emerged as I am now.”

“Then your engagement to her meant far more than we imagined.”

Lord Ortwin was correct—had the engagement been a way to make up for his sin, then it must have been more than just another political pairing. It also explained Aub Ehrenfest’s resistance when Dunkelfelger and the royal family insisted on the engagement being canceled.

“Considering my duchy’s factions, I am in the worst position of all,” Lord Wilfried said. “My engagement with Rozemyne was meant to compensate for my shortcomings, but for several reasons, it had to be undone.”

In no uncertain terms, he explained how agonizing it had been to enter an engagement made purely to cover for his faults, the pressure thrust upon him to become Ehrenfest’s next aub, and that he had ultimately lost sight of his own wishes and what it even meant to be engaged.

What a wretched situation! And to think he endured it all that time...

“The engagement was miserable to me, so I welcomed its dissolution,” Lord Wilfried explained. “Lady Rozemyne and I are better as siblings and nothing more. It was when the Zent ordered our separation, intent on adopting her, that my father instructed me to think about the future I desired. I was permitted a year to make up my mind.”

Giving up on his engagement to Lady Rozemyne would prevent Lord Wilfried from becoming the archduke, but an order from the Zent could not be refused. It must have been a time of great strife for Aub Ehrenfest—I could see that more clearly than when I had focused on Lady Rozemyne's position.

"However, during the Archduke Conference, Lady Rozemyne became Aub Alexandria instead of being adopted," Lord Wilfried continued. "My father approached me afterward and asked what I wanted to do, but not even an entire year of contemplation had given me a clear answer."

And so, Aub Ehrenfest had ordered that he become a giebe.

"Gerlach, the same province into which Lady Hannelore took her knights, has long been at odds with its neighbor Leisegang. Selecting a Leisegang noble to take over would cause all sorts of trouble among the locals. Having an archduke candidate become the giebe instead was ideal, not just for repairing the estate but also for creating a window to Alexandria and keeping an eye on the south of the duchy."

Lord Ortwin nodded, having listened closely. "I understand that an archduke candidate is the best choice, even with the details you've had to omit for the sake of duchy security. Still, will the province survive until your coming of age? Surely someone from the archducal family should take over to heal the land ravaged by war."

"Ehrenfest has no adults to spare. Lord Bonifatius, maybe, but that hardly seems wise; he is retired and sees to the aub's duties whenever Father is absent from the castle. Not to mention, his house leans Leisegang. I was chosen to become the giebe largely because, out of all the viable candidates, I am the best choice of the appropriate faction."

So dire was the situation in Ehrenfest that Lord Wilfried was expected to become a giebe the moment he came of age. Such an issue would never have arisen in Drewanchel or Dunkelfelger; our archducal families were much too large.

"How strange..." Lord Ortwin mused aloud. "Are you truly not of the same faction as your full siblings?"

Lord Wilfried shook his head. "My grandmother took me into her care shortly after I was born. For that reason, I am of a different faction."

"That is..."

Lord Ortwin fell silent, too stunned to utter another word. I was just as

taken aback; being raised apart from his brother and sister made them more akin to half-siblings than anything else. And if Lord Melchior and Lady Charlotte had been raised normally, then I doubted their mother had wanted to give up her firstborn son.

Oh, what a cruel act...

Though I dared not put my thoughts into words, anger coursed through me at the thought of what must have transpired.

"Melchior is considered most likely to become the next aub, having inherited the position of High Bishop from Lady Rozemyne. Praying to the gods should secure him divine protections in abundance, and he won't obtain his schtappe until after coming of age. As our father is still young and unlikely to cede the archducal seat anytime soon, no matter how hard Charlotte might work, Melchior's chances are far superior," Wilfried continued.

Lady Charlotte was a girl, and the schtappe she wielded was from her first year at the Royal Academy. Unless there was a sudden need for the current Aub Ehrenfest to step down, she was at a serious disadvantage against her younger brother.

"In any case, the next aub will need an archduke candidate to support them," Lord Wilfried explained. "A full sibling is a more reliable choice than the child of a second wife, and Charlotte is better suited to staying in the Noble's Quarter. As an older brother from another faction, my presence alone would risk creating a divide."

To summarize, making Lord Wilfried the next Giebe Gerlach was the best course of action for Ehrenfest. Seeing his vacant smile, however, I could not tell whether he would truly be okay with such an outcome.

"Wilfried, these are no more than assumptions," Lord Ortwin said. "You're an honor student; there's no way to know whether Lord Melchior will obtain similarly high grades."

"My brother excels in all fields. Truly, he does," Lord Wilfried countered, shaking his head with a bitter smile. "He works as hard as he can, intent on becoming as capable as Lady Rozemyne, and I do not share his dedication. As it stands, he will grow up to be an excellent archduke."

Lord Wilfried sighed and turned to me. No longer shy or embarrassed, he now bore the countenance of someone who had given up and accepted the truth of his situation.

“Were you an archnoble, Lady Hannelore, or an archduke candidate of a lower-ranked duchy that would not threaten my siblings, I would gladly have taken your hand,” he said. “Or if I had known about your feelings a year ago, I might have worked with maddening devotion to become the aub. That opportunity has passed, however, and Aub Ehrenfest has made his decree. You are an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger, now the top-ranked duchy in all of Yurgenschmidt; marrying a giebe from Ehrenfest is beneath you.”

“I see...”

If not for Lanzenave’s invasion, Dunkelfelger would never have risen in rank, and I would not be known as a friend of the divine avatar. Gerlach would never have been ravaged, and there would not have been such an urgent need to assign a new giebe to the province. In a world where Lord Wilfried was a normal archduke candidate, not one embroiled in political chaos, he might actually have wished to become the aub.

Could my timing have been any worse?

“The next aub taking an archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger as his bride would do wonders for Ehrenfest,” Lord Wilfried explained. “But as I am fated to become a giebe, I am not worthy of your hand. You would destabilize the authority of Melchior’s first wife and breed a new generation of conflict.”

That is the last thing I desire...

I gritted my teeth, firm in my belief that I had caused Ehrenfest enough problems already. Nobody there or at home would want me to become Lord Wilfried’s first wife.

“Please accept my sincerest apologies, Lady Hannelore. As an archduke candidate of Ehrenfest, I cannot risk sowing seeds of chaos or destruction in my duchy.”

If Lord Wilfried had wanted to become an archduke, I would have done everything I could to make it happen. If he had wished to abandon Ehrenfest and marry into Dunkelfelger, I would have gone to any lengths to convince the relevant parties. But alas, he had resolved to obey his father’s orders and become a giebe; Ehrenfest had nothing to gain from allowing me to marry him.

“I... I see...”

My mind raced in a desperate rush for answers, asking again and again

what I could have done to be bound to him. Perhaps because this was my second time being rejected since our game of bride-stealing ditter, or perhaps because I had thought of nothing but Lord Wilfried for the past few days, a gaping hole opened in my heart. From it, mana surged without restraint.

“Lady Hannelore, are you okay?” Kenntrips asked.

I nodded, striving to contain my mana. This was neither the time nor place to lose control. I tensed my muscles and squeezed the charm on my wrist.

“Let us end our meeting here. The attendants keep shooting us anxious glances,” Lord Ortwin said, then put his sound-blocker down and rose to his feet. Lord Wilfried nodded and did the same, spurring Kenntrips and me to follow suit.

“Allow me to offer prayers and gratitude to Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time for weaving our threads together this day,” I said, speaking solemnly to match the tone of our conversation.

Before I could continue, the charm on my wrist began to shine for reasons I could not comprehend. Made for me by my head attendant, Cordula, it was engraved with the sigil of Dregarnuhr. Its yellow feystone shone, and a light of the same color shot toward the roof of the gazebo. We all stared up in a daze as it started drawing a magic circle overhead.

“What on earth?!”

“What’s happening?!”

The knights rushed into the gazebo just as the magic circle reached completion. There was a bright flash, and in the blink of an eye, I was transported to a vast white void.

Dregarnuhr Weaving Threads

I was staring across the void, lost as to what had just happened, when a woman wearing a light-yellow veil appeared in front of me. I could tell from the tall shape of her headdress that she was wearing her hair up. Only her mouth was visible, but I gathered she could see me; she was facing me head-on. The pressure she exuded made me want to run, and it suddenly became hard to breathe.

“Hannelore, it was tremendously useful that you summoned me with your mana.”

Summoned...? Wait, is this Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time?!

Thinking back, the magic circle had appeared the moment I spoke her name. I had meant to give a simple farewell, not summon her, but there was no mistaking the fact that she was standing before me. So intense was her divine power that I could almost feel it pushing me back, reinforcing the fact that she was indeed a goddess.

To think the gazebos were connected to her by more than just rumors!

“Do lend me your vessel, Hannelore. I must summon the Zent candidate who obtained the Book of Mestionora. Under normal circumstances, I could do so without you, but she is shielded by a powerful barrier that hushes my voice and prevents my touch from reaching her. How unfortunate.”

Dregarnuhr must have meant Lady Rozemyne, who had started to wear protective charms after the last time a goddess took over her body. I could not speak conclusively, as my knowledge of the country reached only so far, but I found it hard to believe that anyone else in Yurgenschmidt was shielded so thoroughly that not even the voice of a goddess could reach her.

“Um... O holy Dregarnuhr, may I confirm that you are speaking of Lady Rozemyne, not Zent Eglantine?” I asked. Truth be told, I was unsure why she wished to summon a mere Zent candidate rather than the actual Zent.

“Yes, I suppose that *is* how you all address her. Indeed, she is who I seek,” the goddess replied, a smile forming on her lips.

Lady Rozemyne had transferred the Grutrissheit to then Lady Eglantine,

but it seemed the gods still saw her as a Zent candidate. Perhaps they did not consider Zent Eglantine a true Zent to begin with. A complex wave of anxiety spread through my chest as I sensed myself being embroiled in a plot with the gods previously kept secret by Lady Rozemyne and the royal family.

"If we do not summon her, the past twenty-some years we have woven together will come loose and vanish," Dregarnuhr continued, blowing away my petty concerns in an instant.

"More than two decades of history will just... disappear?" I asked.

"Only the Zent candidate can be involved with this incident."

I was unsure what was happening, but losing twenty-some years would be an incalculable tragedy. If only Lady Rozemyne could resolve the matter, I would need to allow the goddess to summon her.

"O holy Dregarnuhr—if my vessel will suffice, then please use it as you must."

The Goddess of Time thanked me, then vanished, her veil swaying slightly as she went.

I agreed without much thought, but is giving my body to a goddess really wise? I doubt I am anywhere near as suitable as Lady Rozemyne.

Stuck inside the blank void, I could only wait, pondering my choice in something of a daze. Dregarnuhr returned a short while later. She must have been successful, as Lady Rozemyne was with her.

"Lady Hannelore, are you okay?!"

She appeared to be dressed in some new style of riding attire. Vials ran along her chest in a rather rare fashion, but even more surprising was the intense look on her face as she ran toward me. Her hair was tied behind her head, and although she wore her rainbow feystone hair stick, her usual flower ornament was nowhere to be seen.

Wearing all those magic tools and feystones, she looks dressed for battle. It seems a tad excessive for a summons from the gods.

But then it struck me—Lady Rozemyne was being asked to prevent some disaster that threatened to undo more than two decades of Dregarnuhr's woven threads. In the face of dangers unknown, it was only natural to prepare for the worst.

"Did the gods do anything to you?! Are you in pain or losing any of your memories?!" Lady Rozemyne exclaimed, frantic as she inspected me

from head to toe.

“There is nothing to worry about,” I assured her, free of aches or anything of the sort. “I simply lent my body to Dregarnuhr and waited for the two of you to arrive.”

“The problems will come later, then. The Goddess of Time possessed you; her divine power will surely remain and cause all manner of damage to your everyday life. I will need to ask Zent Eglantine to prepare some silver cloth for you.”

“Come again? ‘Damage’?” Lady Rozemyne’s concern quickly became my own.

Dregarnuhr’s veil swayed again as she regarded my friend with a quizzical tilt of her head. “Hannelore’s body is not like yours—it resists my divine power and is especially hard to dye. If any of my influence remains, it should vanish in mere moments; it was never my intention to have it linger before.” Her face remained covered, so I knew not what kind of expression she was wearing.

“Well, what are the odds that her memory or something of equal importance is damaged, then?” Lady Rozemyne pressed.

“In this case, *I* am the one requesting aid; I would not play tricks as Mestionora did. I needed only for Hannelore to summon you.”

Lady Rozemyne let out a quiet sigh, and the tension seemed to leave her body. A peaceful moment passed; then she turned to me with a clouded expression.

“Because of my charms, I fear you have been drawn into matters most complex,” she said. “Please accept my sincerest apologies. Your memory should not be impacted, but you might face problems elsewhere. Vestiges of the goddess’s power are bound to remain within you, and a nettlesome fuss will come from you being touted as the Divine Avatar of Dregarnuhr.”

Back in the gazebo, the Goddess of Time had possessed my unconscious body in full view of not just my own duchy but Ehrenfest and Drewanchel as well. The accompanying light had shone so intensely that many within the nearby scholar building had also borne witness to the spectacle.

Oh, what a tricky situation this is going to be... I actually fear returning to my body!

“O Dregarnuhr, would you be so kind as to elaborate on your reason for summoning me?” Lady Rozemyne asked, a sharp look in her eyes as she

gazed upon the Goddess of Time. “You have said that twenty-some years hang in the balance and that Ferdinand is at risk, but not what any of that means.”

Lady Rozemyne’s recalcitrance in the face of a genuine goddess made me anxious, but Dregarnuhr appeared unfazed. She elaborated without question, although her response did nothing to ease my confusion.

“Are you aware that I spin the threads of fate?”

“So the tales told in Yurgenschmidt say.”

“And do you know of Wentuchte the Goddess of Weaving—she who takes the threads I spin and transforms them into history with her divine instrument, the loom?”

“I know as much as is described in the Book of Mestionora,” Lady Rozemyne replied with a nod.

In truth, I had not known about Wentuchte creating history. She was best known as a weaver who appeared in tales about the former subordinates of Earth. Upon learning that they had been chased away, Geduldh had wept and protested that she would refuse all clothes not made with cloth woven by Wentuchte. Such a master of her craft was the Goddess of Weaving that cloth of the highest quality was praised as being “excellent enough to have come from her hands.”

“As a harmless jest or an act of malice, I do not know, but the thread of *his* fate was cut from the cloth of history that Wentuchte wove,” Dregarnuhr concluded.

“You speak of *Ferdinand’s* thread, correct?” Lady Rozemyne asked. Perhaps I was mistaken, but her tone seemed a little confrontational.

The Goddess of Time nodded, a smile playing on her lips. “Indeed. The thread of his fate was severed more than twenty years ago. Under normal circumstances, a thread cut prematurely would simply be bound to another or removed entirely. But Ferdinand has been deeply involved with Yurgenschmidt as of late, has he not? Wentuchte was despondent, convinced that plucking his thread would change the entire course of history.”

One could not deny the enormity of the role Lord Ferdinand had played in shaping recent events. After being rescued in Ahrensbach, he fought against Lanzenave, won a key battle in Gerlach, and joined the fighting at the Royal Academy. He had also attended a meeting with the royal family

to select the new Zent, during which, as my father maintained, he had come across as a truly dominant force. At present, he was supporting Alexandria as Lady Rozemyne's fiancé.

I suspect his influence reaches even further than I realize.

"It really was a shame," Dregarnuhr continued. "She had seemed so overjoyed at how wonderfully her woven pattern had turned out. So, I searched for a thread of Ferdinand's color to repair it. And that led me to you, Rozemyne."

Oh my! Does that not mean they are fated partners recognized even by the Goddess of Time?!

Lady Rozemyne had obstinately denied the visitation of Bluanfah the Goddess of Sprouts, but she had merely lacked self-awareness. She and Lord Ferdinand were destined to be together, their fates intertwined by Liebeskhilfe the Goddess of Binding. I could feel my heart beat quicker, but all thoughts of romance were blown from my mind when the goddess made her next declaration.

"I should like to use Sterrat's power to fully bind your threads and unify their color. Then, I shall use a portion of your thread to fix his. Do you accept?"

Sterrat was the God of Stars, who acknowledged newlyweds during their Starbind Ceremonies. The insinuation was that Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand would marry, ensuring that her intact thread of fate could be used to restore his severed one.

In short, Lady Rozemyne is being asked to give up a portion of her life to save not just Lord Ferdinand but the very history of Yurgenschmidt.

Stunned, I turned my attention to my dear friend. A grave request had just been made of her, yet she agreed without a trace of reservation.

"Please wait, Lady Rozemyne," I said. "Do you understand what it means for your thread to be used for such a purpose? Perhaps there is another solution." There might not have been much I could do, but Lady Rozemyne must have had *some* way to bargain with the gods.

"I thank you ever so much for your concern, Lady Hannelore, but Dregarnuhr's choice of words makes it clear that the gods care not for Lord Ferdinand or the threat to our country's history. She acts only because Wentuchte is loath to compromise the beauty of her work. They might look like us, but we must understand that the gods operate on logic and

principles far removed from our own. There is no place for bargaining or negotiating here.”

The gods existed in a world entirely different from our own. I had understood that much, but still, something had compelled me to think that the words of mere mortals could persuade them. Lady Rozemyne assured me that I was mistaken.

“Furthermore, it is I who will suffer the most if Dregarnuhr changes her mind and advises Wentuchte to give up on the severed thread,” she continued. “I have resolved to protect Lord Ferdinand no matter the cost; surrendering a few years of my life is the least I can do for him. O Dregarnuhr, might I assume that time is of the essence?”

Far from hesitating, Lady Rozemyne was urging the goddess to hurry. It spoke to the strength of her resolve, but seeing her complete lack of deference made my heart leap into my throat.

Dregarnuhr responded with a nod, no more bothered than before. She raised a hand, causing her sleeve to sway, and a wondrously ornate door appeared within the void. It opened into a room where a calm-looking woman sat with thread in hand, her auburn hair bundled loosely behind her head. She resembled the statue of Geduldh from the altars so closely that I could see how she might once have been a subordinate.

“Dregarnuhr. I am most grateful,” said Wentuchte.

“Pray tell, where might Sterrat and Liebeskhilfe be?”

“In the other room. Sterrat is keeping Liebeskhilfe from my loom. Once again, she cannot help but toy with the threads.”

So, all those tales of the Goddess of Binding causing mischief were true...

I was in the presence of two genuine goddesses, yet the awe they inspired was half-hearted at best. Something about them was hard to comprehend. In a sense, it felt as though everything I was experiencing was only a dream.

“My... You truly brought her?” came an exasperated, chastising voice. “I understand why Wentuchte doesn’t want her beautifully woven tapestry to unravel, but using another’s thread to mask an imperfection...?”

Turning to the source of the noise, I saw another legend approaching us: Liebeskhilfe the Goddess of Binding. There was a god accompanying her, clutching her wrist as if to prevent any sudden movements.

Liebeskhilfe exuded the aura of an energetic prankster, exactly as the stories had claimed, but she gazed upon Lady Rozemyne with clouded eyes. “You needn’t play along with Dregarnuhr and Wentuchte—you know that, don’t you? For the sake of two centuries, I could understand, but this is a mere two decades she’s fussing about. Would the pattern not look so much nicer if she just started over?”

“A mere two decades”?!

Clearly, the gods’ perception of time was nothing like our own. Undoing twenty-some years would return Yurgenschmidt to before the days of the civil war, when even the smallest change could prevent Lady Rozemyne or me from ever being born.

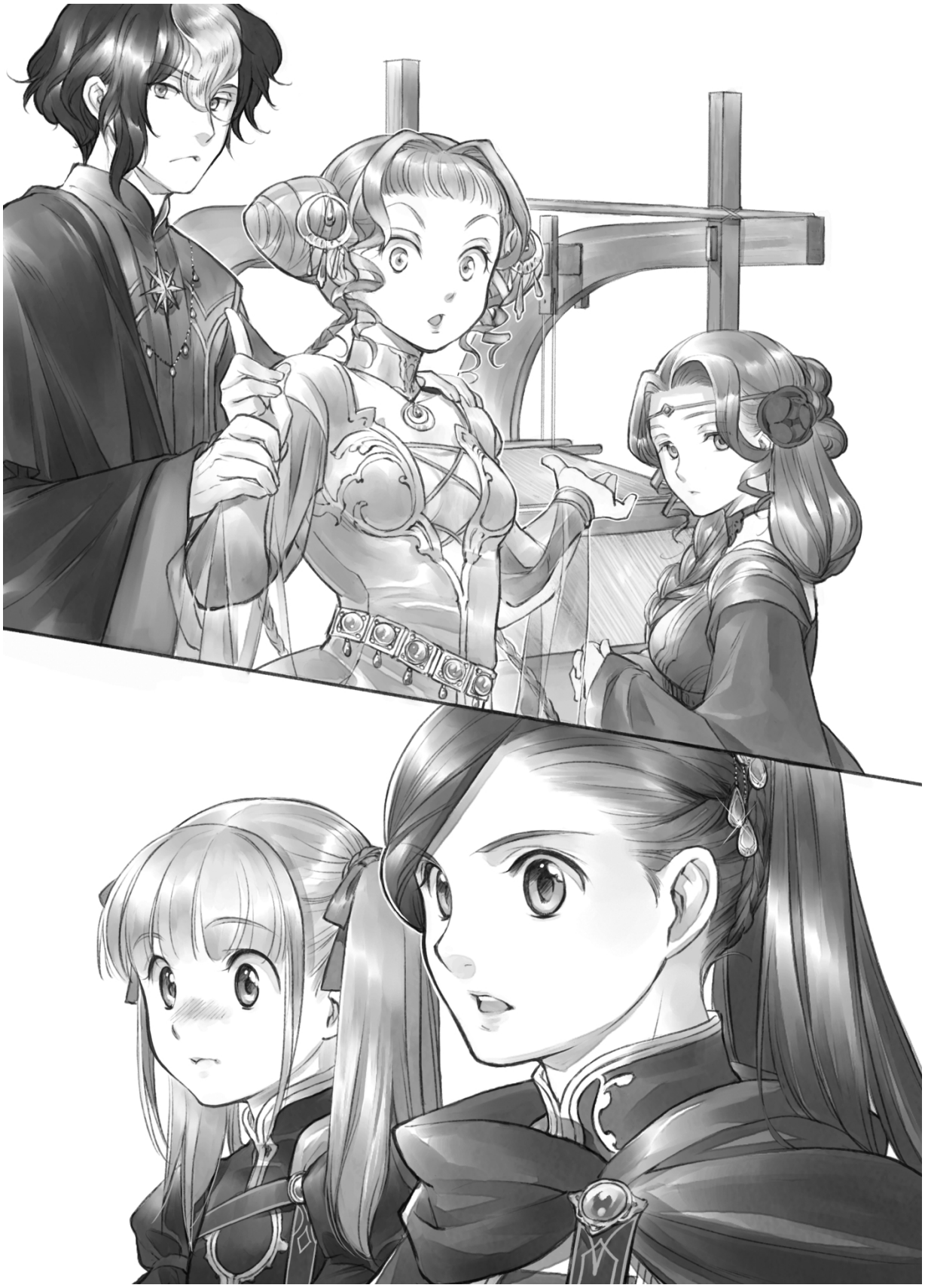
Please, O goddess, do not propose something that would wipe out our lives and our history!

I swallowed my scream and maintained a smile. Lady Rozemyne really had meant it when she said the gods existed in a world entirely unlike our own. Perhaps the custom of training nobles to control their emotions had come from Zents not wanting to anger the gods during their exchanges.

“O holy Liebeskhilfe, the beauty of a new tapestry is by no means guaranteed,” Lady Rozemyne stressed. “I would rather repair the severed thread than allow everything we have been through to unravel.”

Liebeskhilfe responded with a curious look. “Truly? You are both content with keeping things as they are? I would cherish this opportunity, were I you. Rarely does one get a chance to try again.”

Did she say “try again”?



I clutched my chest. The more I thought about it, the more certain I became that I was not content with how things had turned out. If going back a single year—not twenty—were an option, I would surely make the most of the opportunity.

“Wentuchte, in her wisdom, has grown attached to her current work,” Lady Rozemyne said. “I, too, wish to preserve her creation.”

The Goddess of Weaving allowed a slight, satisfied smile to grace her features. “Not only is it beautiful, but it also brought peace to that little box garden. It seems such a waste to let it all crumble to dust. Don’t you agree, Sterrat?”

Sterrat the God of Stars, the man keeping Liebeskhilfe in check, glanced at the loom with an exceptionally bitter look on his face. His hair was black, save a streak of gold through his bangs.

“Liebeskhilfe can bind threads on a whim, but I require the consent of both parties.”

“Oh my...” Wentuchte muttered. “You can determine the consent of a severed thread, then? That is wonderful news.”

“She means to have the cut thread bound,” Dregarnuhr added. “I ask that you comply without delay.”

“And with how thoroughly she has been dyed, only a fool would question his consent,” Liebeskhilfe concluded. “Were the man to refuse to be bound to her now, I would personally sever his thread again.”

Sterrat had managed only a single complaint before the trio of goddesses intervened, smacking him down one by one. He rolled his eyes in response and played with his golden lock of hair. Their exchange seemed so human that it was hard to tell whether the gods really were beyond us.

“Fine, fine,” the God of Stars said, forced into reluctant agreement. “I recognize your points, each more correct than the last. It really is safe to assume that, with how thoroughly this one has been dyed, they both desire to be wed.” He snapped his fingers, and a black cloak trimmed with gold took shape around him, adorned with a brooch that shone as brightly as a star. He must have changed into his formal attire as a god.

“Ohoho... In which case, allow me.”

Smirking, the Goddess of Binding snapped her fingers as well, changing into her own gold-trimmed clothes. Sterrat and she each wore the divine color of the god to whom they were subordinate. Liebeskhilfe also appeared

to be wearing more hair ornaments than she had previously.

“This way, Rozemyne,” Dregarnuhr urged.

Lady Rozemyne nodded, then knelt and bowed her head before the God of Stars and Goddess of Binding. The former swung his arm, and the void around us transformed into a star-speckled sky. A yelp escaped me, but I clapped a hand over my mouth to stop it; we showed no signs of plummeting even with the sudden absence of ground underfoot. I glanced around in a panic, whereas Lady Rozemyne remained perfectly calm, having not even looked up to see what was going on.

Liebeskhilfe pulled two of the accessories from her hair, taking one in each hand, and threw them into the night sky. They reached their apex, then came back down to her, bringing two slender rainbow threads with them. She untangled the threads from the ornaments before passing them to the God of Stars.

“I see. Time really is of the essence,” he mused, his features twisted in the start of a grimace. He removed his brooch, which I took to be his divine instrument, and said, “May the blessing of the stars be granted.”

Sterrat pinched the two threads and pulled them taut. They twisted together as if becoming one, then separated again, and golden dust reminiscent of shimmering stars rained down on Lady Rozemyne. So majestic was the sight that it rendered me genuinely speechless, and tears came to my eyes unbidden; I had just witnessed a true Starbind Ceremony set in motion by the gods themselves. The ceremony my brother had described to me, and shown me paintings of, seemed mundane in comparison.

“It is done.”

Dregarnuhr’s voice snapped me to my senses, and it suddenly occurred to me that we were back in the Goddess of Weaving’s room. The God of Stars and Goddess of Binding had returned to wearing their more casual attire.

“Now then, Rozemyne,” the Goddess of Weaving said, “you must head to the moment the thread was severed, face the perilous danger that resides there, and reconnect the thread to my tapestry.”

Wentuchte’s ring shone, and a light that reminded me of those given during first greetings floated leisurely toward Lady Rozemyne. My dear friend was enveloped, then transformed into a strand of thread that emitted

a veritable rainbow of colors. It swirled through the air, matching the movements of the goddess's finger, before plunging into the cloth on the loom.

"To the thread you seek," Wentuchte instructed, focusing intently on the loom without so much as a glance our way. Dregarnuhr placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder and turned to me.

"You were of great assistance, Hannelore. The thread should now be restored. It has not escaped my notice that Rozemyne came with me only for your sake. To show my thanks, I shall grant you a single wish of your choosing."

"Oh, I could never—"

My voice caught in my throat. Rather than politely decline, would it not be best to seize this opportunity the goddess intended to give me?

"E-Erm... As impudent as this request might sound, might I enter the tapestry as well? I would, um... appreciate the chance to go one year into the past."

"Perhaps I could allow it while Rozemyne restores the severed thread, but would that not change the pattern?" Dregarnuhr asked, her attention focused on Wentuchte, who continued to stare at the work in question. "Not to mention, I purposely brought her physical form here to minimize the impact upon her. You are naught but your mind; venturing back in time will make you more susceptible to our power. I cannot grant you a separate body to use—your consciousness will merely be sent to your past vessel."

"What's the problem, Dregarnuhr? You asked what she wanted, and she told you!" Liebeskhilfe exclaimed with an amused grin. "And even if she *does* make a mistake of some kind, repairing a single year or so is trivial."

Set on changing my relationship with Lord Wilfried, I found the goddess's support extremely heartening. I even started to feel that there was nothing to fear about having my mind alone sent back to the past.

"My actions should not change history to any considerable degree," I said. "The change I yearn for is personal. I beg of you, afford me the chance to try again."

"Ahaha! That's more like it! You have my approval, if no one else's. Sally forth!"

Liebeskhilfe placed a hand on my back and thrust me forward. The other goddesses cried out in surprise and tried to stop her, but it was too late; I,

too, was absorbed into the vast tapestry.

The Academy of a Year Ago

“Listen well, Hannelore,” Dregarnuhr said as I was overcome with the sensation of a slight descent, “your mind can remain in the past only until Rozemyne has finished repairing the thread. Furthermore, I forbid you from doing anything that might obstruct Wentuchte’s work.”

The goddess spoke quickly. Perhaps because Liebeskhilfe had acted on a whim, she had very little time to impart her most crucial warnings.

“You are also prohibited from sharing any knowledge about the future with the people you meet,” Dregarnuhr continued. “Let me be clear—if anyone finds you suspicious, I shall consider it a danger and take action. I shall retrieve you at once and erase the memories of those you were involved with.”

The gods’ priority was repairing the tapestry that Wentuchte had woven; it stood to reason that changing history was strictly forbidden. Thankfully for us all, I took no interest in obstructing Lady Rozemyne or the gods—I merely wanted another chance to confess to my heart’s desire in the hope that we could finally be together.

“Understood,” I said. “To begin with, I do not intend to make any major revisions to history. I want only to convey my feelings to Lord Wilfried.”

“Wil...?”

The goddess’s voice faded, and with a low *clack*, I was slotted into a new place in time.

I awoke in my room inside the dormitory. Perhaps it was wrong of me, but I could not help but doubt whether the gods had actually succeeded in their work. Their perception of time was a world apart from our own, so they could easily have made some kind of mistake. I sat up and checked my nightwear.

These are the same clothes I wore last year. I suppose I really am at the right point in time.

It was so much colder at the Royal Academy than at home that I ordered

new nightwear each year. Seeing what I was wearing now, I could say without a shadow of a doubt that I was in the correct year. My next question was how far into the academic term we were; I needed to know whether Lady Rozemyne had vanished yet. Eager to find out, I changed my clothes and went straight to the training grounds.

"Oh? Are you here to participate, Lady Hannelore?" came a sharp remark from one of the apprentice knights.

As the air grew thick with tension, my retainers gathered defensively around me. The apprentices all shot me pointed stares, but why? I was only following my usual routine. My brow furrowed, I set about my training... and realized what was going on.

Ah, yes. Last year, I was still...

My fourth year at the Academy had been plagued with negativity. I had yet to clear my name, so the others of my duchy had ostracized me for bringing about our defeat only to be turned away by the low-ranking Ehrenfest. At once, I recalled just how poorly the knights and my brother's retainers had treated me, and how much I had wanted to leave home as a result.

Time and time again, my duchy had compared me to Lady Rozemyne. I had failed to put up a meaningful defense during the Sovereign knights' attack, allowing Lord Wilfried to tempt me into submission, whereas she had put up a shield to ensure not just her own safety but that of her peers as well. The more her reputation climbed among our students, the more I was deemed a mess of an archduke candidate in contrast.

My actions during our recent game of bride-stealing ditter had resulted in our defeat, but that alone was not the issue. In fact, if my betrayal had secured me an engagement with Lord Wilfried, I doubted a single person would have spoken out against me. Using my brother as a stepping stone to obtain my love would have made me a masterful tactician.

Instead, I had taken a step back, reluctant to trouble Ehrenfest any more than we had already. I had given up on what was rightfully mine, rendering our defeat pointless and inspiring my fellow students to deem me unfit to be an archduke candidate. To make matters worse, my brother had graduated, leaving me to manage the dormitory on my own. Any trouble I had with the work he had previously overseen only reinforced the burgeoning consensus that I was a letdown. If not for the ditter incident, my brother's retainers

would have helped me, but I could not ask them questions as things stood.

In its current state, the Dunkelfelger Dormitory was a most unpleasant place for me—somewhere I would rather not tarry. As I reached the end of my training, I scanned the grounds and steeled my resolve.

This is a race against time.

I would confess my feelings to Lord Wilfried and return to the present posthaste, I thought. But a moment later, I was struck with a startling realization: my time here depended on how long it took Lady Rozemyne to repair the errant thread.

"Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time," I called, touching my charm—but I received no response. Even if I completed my mission at once, perhaps I would be stuck here until Lady Rozemyne's work was done.

"Prayer can wait," Cordula said. "Get changed and eat breakfast first, milady."

Following the advice of my head attendant, I bathed, changed, and then headed to the dining hall with my retainers. There, I eyed my would-be suitors, who were sitting only a short distance away.

Raufereg had yet to join the Royal Academy. He tended to make noise with his friends and retainers during meals, so the hall seemed rather serene in his absence.

Rasantark had greeted me upon my arrival, but now he was focused on his food. Kenntrips had glanced up out of curiosity before immediately returning his attention to his plate. It would have been absurd to expect us to be as close as we were in the present, but even so, I found their detachment strange and uncomfortable. Was there a reason Kenntrips kept meeting my eye?

"Is something the matter, Kenntrips?" I asked.

He blinked at me in surprise, then approached. "It is about the mednoble Dedication Ritual..."

In an instant, I understood what he wanted to say: the applicants must have been decided. Praying made it easier to obtain divine protections, which appealed to students of all statuses, but the process of giving up mana placed a heavy burden on laynobles and low-grade mednobles. Forcing them to participate could negatively impact their progress in class, so they were allowed to choose whether they were up to the task.

The archnobles and archduke candidates of our duchy were not allowed

the same autonomy. For us, participation was mandatory.

“Could you show me the list, then?” I asked.

Instead of sharing the names he had written down, Kenntrips gave me a dubious look. “Has... Lord Lestilaut discussed this matter with you?”

“Hmm?”

“You, um... requested the document without consulting Luitpold.”

Being from the future, I was aware that Kenntrips had made the list of applicants both this year and last. As a fourth-year, however, I should not have known. I remembered asking Luitpold to fetch it for me, his confession that he had yet to even prepare it, and Kenntrips admonishing both of us—Luitpold for lacking the drive of an archducal retainer, and me for not giving my apprentice scholar adequate instructions.

How was I meant to keep track of that?!

“Y-Yes, indeed... I consulted my brother,” I stammered. “Thank you. I thank you ever so much.”

I gave Kenntrips my best smile and accepted the list from him, worried that I was already drawing unwanted attention to myself. As expected, the names were exactly as I remembered them.

“Luitpold, transcribe this and give copies to both Klassenberg and Ehrenfest,” I said.

“Understood.”

I glanced at Kenntrips, doing my best to keep my nerves from showing. He seemed a little perturbed but quietly went on his way—perhaps a sign that my attempt to hide the truth had been successful.

Back in my room, I let out a sigh of relief. It had terrified me to think I might be caught so soon, but now I understood exactly how far back the gods had sent me. Just a few days prior, the archnobles and archduke candidates had taken part in their Dedication Ritual.

“Cordula, Father instructed that I stay ahead of Klassenberg with these Dedication Rituals, did he not?” I asked. “I wish to hold a tea party with Ehrenfest before they do.”

“I would wait for Lady Rozemyne to recover. As she is currently unwell, we have no need to approach Ehrenfest outside of the rituals themselves.”

“She need not attend,” I pressed on. My head attendant had shot me down, her eyes cold, but I would not give up without a fight; I needed time

to speak with Lord Wilfried. “Father insisted that this is a matter of the utmost importance, so let us learn from the other Ehrenfest students instead.”

“Lady Rozemyne received an invitation to the Archduke Conference just as you did, confirming her significance in the eyes of the royal family. You will find her a most important ally, especially in these trying times.”

Cordula was greatly appreciative of Lady Rozemyne. By putting my name forward, my dear friend had given me the opportunity to assist the royal family during the Archduke Conference. Their praise had done wonders for my image among Dunkelfelger’s higher echelons, if not among my brother’s retinue and the apprentice knights.

“Indeed, Lady Hannelore—you have much to gain from your relationship with Lady Rozemyne,” Andrea interjected. “Lord Wilfried spurned you despite agreeing to the terms of bride-stealing ditter. He is to blame for the damage done to your reputation and the harsh treatment you are forced to endure.”

Heilliese nodded in agreement as she and Andrea finished preparing for their classes. “I cannot believe he speaks to you as if nothing happened. I suspect even Verbergen would show more discernment, were Entrinduge to castigate him so.”

Verbergen the God of Concealment had an unsavory habit of pursuing multiple women, each unaware of the others. It had earned him a harsh rebuke from Entrinduge, but not even that had put a stop to his womanizing. The incident had come to be regarded as an allegory for shamelessness.

“To be perfectly clear, that boy does not deserve you, milady. I ask that you avoid him at all costs, lest any more unnecessary rumors start to spread.”

“Cordula...”

I knew that participating in true ditter eased tensions between our duchies, but I had forgotten just how bad things were.

My retainers’ fury toward Lord Wilfried was intense, to say the least. They were angry because they cared about me, but still...

How am I to navigate this?

Asking them to help me confess was out of the question; they would inquire as to why I gave up on the engagement during the Interduchy Tournament. Had the gods sent me back further, I would have fought to

keep that deal on the table, but only because of the changes that had come about in the seasons since. Had I not heard about the chance of my half-sister Lungtase marrying into Ehrenfest, I might never have acknowledged my feelings for Lord Wilfried.

On that note, something occurred to me: would it not have made more sense to ask to be sent back *two* years, to before the Interduchy Tournament and our bride-stealing ditter match? I thought for a moment, then shook my head. At the time, Lord Wilfried was still engaged to Lady Rozemyne, and he demonstrated admirable strength of character by continuing to play that role until the royal family formally announced their separation. He would doubtless have rejected me—not that I was fool enough to propose to an engaged man.

"It is time for class, milady."

Oh, what can I do to have a private conversation with Lord Wilfried...?

Upon descending the dormitory's stairs and making my way to the exit, I saw the students gathered in preparation to leave. I scanned the crowd for someone to speak to and locked eyes with Kenntrips, but he looked away before I could even start to approach him. It made no sense to take it personally—he had yet to become my suitor, and treating him as one would have been entirely inappropriate—yet I could not ignore the sudden ache in my chest.

Perhaps I was relying on him even more than I realized.

Kenntrips had been my one and only ally in my mission to confess to Lord Wilfried; losing his support meant I would need to forge ahead alone. Yes, I was surrounded by retainers, but nothing about their intense atmosphere put me at ease. Only then did it occur to me how accustomed I had become to having Kenntrips and Rasantark escort me to class.

Do I have what it takes to manage without Kenntrips's help?

I would need to make contact with Lord Wilfried and convey my feelings on my own. Given that Cordula and the others were vehemently against me associating with anyone from Ehrenfest other than Lady Rozemyne, I would surely need to mimic Lord Ortwin and approach my target during class.

Now, what was the excuse given for Lady Rozemyne's absence? As I recall, she was unwell for so long that she had to return to her home duchy halfway through the academic term.

In truth, she had been swept away by the gods themselves—not that I would ever have suspected as much. I recalled Cordula and the others permitting me to hold tea parties with Lady Charlotte after Ehrenfest made their announcement, but I could not risk waiting that long. I was still entirely unsure how long it would take Lady Rozemyne to attend to the severed thread.

It might be a bother to make my move during our lesson, so perhaps I should ask Lord Wilfried to stay behind for a moment when we finish.

I wandered into my classroom, still deep in thought.

"Good morning, Lady Hannelore."

"Indeed. Good morning."

"Good morning, Lord Ortwin, Lord Wilfried."

I had not expected anyone to speak to me, so I was caught unawares by the two boys' greetings. I returned the gesture, then looked at Lord Ortwin. Despite his zealous confession in the present, nothing about his current demeanor gave me reason to believe he had an interest in me. Perhaps that spoke to his talent as an archduke candidate.

"I was just asking Wilfried about Lady Rozemyne's health," he said. "It seems she shows no signs of recovering."

"Unfortunately not," Lord Wilfried supplied, evidently troubled. "She was, um, already working hard to finish her classes, intent on returning home as soon as she could, when she had to take part in the Dedication Ritual on her only day of rest. Her attendants expect her to be bedridden for quite some time. Exhaustion must have gotten the better of her."

A year ago, I had assumed that Lord Wilfried wavered out of concern for Lady Rozemyne. Now that I knew the truth, I could analyze his response more carefully.

He is feigning concern. I know that just by looking at him.

I was unsure how to explain it, but I could tell when he was truly anxious just by the nuances of his expression. He was uncomfortable at most, maybe because he was having to deceive us. That I could identify these subtle hints that escaped even Lord Ortwin spoke to just how closely I observed him.

"Um, Lord Wilfried..." I said.

"Yes, Lady Hannelore?" he asked with a smile. As he gazed upon me, I saw not a trace of adoration in his dark-green eyes. He must have

considered the bride-stealing ditter incident well and truly over, as I saw no guilt or conflict in them either.

It was very unlikely that Lord Wilfried knew how I was being treated in Dunkelfelger. I had purposefully not told Ehrenfest, reluctant to trouble them further, so I was almost proud to see the lack of shame in his expression. Part of me wished to preserve that innocence—but more than that, I wished to see his eyes widen with the same disbelief as when I had confessed to him before.

“There is something important we must discuss,” I explained. “May I have a moment of your time after class?”

“After class...?”

“Indeed. Only a moment, I assure you.”

Lord Wilfried nodded, evidently unaware of my intentions. The first step of my mission complete, I felt the corners of my mouth rise as I moved to my desk.

“Everyone, let us begin class,” Professor Eglantine called. Who would believe that a year from now, Lady Rozemyne would hand her the Grutrissheit and facilitate her becoming the next Zent? I was delighted to be a student of someone who would go on to rule all of Yurgenschmidt.

As per our teacher’s instructions, we each prepared our respective box garden. Lady Rozemyne had turned a feystone into gold dust and drawn a magic circle with remarkable speed in our first week of class, but such raw talent was thoroughly abnormal; nobody else in our class would even come close to matching her. The slower students had yet to even finish supplying their boxes with mana.

I channeled mana into a feystone with one hand, trying to reduce it to gold dust, while drawing a magic circle with the other. It was exhausting. I would need time to drink mana-focused rejuvenation potions and recover.

As I waited for my mana to return to me, I gradually continued to add to the magic circle. It was creation magic, accessible only to archduke candidates. Lady Rozemyne had drawn the entire circle at once, but a normal archduke candidate would not have the mana or focus to recreate such a complex pattern with so many sigils in one go.

I might not be as fast as Lady Rozemyne, but I am making quick progress by regular standards.

I glanced at the empty space beside mine and sighed. How was Lady

Rozemyne doing? Was she succeeding in her mission? She really must be special for the gods to have gone to her directly.

Perhaps she will finish in the blink of an eye, as with her classes.

The amount of time I could spend in the past depended on Lady Rozemyne. I needed to confess to Lord Wilfried as quickly as I could.

As soon as class is over.

I squeezed my schtappe-made pen, marring one of my sigils with an imperfect line. My nerves were getting the better of me, it seemed.

I could already imagine how my confession would go. Lord Wilfried would stare at me with wide eyes, as he had done before, then look around in embarrassment. He would repeat that he appreciated my feelings and that he yearned for a fiancée such as I. But the parallels would end there; this time, he would surely declare, "Aub Ehrenfest has granted me one year to decide my future. I shall devote my absolute all to becoming the next archduke."

Again, my hand strayed, introducing an error to another of my sigils. I gazed down at the misshapen circle and sighed; I was not in the right frame of mind for such sensitive work.

I shall put this aside and make gold dust for now.

Resolved to focus my attention elsewhere, I submerged the paper I was using into a solution designed to remove mana ink. The magic circle I had drawn melted away, leaving only a pure-white sheet.

Fourth bell rang, and students started exiting the classroom. I was packing away my things, attempting to look busy as I waited for everyone to leave, when I noticed Lord Ortwin turn toward me. Our eyes met... and then he departed as well.

"Lady Hannelore, Lord Wilfried—if you have gathered your belongings together, then kindly take your leave."

"Professor Eglantine..." I muttered. "There is, um, something I must discuss with Lord Wilfried. If you could allow us just a moment..."

Professor Anastasius—even now, the thought of a former prince becoming a teacher seemed strange to me—had overlooked my conversation with Lord Ortwin, and that had taken place *during* class. Professor Eglantine had no reason to refuse me, I thought, but a troubled frown came over her face. Her bright orange eyes moved from me to Lord

Wilfried and back again.

“Forgive me, Lady Hannelore, but I cannot grant you my sanction,” she said quietly, one hand resting on her cheek. “During our days at the Royal Academy, Prince Anastasius would approach me before, during, *and* after class. I was but an archduke candidate at the time, whereas he was royalty, so there was nothing I could do to refuse him.”

Professor Anastasius had permitted Lord Ortwin to speak with me during class because he, too, had used that time for courtship. Professor Eglantine had experienced the opposite end of those exchanges, so she refused to enable such antics in her classroom.

“If you *must* speak here, then I shall observe to ensure you do not use your authority as an archduke candidate of a greater duchy to pressure Ehrenfest into submission,” Professor Eglantine continued. “If you take issue with that, then leave my classroom at once. You would do better to arrange a meeting through the proper channels.”

It must not help that Klassenberg strives to keep my duchy away from Ehrenfest.

I was taken aback by the unexpected turn of events. Professor Eglantine had a good reason for her terms, but that did not make them any less troublesome. I would never have expected—nor wanted—to confess under such close supervision.

Unaware of my mental anguish, Lord Wilfried accepted Professor Eglantine’s proposal with a smile. “You may watch us, if you wish. I do not believe Lady Hannelore would make such demands of Ehrenfest.”

“I appreciate it,” she said, then stared at me intently. “Are your thoughts the same, Lady Hannelore?”

For a moment, I wondered whether I should give up on proposing... but leaving empty-handed was not an option. Turning down Professor Eglantine would give the impression that I *had* wanted to make an unreasonable demand, and there was zero chance of my neurotic retainers letting me speak with Lord Wilfried under any other circumstances.

Before, I proposed with Kenntrips and Lord Ortwin watching. This is nothing in comparison.

Indeed, confessing in front of Professor Eglantine would weigh on me far less than doing so in front of two people who had declared their feelings for me. I placed a hand on my chest, took several deep breaths, and

measured the distance between Lord Wilfried and me.

Is he too far away? No, not when his guard is entirely down. Professor Eglantine seems wary, but from where she is now, she stands no chance of stopping me. I shall pin my target down faster than she can even attempt to intervene.

"Very well," I said with a nod. "Observe us, if you wish."

Professor Eglantine's features relaxed into a smile, and she turned her attention to Lord Wilfried. It was an invaluable opening I could not overlook. I closed in on my mark and swept his legs out from under him.

"Wha...?"

"Lady Hannelore?!"

Oh, right... Lord Wilfried does not know how we of Dunkelfelger propose.

Last time, Lord Ortwin and Kenntrips had brought him up to speed. It fell to me to explain things in their absence. I seized my target by his shirt to stop his descent, lowered him slowly to the floor to prevent him from hitting his head, and then pinned him down in the least painful manner I could. His dark-green eyes showed nothing but shock.

"This is how a woman of Dunkelfelger proposes when acting against her father's wishes," I said, keeping Lord Wilfried perfectly still. "Give me tasks to complete so that we may be wed."

He merely stared at me, confused. Another quiet "Wha...?" was the most he managed in response.

"Was my explanation not clear enough?" I asked, trying to follow Kenntrips's and Lord Ortwin's example.

Professor Eglantine stared down at us, unease seeping through her outward calm. "Lady Hannelore, few outside your duchy will respond to such terms, and even fewer will appreciate your manner of proposal. You would do well to keep in mind that Dunkelfelger's customs are not the norm."

"Is that so...?" I muttered. "How do the women of other duchies propose, then?" Neither Kenntrips nor Lord Ortwin had elaborated on the matter. If other women did not pin their men down, it was crucial that I find out what they did instead.

"They express their interest with gifts and pleasant remarks, then have their desired partner propose for them," Professor Eglantine said, a distant

look in her eyes. “Proposing is a man’s job. Rarely do women take matters into their own hands.”

I had thought there might be other, less forceful ways for women to make the first move, but no—ours was the only duchy where women proposed at all.

Goodness. I was none the wiser!

Pinning a man down, requesting a chance to prove one’s worth, and then completing whatever tasks he set to earn his hand in marriage seemed perfectly acceptable to me. It was a test of one’s resolve and spirit, and a poignant one at that. Perhaps it would be wise to spread our custom to the women of other duchies as well.

“Release him, if you would,” Professor Eglantine said with a sigh.

I rose to my feet, and the subject of my confession slowly did the same. He took a small step back as if to put some distance between us.

“Not to sound rude, but, er... do you truly wish to propose to me?” Lord Wilfried asked, now more suspicious than surprised. “I thought last year’s ditter match was behind us.”

“Yes. I want to be with you,” I declared. “I want you to want it as well.”

I had thought Lord Wilfried would appreciate my confession. Instead, he looked openly annoyed by it. Only a day had passed since he had laid his heart bare to me—at least from my perspective—yet his reaction to my emotions could not have been more different.

How could this be?

“Lord Wilfried already has a fiancée—and one who is bedridden, at that,” Professor Eglantine noted. “Is it not obvious why such a proposal would trouble him?”

A calmness came over Lord Wilfried, who merely nodded in response. Because I was from the future, I knew that his engagement had secretly been canceled—but how could fourth-year Hannelore have gathered that?

I need some manner of excuse.

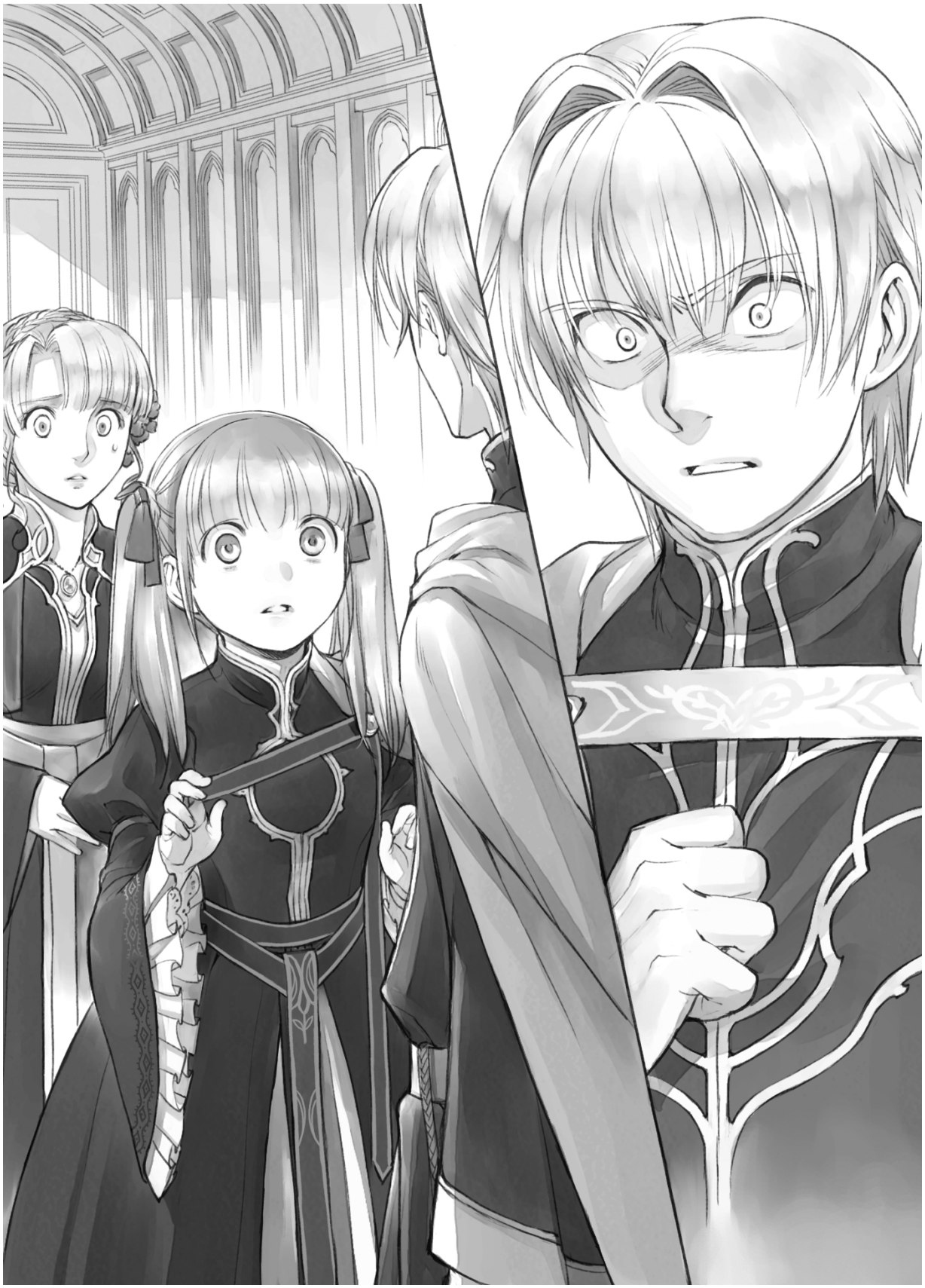
It took me a moment of contemplation, but I remembered my time spent with Lady Rozemyne and those fated to be former royalty. “Perhaps, but is his engagement to Lady Rozemyne not soon to be terminated? I was with her and the royal family during the Archduke Conference; of course I noticed the change in their relationship.”

Lady Eglantine and Lord Wilfried were struck speechless. I had

composed an excellent rebuttal without openly exposing my knowledge of the future.

“If our engagement must wait for that news to be revealed, then so be it,” I said. “Lord Wilfried, I will spare no effort in helping you become the next aub.”

Lord Wilfried stared at me, incredulous, his face as pale as it could get. There was no warmth in his eyes; instead, he positively radiated outrage as he clenched a trembling fist in front of his chest.



“Did... Rozemyne tell you to do this?” he asked.

“Lady Rozemyne played no role in this,” I said at once, my head cocked to one side. I could not even begin to imagine what I might have done to deserve such a hostile response. “I spoke with her, and she said only that she could not divulge private duchy matters.”

Lord Wilfried took a deep breath as if attempting to regain some semblance of composure, then shook his head. “Forget it. I apologize, Lady Hannelore, but the status of my engagement is irrelevant; I refuse to accept your confession.”

“Excuse me...?”

A stinging chill overcame me, as though I were encased in ice. I had not anticipated a rejection, let alone one so intense. My breathing hastened, a shrill ringing echoed in my ears, and an uncomfortable pressure gripped my chest.

Even then, Lord Wilfried regarded me with nothing but anger.

“I could never accept becoming the aub through your or Dunkelfelger’s power,” he said. “For the sake of both our duchies, I shall pretend this conversation never happened.”

The severity of his refusal was beyond my comprehension. Back in the present, had he not said he would have accepted my confession if I had approached him one year sooner?

“If that is all, then I must go,” Lord Wilfried said with a hard glare, then turned on his heel as if declaring that he cared not what else I might have to say. I could only watch in a daze as he marched out of the classroom, ocher cape swaying in his wake.

Soon enough, I was alone with Professor Eglantine.

“Lady Hannelore,” she called, her voice more tender and considerate than mere moments ago. I turned to her with a vacant expression, and she heaved a sigh before giving me a kind, reassuring smile. “If you predicted that Lord Wilfried and Lady Rozemyne’s engagement was going to be nullified, should you not have waited until it actually happened? Given the circumstances, I doubt you could have picked a worse time to make your move.”

So my timing was the issue? It failed me once again?

Questions ran through my mind. I might not have been able to answer them, but one thing was perfectly clear to me.

“As poor as my timing might have been, I had no choice. This was my only opportunity.”

I had believed what Lord Wilfried had said—that he would have fought for my love if only I had proposed sooner—and had traveled back in time with the aid of the gods themselves to be with him. My stay could last only as long as Lady Rozemyne took to reconnect a single thread, and without my retainers’ assistance, I was restricted to speaking with Lord Wilfried before and after class.

“Forgive me, Professor Eglantine; I caused you unnecessary trouble. I shall take my leave as well.”

I returned to the Dunkelfelger Dormitory, ate lunch, and then retreated to my hidden room. How could I attend classes when my mind was still reeling from shock? There was far too much to reflect on.

Where did I go wrong?

Lord Wilfried had assured me that he would have accepted my confession, but he had done nothing of the sort.

“Was he merely being considerate when he told me that?”

The first time I conveyed my feelings, Lord Wilfried smiled at me, a faint blush coloring his cheeks. I could not bear to think it had simply been an act, but what other conclusion could I draw when he had rejected me?

“He said that he would have put his all into becoming an archduke, but even at this juncture, he clearly has no desire to rise to power.”

On that note, I recalled something that Lady Rozemyne had said to me—that Lord Wilfried had been so desperate to avoid the archducal seat that he had actively sought to end their engagement. I should have remembered it sooner, but the promise of marriage had clouded my mind. Perhaps only the tumultuous year since and the many changes that had come with it had encouraged him to take a more favorable stance on becoming an aub.

“In which case, his response in the classroom makes perfect sense.”

As the final pieces fell into place, I could not help but let out an exhausted sigh. My coming here had served no purpose. In fact, I might even have made things worse.

“What was I thinking? I rushed into action, taking no heed of the hints Lord Wilfried and Lady Rozemyne gave me.”

I was stuck in an unwinnable situation. Here in the past, Lord Wilfried

had yet to experience the year that would reshape his thoughts about becoming an archduke and make him more open to marrying me. But in the present, where he *had* undergone that growth, circumstances prevented us from being together.

"In other words, I never stood a chance of changing things for the better. I suppose it would be nice if, in the future, he looks positively on my decision to confess—not that I think he will with how intensely he shot me down."

I sighed again. The most I could do now was keep a low profile and hope that my confession at least remained in his memories.

My thoughts organized, I went to my afternoon classes with a slightly calmer head on my shoulders. Lord Wilfried was going to such great lengths to avoid me that even greeting him was out of the question. I gave up on approaching him and went straight to my desk.

"Lady Hannelore, is everything okay between you and Wilfried...?" Lord Ortwin asked. He had been eyeing me since I arrived, having no doubt noticed the change in our demeanor compared to that morning. The fact he was questioning me meant that Lord Wilfried truly had resolved not to mention my confession.

I glanced over at Lord Wilfried. He was looking right at me but averted his gaze the moment our eyes met.

If you must pretend that nothing happened, at least do a better job of acting natural.

Was everyone already suspicious of the truth? Or was the onus simply on me to come up with a reasonable excuse? As I contemplated what to do, I started to wonder whether Lord Wilfried and I had very different ideas of what it meant to pretend something had not happened. The already vast chasm between our duchies seemed to widen, and the thought of marrying into Ehrenfest started to worry me. Would my days be spent attempting to decipher foreign culture, all while trying not to anger Lord Wilfried further?

What response would suit his wishes best?

I sighed, aware that our classmates were especially curious to know what was going on, and returned my focus to Lord Ortwin, who was awaiting my answer. Under no circumstances was I going to admit that I had proposed and then been rejected.

This reminds me—Lord Ortwin's situation changes quite a bit between

now and the present, does it not?

His elder sister, Lady Adolphine, would end up divorcing Lord Sigiswald. Lord Ortwin would then strive to become an aub to best be able to protect her.

"I wish to ask a question of my own," I said. "Lord Ortwin, do you seek to become your duchy's next archduke?"

"Well, securing the role proves what one is capable of, does it not? In that regard, I suppose I seek it as much as any archduke candidate would."

Seeing the look on his face, I wondered whether he had understood my meaning. I saw none of the fervor from our future meeting in his light-brown eyes, nor his intense desire to obtain status for Lady Adolphine's sake. It amazed me how much one could change over the span of a single year.

"Forgive me, Lady Hannelore, but I must ask again—what happened between you and Wilfried? He stubbornly refuses to tell me, and—"

"Nothing that would be of any value to Drewanchel."

As our afternoon classes came to an end, I prayed that Lady Rozemyne would conclude her business posthaste.

The next time I saw Lord Wilfried, his behavior remained the same: his expression changed the moment our eyes met, and he went out of his way to avoid greeting me. He was being so painfully overt that we faced even more curious onlookers than the day before. I would need to chastise him for his impertinence.

It was unacceptable to treat a top-ranking archduke candidate with such blatant disrespect. Overlooking his frosty demeanor would cause others to assume that my duchy had done something to gravely insult his.

If the other archduke candidates in our class took word of the unusual atmosphere between Lord Wilfried and me back to their dormitories, their peers and supervisors would start looking into the cause. From there, it would only be a matter of time—no matter how much I tried to hide it, those of the Dunkelfelger Dormitory would inevitably find out that something had prompted Lord Wilfried to treat me with contempt.

And when the news reaches Cordula...

Many from Dunkelfelger still took issue with my decision to defend Ehrenfest after our bride-stealing ditter match. They would gleefully

transform what was currently a problem between two students into an interduchy incident, causing trouble for more than just Lord Wilfried. Ehrenfest as a whole would be drawn into the fray, and all my time spent declaring their innocence would ultimately have been for nothing.

At the same time, criticizing Lord Wilfried for his attitude seemed rather shameless, considering I was to blame for proposing to him in the first place. I was unsure how I would even secure an opportunity to speak with him; he was going to such great lengths to avoid me that even greeting him was currently beyond me.

What are my options?

An ordonnanz was out of the question—it would announce my message to everyone in earshot—and any written correspondence would need to go through his scholars and attendants. So unfortunate was the situation that my best choice seemed to be to summon him with my authority as an archduke candidate of a greater duchy and force him to use a sound-blocker so I could chastise him in private.

The problem was that using my authority in such a manner would be ruinous to our relationship. Lord Wilfried would never forgive me for it, but I could think of no way to point out the issue while respecting his desire to pretend that I had never proposed in the first place.

“Lady Hannelore, Lord Wilfried—could you stay behind for a moment?” Professor Eglantine asked as class came to an end. “I must inquire about the Dedication Ritual this weekend.”

I gazed up at her in surprise, and our eyes met. She was watching me as one might a hapless infant. If asking about the Dedication Ritual were truly her intention, then she would not have found it necessary to ask me to stay behind. This was merely an excuse to give Lord Wilfried and me a chance to settle that which had come between us. I appreciated her concern, and there was nary a doubt in my mind about what I needed to say, but having to scold somebody I cared about put me in miserable spirits.

He will surely think even less of me.

Did the other students believe Professor Eglantine’s excuse? They kept glancing in our direction but slowly took their leave nonetheless.

“What do you want to know?” Lord Wilfried asked, openly frustrated that the three of us were alone again. Even now, he was staying a fair distance away from me, refusing to even look my way to emphasize how

little he wished to speak with me. It was hurtful, to say the least.

"Oh my..." Professor Eglantine said, widening her eyes for emphasis. "Do you really not understand why I asked you here?"

Lord Wilfried averted his gaze, his lips pursed. "You wish to speak about yesterday's incident, not the Dedication Ritual. I understand that much."

This time, Professor Eglantine showed genuine surprise. "Although yesterday's incident *is* relevant, it is your reckless behavior that requires me to speak with you. Do you truly not grasp what is happening?"

Lord Wilfried managed only a stunned "What...?" in response. He was entirely unaware of the danger his attitude presented.

Professor Eglantine gave a troubled smile, then looked at me. "Do *you* understand, Lady Hannelore?"

I nodded, sensing what must have been an intense glare from Lord Wilfried. Given the recency of the incident, I could not help but lower my voice as I anxiously ventured, "You wish to give me the opportunity to admonish Lord Wilfried...?"

"Indeed," she said—then turned to face him. "By all rights, this duty should fall to your retainers, not your professor, but the source of your strife occurred in this classroom and must be kept here. As those in your service know too little of the situation to take you to task, Lord Wilfried, I find that my hands are tied."

She took a moment to exhale, then gazed at him with kind eyes. "Lady Hannelore's proposal yesterday was extremely shortsighted. It was a shocking display seldom seen outside of Dunkelfelger. If you are uncertain about how to interact with her, I completely understand."

Lord Wilfried nodded, and the stern look on his face began to fade. He seemed relieved to have found a voice of sympathy—and somewhat bashful that it had come from someone he so deeply admired.

"However," Professor Eglantine continued, "I cannot ignore you snubbing a top-ranking duchy in my classroom. Obeying the duchy rankings, separating one's public and private lives, and remaining in control of one's emotions are fundamental rules that any noble must follow."

It should have been my duty to admonish Lord Wilfried, but Professor Eglantine was doing it for me. She must have been acting out of consideration for Ehrenfest and the guilt that had eaten away at me ever

since my confession. Had the burden of chastising him rested with me, I would only have inspired even greater resistance, and even the tiniest error in my speech might have devolved into an interduchy concern.

"Yesterday's events were personal, without a doubt," Professor Eglantine said. "I was prepared to stop Lady Hannelore if she used the authority of a greater duchy to bludgeon you into submission, but her actions took me entirely by surprise. I certainly did not expect her to propose so abruptly—and in my classroom, no less—but she gave you the freedom to refuse her. And when you resolved to pretend that she never confessed to you in the first place, she was fully sympathetic, was she not?"

As well as sympathizing with Lord Wilfried, Professor Eglantine was insisting that not all of my choices deserved to be criticized. My actions had backfired in so many ways that her mediation skills positively dazzled me.

"In short, it was *your* decision to act as though nothing happened. Refusing to greet an archduke candidate from a top-ranking duchy without a clear cause, then treating her with open contempt, risks creating discord between your duchies. Aub Ehrenfest would be stunned speechless if he heard of your behavior here; it is wholly unbefitting of someone who has passed their first-year court etiquette class."

Lord Wilfried paled at the insinuation that he was inferior to a new student. Still, instead of rushing to apologize to me, he stayed rooted to the spot and started gnashing his teeth in frustration. Even now that he knew his behavior was inappropriate, he seemed completely uncertain of what to do next.

Was he always this immature?

In my mind, Lord Wilfried had seemed a remarkable partner. He had passed his first-year court etiquette class in a single day and consistently excelled as an honor student, not to mention the kindness and consideration with which he treated his fiancée. The boy before me now could not have been further from that ideal.

He comes across as someone else entirely. Was the person I fell in love with but an illusion born from my own misconceptions?

"This goes for you as well, Lady Hannelore."

"Indeed. My sincerest apologies."

I shot bolt upright as I returned to my senses; my mind wandered so frequently during Mother's lectures that it was almost second nature.

Professor Eglantine's orange eyes were trained on me.

"I can understand not wanting to admonish Lord Wilfried, as you were to blame for his change in behavior," she continued. "And as he was going to such lengths to avoid you, there was little you could do but use your authority as a higher-ranking duchy to summon him."

She was being wonderfully considerate, I thought, and the tone she took was perfectly kind. The scathing sharpness that followed took me entirely by surprise.

"Yet you attempted not even that. Turning a blind eye to his behavior today was benevolent in the worst sense of the word. Had you been in the presence of your Dunkelfelgerian peers, they would surely have felt their duchy was being scorned by someone of a lower rank. A line must be drawn somewhere, Lady Hannelore; half-hearted sympathy benefits no one."

"I am glad we resolved the matter before it could escalate into an interduchy conflict," I said, well and truly relieved. "I thank you ever so much, Professor Eglantine."

She smiled, a look of praise in her eyes. "Conflict is not to my tastes either. Furthermore, I wish to keep any further danger from befalling Ehrenfest in its current state. It pleases me greatly that relations between your duchies have not deteriorated. Now, Lord Wilfried... Your apology."

Despite the warmth of her expression, it seemed our professor had no intention of acting *completely* benevolent.

Lord Wilfried appeared not to have fully understood what Professor Eglantine and I were saying, but he took a deep breath, and all traces of emotion faded quickly from his face. Only once he had adopted the proper smile of an archduke candidate did he approach and kneel before me. Suffice to say, the look did not reach his eyes.

My heart ached. Had I failed to convey my desire to prevent further conflict between our duchies? Worse yet, was Lord Wilfried still unaware of the threat his words and actions posed to Ehrenfest, despite Professor Eglantine's belabored explanation?

"I apologize for my rudeness toward an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger the Second. Given your compassion, which mirrors that of Geduldh, I truly hope you can forgive me."

I was speechless. Accepting such an insincere template of an apology

would only deepen the rift between us. I wanted nothing more than to sprint out of the classroom—but as an archduke candidate of Dunkelfelger, there was only one thing I could do.

“You are forgiven,” I said. “May we remain close friends long into the future.”

I had spoken sincerely, but Lord Wilfried must have thought otherwise; he assured me that my kindness was wasted on him, his expression one of feigned appreciation. Even as Professor Eglantine advised us on how to move forward, he refused to acknowledge me further. The damage done to our relationship was irreparable.

“You may depart, Lady Hannelore,” Professor Eglantine announced at last. “There is more I must discuss with Lord Wilfried.”

I nodded and departed the classroom; there was doubtless plenty to be said about the upcoming Dedication Ritual. My retainers and those serving Lord Wilfried were in the waiting room, wearing their blue and ocher capes, respectively. Mine approached me at once and surrounded me as if determined to protect me from Ehrenfest.

“Lady Hannelore, what happened between you and Lord Wilfried?”

For two consecutive days, we had come out of class later than the other students; I could not blame my retainers for the sharp looks in their eyes. I repeated the excuse that our professor had given us.

“Professor Eglantine had several questions concerning the Dedication Ritual. We released joint research with Ehrenfest about religious ceremonies, so my input was deemed necessary as well. I explained as much as I could, but there is yet more she hopes to learn from Lord Wilfried. Ask her yourselves if you doubt me.”

So I said, but not one of my retainers was equipped to interrogate a member of the royal family. At most, they could ask our dormitory supervisor to inquire for them, and there was not a doubt in my mind that Professor Eglantine would corroborate my claim.

Suppressing my despair at having lost even my friendship with Lord Wilfried, I forced a smile befitting my status and made my way back to the Dunkelfelger Dormitory.

No sooner had I returned to my room than the cracks in my composure began to show, culminating in an exhausted sigh. Cordula instantly met the

eyes of my attendants, who were helping me change.

“You seem rather depressed, Lady Hannelore,” she said. “Was the Dedication Ritual truly the topic of your conversation with Professor Eglantine?” Her tone was interrogative, but she regarded me with genuine concern.

“Indeed, it was...” I muttered, my eyes downcast. Announcing the truth was out of the question. “And yet... she exuded such an overwhelming sense of joy.”

“And that soured your mood...?”

“I cannot quite find the words. In a sense, I suppose her beaming smile and cheerful demeanor made me envious.”

“Envious?” Andrea repeated. “Do you also aspire to marry into royalty?” Her question felt almost surreal, knowing that Professor Eglantine was destined to become the Zent, and the royal family as we knew it would soon cease to exist.

“Oh, no. Back when I was a first-year, Professor Eglantine had two princes as her suitors. As the rumors went, her choice would decide the country’s next ruler, so she knew not who to lean toward.”

Professor Eglantine had not made up her mind until she was in her final year at the Royal Academy—and even then, she had put emotion above the throne by choosing Lord Anastasius, who had given up on becoming the Zent in an act of true love and devotion. Some speculated that Lady Rozemyne had served as their go-between, but as we had not been close at the time, I was unsure how great a hand she had actually had in the matter.

“I wonder, what separates those who end up happier for acting on love, and those who do not?” I asked.

Rather than choosing the country’s next king and taking her place at his side, as everyone had expected, Professor Eglantine had opted to put her heart first and ended up all the better for it. I, too, had tried to prioritize love, only to be told that my confession had come an entire year too late. Yet when I traveled to the past to remedy my mistake, I was rejected with such intensity that it cost me the entire friendship. The harder I tried, the worse things seemed to become.

“You approach everything with half measures, milady. If you truly wished to marry Lord Wilfried, then you should not have stepped down to avoid inconveniencing Ehrenfest. It would have served you better to pursue

him with the resolve to inspire a revolution in your wake. Or if you felt nothing for him, as you claimed, then you should simply have brought Ehrenfest to their knees and demanded that they apologize for having shamed you. I would not have hesitated to assist you in either case."

"Are those choices not too extreme?" I asked, misery seeping into my affected smile.

Cordula's stern gaze appeared to relax, and she looked upon me with tender eyes. "I saw how much you endured, stomaching Ehrenfest's self-centered terms while suppressing how you felt about Lord Wilfried. In truth, I think an extreme choice was exactly what you needed."

I scanned the room. The attendants changing my clothes wore looks betraying both frustration and respect for me.

"I am aware that my choices have burdened all of you as much as they have burdened me," I said. "For that, I truly do apologize." Because of my actions, the situation back home was far from ideal.

My retainers exchanged glances, then wry smiles.

"If you are concerned about us, then be more sincere, more resolute, and more discerning in your choice of men," my head attendant said.

"Cordula is correct," Andrea added. "Otherwise, our struggles will only continue to mount."

Any remaining tension faded as my attendants giggled among themselves. Although some awkwardness lingered, it felt as though we were speaking frankly for the first time in quite a while.

"But I *am* discerning in my choices," I protested. "Lord Wilfried would cherish me, and—"

"Yes, yes. He came to your aid in the midst of your ditter match. How considerate he must be."

Cordula took the initiative, repeating the excuses I had given so many times before. My other attendants followed suit, noting how Lord Wilfried had always seen me off when Lady Rozemyne collapsed during one of our tea parties. The ease with which they recounted my words left me deeply embarrassed; I must have raved about him a lot more frequently than I assumed.

No wonder Kenntrips and the others were so quick to draw their conclusions.

"You seem strangely tolerant today..." Cordula remarked. "Under

normal circumstances—being as stubborn as you are—you would start making excuses for Lord Wilfried at the mere mention of his duchy."

At once, I was struck with the urge to cradle my head. Everyone had always been so quick to speak ill of him that, indeed, I might have been a little too defensive.

"I am aware of the love that has taken root within you, and of his kind gesture during the ditter match that started it all," my head attendant said. "Still, I do not think that he would cherish you whatsoever, milady."

In the past, I would have objected without a second thought, and my retainers would have dismissed me with nods and shrugs. Going through the same routine time and time again had chipped away at my motivation and convinced me that no one from Dunkelfelger could ever understand how I felt—but what if my retainers thought the same of me as I stubbornly refused to acknowledge their concerns? Two years had passed since our bride-stealing ditter match, and only now had such an obvious truth become clear to me.

"You always say that, and that he lacks honesty. Why?"

Cordula and the others stared at me in shock, then at each other.

"The terms of your match were overturned, as Lord Lestilaut mistakenly chose the wrong kind of paper for an interduchy agreement," my head attendant explained. "However, that was merely a technicality. It does not change the fact that Lord Wilfried read the contract, confirmed the particulars with your brother, and ultimately signed it. *He* declared that he would lead Ehrenfest into ditter, not Lady Rozemyne or Aub Ehrenfest."

A quiet "Ah..." escaped me. I had always insisted that Lestilaut was to blame for the ditter match, and that my involvement had only come about as a desperate attempt to dissuade him.

"Had your hand in marriage not appealed to him, Lord Wilfried would have refused to sign the contract until the terms were changed, no matter what Lady Rozemyne said. That he signed the agreement means he was duty bound to wed you. As things stand, it seems that he never intended to respect the contract, and that he planned to draw attention to Lord Lestilaut's mistake whether Ehrenfest won or lost. He might be kind, but his actions paint him as two-faced or completely ignorant of the weight of a future aub's signature."

The day's events had sapped me of any desire to protest. Not long ago, I

had seen just how shallow Lord Wilfried could be.

Not to mention, given the sanctity of ditter to the people of Dunkelfelger, it is no wonder that my attempts to defend him earned me such ire.

The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to put my head in my hands. I could hardly believe how foolish I had been.

"Most of all," Cordula added, "Lord Wilfried took part in that ditter match to protect Lady Rozemyne, not to secure your hand. What reason do I have to believe he would treasure you?"

Small acts of kindness, such as comforting me after tea parties and socializing in Lady Rozemyne's place when she was absent, had led me to believe that Lord Wilfried would cherish me in Ehrenfest. Upon further consideration, however, I realized that none of his actions had been motivated by love for me; he had merely been covering for his fiancée.

In fact, it was Lady Rozemyne who promised to ensure my happiness if I married into Ehrenfest.

For the first time, I could see things as they truly were; what had once seemed so clear now struck me as little more than wishful thinking. I was still coming to terms with my mistake when a newfound intensity entered Cordula's eyes.

"And, if we consider everything together..."

She paused, watching me closely to gauge whether she should continue. My other attendants uttered not a word, but the severity of their expressions told me I was being asked something of grave importance—a question that would determine whether the foundations my battle rested upon were stable. I straightened my back, bracing for the worst, and gave a curt nod to insist that she speak.

"I do not think there is anything in Ehrenfest worth the rigors you have faced."

I swallowed, and my mind raced with thoughts of what was to come: the game of true ditter, the celebratory feast, the coronation of a new Zent, and Lady Rozemyne's inauguration as an aub. Despite my wishful thinking and passivity, I had protected Ehrenfest and secured a future I could be proud of. Nothing would make me give that up.



“Cordula, everyone... Nothing matters more to me than staying friends with Lord Wilfried and Lady Rozemyne—than being able to laugh and speak with them as usual. I understand now that I was being shortsighted, and that my way of thinking was more wishful than realistic. Even so, I cannot give up on that which is dear to me.”

I took pride in not having burdened my friends with knowledge of my hardships at home. And now that my relationship with Lord Wilfried was in tatters, I wanted nothing more than to repair it, if such a thing were possible.

“I would ask that you not belittle the friendships and experiences I consider more precious than anything.”

“Very well,” Cordula said. “As your retainers, we hereby swear to protect what is important to you.”

And with that, the chasm that had separated my retinue and me since our ditter match with Ehrenfest—or rather, since my stubborn defense of Lord Wilfried—had finally been closed.

Rather than try to force an engagement, I wished to cherish my friendships and the good times we had spent together. Only now was that clear to me. Returning to my fourth year had caused me all manner of problems, but it had taught me something valuable as well: I needed to communicate with my retainers, not simply turn my back on them.

Truthfully... I wish I could go back to the present.

I wished to return to my original time, when, for all my trials and tribulations, my bond with Ehrenfest was as strong as ever. I would apologize to Lord Wilfried for how I proposed to him, then face Cordula and the others again to repair my relationship with them.

As I racked my brain for what to do, I suddenly recalled the Goddess of Time’s warning. I was forbidden from presenting my knowledge of the future to those who had yet to experience it. The moment I came under suspicion, Dregarnuhr would retrieve me and erase the memories of all those I interacted with.

In short, by breaking the taboo, I can undo my mistakes here?

I feared the impact my early confession might have on the present when I returned there with Lady Rozemyne. Based on his reaction and response, I could see just how much Lord Wilfried had matured over the course of his fourth year.

“The truth is, Cordula—”

Before I could say another word, my knight Heilliese burst into the room. “A moment of your time, milady?” she asked. “One of the mednobles has a petition for you.”

I put my thoughts of returning to the present aside and gestured for her to continue. She knelt before me and wasted no time in giving her report.

“It seems the archnobles have completely stripped the gathering spot of herbs, despite the other students’ need to brew rejuvenation potions for the Dedication Ritual.”

It had been Fireday when I first returned to my fourth year, and Kenntrips had given me a list of mednoble names upon seeing me. It stood to reason, then, that the archnobles had performed their Dedication Ritual the previous Earthday. They had all been required to participate, which meant they needed rejuvenation potions—specifically, the ingredients to brew them. I searched my memories and recalled that, indeed, I had needed to restore the gathering spot before.

I remember it being an arduous, exhausting task, as the knights who thought ill of me were reluctant to help.

Loath though I was to go through it all again, the mednobles’ *and* the laynobles’ Dedication Rituals were right around the corner. I had no choice but to replenish the gathering spot, and we needed all the assistance we could get to minimize the burden.

In my fourth year, those of the grades above had tended to go overboard when harvesting ingredients. It was only in my fifth year that I mobilized all of our students to restore the gathering spot together.

“Ideally, we should get everyone to take part in the replenishment,” I said. “Could we do it tomorrow morning after training?”

“If everyone cooperates, then yes...” Heilliese muttered with some reservation. “But that would mean using up mana before class; we should expect many to speak out in protest.”

My retainers all wore uncertain expressions. Their concerns made perfect sense; at this point in time, before my role in true ditter, I doubted the knights would obey me. They had followed my brother’s orders without question, so it had wounded me to see them so reluctant.

How did we resolve this before? As I recall, we had Rasantark to thank.

In the blink of an eye, his booming voice had whipped the entire

dormitory into shape. It had depressed me at the time—as I saw it, I was so worthless that even one of my brother's archnoble retainers commanded greater authority. Only now could I appreciate how much Kenntrips and Rasantark had done for me when my reputation was so painfully lacking.

To think I was so blind...

Upon my return to the present, I would need to express my sincerest thanks to both suitors. But of course, restoring the gathering spot came first. My knowledge of the future told me that I needed a way to get the knights to listen to me.

True ditter convinced them all before. Perhaps playing ditter in the dormitory will change their tune?

I waited until dinner that evening to make my announcement: "After tomorrow morning's training, all students in their third year and above will work together to replenish the gathering spot."

Just as Heilliese had predicted, my words were met with plenty of resistance. Few wanted to expend their mana so soon before class.

"If you consider that too much, then we shall do it tonight," I said. "The mednobles need time to brew as well."

"Tonight...?" one of the gathered nobles asked. "Immediately after dinner?"

"You get free time after meals, do you not? We need only restore the gathering spot enough for the laynobles and mednobles to collect the resources they need."

As in my memories, the knights were slow to react. The attendants and scholars followed their example and stayed quiet; they would need the knights to protect them from feybeasts while they healed the gathering spot, which prevented them from acting alone.

I pursed my lips, Kenntrips grimaced, and Rasantark turned to me with a frown. Before, I had thought they were scorning me for my uselessness as an archduke candidate, but now I understood that they were simply concerned.

"Enough, everyone! This is an order from Lady Hannelore!" Rasantark declared, coming to my aid as he had done before. "We shall assist her once we've eaten!"

"Assist her?" one knight repeated. "How do we know she won't betray

us next?”

“We apprentice knights have suffered enough at her hands!” another retorted.

Their shouts and jeers made me want to avert my eyes, but then I remembered what Professor Eglantine had said to me. Just as the duchy rankings had given me power over Lord Wilfried, status gave me authority over the others in the dormitory. Although I was responsible for this conflict, I still had every right to scold those who were acting out of turn.

My silent acceptance only enabled and encouraged the knights before.

Permitting the knights to refuse orders and scorn an archduke candidate risked undermining the chain of command during serious operations. As my experience with true ditter had made clear, trouble could come entirely out of the blue, leaving those involved with barely any time to prepare. I needed to make my stance clear and scold them for their insolence.

I took a deep breath and let mana course through my body. Then I held my head high and glared down at the unruly students with savage intensity. “Your personal grievances with me are no excuse to refuse the orders of an archduke candidate. Was that much not clear? We shall heal the gathering spot together, for the entire dormitory will pay the price otherwise.”

The last apprentice knight to complain merely stared at me with his mouth agape. He took a moment to regain his composure, then attempted to speak out again.

“*LANZE!*” I interrupted, slamming the butt of my newly formed spear against the floor with all my might. “All students in their third year and above shall gather fully armed. For as long as I am an archduke candidate, you *will* obey my orders, no matter how you might feel about me personally!”

“Understood!”

The gathered students scattered like baby spiders. Soon enough, Lestilaut’s and my stunned retainers were the only ones who remained with me in the dining hall.

“Lady Hannelore...?”

“We must prepare as well,” I declared. “The gathering spot needs to be restored. Rasantark, I thank you ever so much for moving to protect me.”

This time, I properly thanked my future suitor before returning to my chambers. There, I changed into full armor and asked Cordula to prepare

the relevant magic tools for hunting feybeasts.

“Do you truly need this many?” she asked.

“I do. Restoring an almost barren gathering spot will prompt an assault from all manner of mana-hungry feybeasts.”

Last time, the feybeasts had put us through our paces, for we had not anticipated an attack on such a large scale. Kenntrips had advised me to guide the students to the safety of the dorm, of course, so I could only base my evaluation on the worn-down appearance of the returning knights.

“I do not remember the aub or knight commander mentioning anything of the sort when they replenished the gathering spot after the Archduke Conference...” Cordula said.

“Hmm? No, I suppose not. Back then, the duchies all restored their gathering spots simultaneously, dividing the feybeasts’ attention in the process. And as their combined work supplied the Royal Academy with an abundance of mana, we can assume there are more feybeasts here now than there were in spring.”

My retainers eyed me with suspicion, so I met their looks with a smile. The dormitory supervisors of the present had gathered what intelligence they could and compared the feybeasts around the Academy to those from before the civil war. In the end, they had concluded that there were indeed more—not that anyone at this point in time could know that.

“Lady Rozemyne warned me,” I added. “She knows more about regenerating the gathering spots than anyone.”

On that note, everyone conceded. Lady Rozemyne had reintroduced the prayer in the first place, so nobody had reason to doubt her.

As I recall, it was helwolves that attacked us.

Helwolves were red-furred feybeasts that resembled dogs, though with small horns protruding from their foreheads. Even a layknight stood a decent chance of slaying one on its own, but the beasts moved in packs and struck in formation. They were known to target the unprepared, so a single magic tool designed to deal damage across a large area would make them dramatically easier to defeat.

“Perhaps this will aid us,” I said, taking the magic tool that Kenntrips had given me for bride-stealing ditter. The thought of using it against people had scared me too much to bring its might to bear, but against feybeasts, I would show no mercy. “Heilliese—once the gathering spot has been healed,

lead everyone back to the dormitory without letting down your guard. Cordula, hold the fort until our return."

My head attendant looked at me, her eyes narrowed, then crossed her arms over her chest and knelt. "May Angriff guide you."

We exited the dormitory into a vast, snowy landscape. The sky hung still, much to our relief; although our armor would shield us from the cold, a blizzard would have put us at a serious disadvantage. The lack of obstructions would also make it easier to spot the helwolves' red fur when they appeared.

I raised my right hand—a signal to my armed peers—then continued toward the gathering spot by highbeast. It was not long before a pale column of light broke the expanse of white before us. Our destination would normally have been awash with green, leafy trees and grass abounding, but the archnobles had picked it clean. Now, it appeared no more vibrant than a barren wasteland.

"My knights shall watch for feybeasts," I explained—the first of my instructions. "Rasantark and the rest of my brother's knights shall slay any that appear, while the rest of us will pray and supply the gathering spot."

The apprentice knights looked at me as if about to speak, but only silence followed. I did them the kindness of pretending not to have noticed.

"Arrange yourselves in a circle around the gathering spot. To ease the burden upon you all, I am told archnobles should stay far apart, whereas laynobles should stick closer together," I said, repeating what Father and the others had shared of the process they were taught. "Now, let us pray."

I put my hands on the ground and gently started channeling mana into it. Green light spread through the earth, forming the contours of a magic circle. It was a divine, fantastical sight, but I could not let it distract me. A chill ran through me as mana continued to leave my body.

Once the circle was full, I chanted the prayer I had memorized.

"O Goddess of Water Flutrane, bringer of healing and change. Grant me the power to heal thy sister, the Goddess of Earth Geduldh, who has been wounded by those who serve evil. I shall offer this divine note to thee, casting ripples of the highest order. May thou fill the world with thy divine color to mine own heart's content."

The green magic circle rose into the air, and grass and trees began to

grow.

“That will do,” I called. Under normal circumstances, we would have waited for the circle to reach the very top of the gathering spot, but for our purposes, stopping at roughly eight-tenths completion would suffice. “This should provide enough resources for everyone’s rejuvenation potions. Using too much mana here would impact tomorrow’s classes.”

Not to mention, we needed to be ready for the feybeasts that were about to attack. I downed one of my rejuvenation potions, then interrupted the students gathering ingredients and instructed them to return to the dormitory.

“But we’ve barely even started.”

“It can wait until tomorrow’s training. Mana-starved feybeasts are bound to swarm us any moment now.”

Everyone except my retainers regarded me with suspicion. There was no time to hesitate; I would need to ease their doubts posthaste.

“I was told as much by Lady Rozemyne, whose experience with this prayer is unmatched,” I explained. “Let us hurry. My knights shall guide you.”

“In that case...” Rasantark took a deep breath. “Everyone, follow Lady Hannelore to the dormitory! We knights shall protect the gathering spot!”

Weapon firmly in hand, he sharpened his focus on our surroundings. First my brother’s knights, then the apprentice archknights took up arms as well. I remembered just how exhausted they had looked upon their return and promptly shook my head.

“No! Everyone but I shall return to the dormitory!”

“Lady Hannelore, what are you saying?!” one knight sputtered.

“Forgive me, but this task is much better suited to us than to your guards,” said another. “We—”

“Unless you all withdraw, I cannot use the magic tool that Kenntrips made!” I barked, thwarting their protests and presenting the tool in question. “Depart at once!”

Rasantark gawked, then nodded, fully aware of the might of Kenntrips’s work. Kenntrips himself stared at the tool with wide eyes, his expression betraying disbelief.

“Lady Hannelore...” he managed, “why are you...?”

“Your tool is much too powerful to be used against people. But against

feybeasts, I need not exercise restraint."

"I see... So *that* was how you saw it." The frown souring his features gave way to a resigned sigh.

"Kenntrips, escort everyone back to the dormitory at once," I said. "I shall protect them. Such is my duty as an archduke candidate."

"Although I do not doubt your conviction, we cannot say for certain whether feybeasts are truly coming. We shall entrust Heilliese's party with escorting the students while you take up the rear guard, Lady Hannelore. There, we shall protect you."

Despite his suspicion, Kenntrips had wasted no time in focusing on the matter at hand.

"Even if we *do* encounter feybeasts, as Lady Rozemyne cautioned, we still do not know their species or strength," he continued. "Should any survive the magic tool, acting alone would put you in grave danger. Rasantark and the others shall wait outside its reach. I know better than anyone how far its devastation will extend."

Kenntrips began instructing Rasantark and the others, using his knowledge of the magic tool to his advantage. He was still hard at work when an ordonnanz arrived.

"Lady Hannelore, this is Heilliese!" the little bird announced. "A massive pack of helwolves is approaching fast! They're racing straight toward you!"

A sudden seriousness gripped everyone still present.

"They're actually coming?!"

"Take your distance! Lady Hannelore needs space to use the tool!"

"We shall signal with a gelb once everyone is out of range!"

The red light of a rott warned of danger and requested aid, whereas the yellow light of a gelb announced that the preparations for battle were complete. I rode toward the helwolves as Kenntrips led the others to safety. If not for my drivable highbeast, which protected me from attacks unable to rival my mana, I would not have been able to enact this plan in the first place.

I used the might of my mana to accelerate to blinding speeds, boring a path straight through the helwolves as I went. Countless blue eyes burned with anger as their kin leapt at me, having branded me a foe. They snarled and chomped at my highbeast, but there was nothing they could do to

breach its defenses. I gazed upon their bared fangs as I started supplying my magic tool with mana, ready to throw it at a moment's notice.

A burst of yellow struck one of the helwolves in front of me—a signal from Kenntrips. As the beast pawed cautiously at the light, I threw the mana-charged tool out the window of my highbeast.

"*Detonas!*" I shouted.

Two magic circles spread out from the tool: a yellow one designed to protect its user, and a blue one meant to deal damage. Barely a moment later, a bone-rattling explosion rang out. The helwolves erupted in high-pitched shrieks, then fell silent as their feystones dropped to the ground. Those that were outside the range of the blast immediately turned tail and ran.

"Lady Hannelore!"

Kenntrips and Rasantark rushed over on their highbeasts, along with the other knights who had been waiting outside the blast zone. Rasantark was the first to reach me.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"Oh my... Did you not believe in Kenntrips's magic tool, Rasantark?" Even through his full plate armor, I could tell that he was nervous. His concern struck me as both amusing and endearing.

"Seeing that massive pack of helwolves gnawing at your highbeast would make anyone anxious!"

A chuckle escaped me. "I am sorry to have worried you. However, thanks to my drivable highbeast, I am entirely unharmed."

Hearing the tremor in Rasantark's voice told me how the spectacle must have looked. Any knight duty bound to protect an archduke candidate would have watched with their heart in their throat.

"My sympathies to you all, but I am glad that Heilliese and the others were not here to witness what happened," I said. "I fear they would have charged within range of the magic tool."

"Rasantark tried," Kenntrips noted, shooting him a glare. "Stopping him was a nightmare."

The other knights nodded, thankful to have succeeded.

"Kenntrips, it was thanks to your magic tool that we managed to slay the helwolves without sustaining any injuries," I said. "Excellent work."

He met my words with a look of uncertainty—hardly the reaction I had

expected from a man who had just been praised. As he kept his gaze on me, his gray eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Are you truly Lady Hannelore?”

“E-Excuse me?” I sputtered on instinct.

“What are you implying, Kenntrips?” Rasantark asked. “Who else could she be?”

“She *appears* to be Lady Hannelore, and some aspects of her demeanor speak to the person I remember, but... she seems fundamentally changed. It’s as if—yes, as if she’s older and more mature.”

Before I could even consider my response, my body lurched as if someone had suddenly snatched me. My head spun, and the world around me faded to white. The next thing I knew, I was lying on the floor, and the goddesses were gazing down at me with tense expressions.

Threads in Liebeskhilfe’s Grasp

I sat bolt upright, startled, and the gods’ expressions relaxed. Liebeskhilfe the Goddess of Binding was the only one still wearing a frown.

“Goodness, what a disappointment,” she groused. “You went into the past and got nothing from it, hmm?”

“I would not say nothing...” I muttered in response. I might have been too heavy-handed in confessing to Lord Wilfried, but the experience had taught me plenty. I truly had gained a lot from the trip.

“Well, I would! Although you laid your heart bare to Wilfried, I couldn’t bind your threads together at all. Here I was, hoping to do little ol’ Hannelore a kindness, since you always go to the trouble of praying to me...”

The goddess groaned. She was clearly vexed, but I could not mask my elation as I said, “I am glad my offerings have reached you, O holy Liebeskhilfe. Your efforts to repay me are an honor beyond my worth. I thank you ever so much.”

“With just a little more time, everything could have gone wonderfully. Why did you have to break the taboo?” the Goddess of Binding asked, pursing her lips.

Dregarnuhr placed a hand on Liebeskhilfe’s shoulder, assuring her she was not to blame. Then, turning toward me, she continued, “As I warned you, Hannelore, I have erased all memories connected to your journey to the past. It will be as though we never sent you back.”

She explained that history would revert to its original course. Everyone would forget my fourth-year confession to Lord Wilfried, the understanding I reached with Cordula and my other retainers, my leadership in restoring our gathering spot, and my triumph over the helwolves.

“I understand, O holy Dregarnuhr. But would you leave my memories as they are? I came to many valuable revelations during my time in the past, and I would not wish to forget them.”

“Very well. Let those revelations be my kindness to you.”

I nodded. I would cherish my new memories above all else.

“Still, what a surprise,” Liebeskhilfe mused aloud. “Who would have thought that Wilfried, of all people, was the object of your affection?”

“Come again...?” I asked, blinking at her.

“It was you who severed the tie between your threads in the first place. To think you would go all the way back to the past to repair the damage... Humans truly are strange.”

“Um, what do you mean?” I asked, my head tilted in complete and utter bewilderment. The Goddess of Binding mirrored the gesture.

“You prayed for it, did you not?”

“For my connection with Lord Wilfried to be severed...? Not to my knowledge, no.”

“Well, your prayer reached me. It was a rather strong one too.”

She waved her hand, and a metallic surface materialized in the air. In it, I could see... myself. Judging by the furniture and such, I was in my room in the dormitory.

“When too many prayers arrive at once, I am unable to comprehend them all,” Liebeskhilfe explained. “I set aside the particularly strong ones to review them in isolation.”

To think this *is how we look to them...*

It felt as though I were gazing into the water mirror we used for communication. I watched my past self speak with Cordula in a panic, then start praying with a desperate look on her face.

“O Liebeskhilfe, Goddess of Binding! I thank you ever so much for the blessings you bestowed upon me. You have done enough! Because of you, I now have more options than I ever thought possible. I do not require any more. Praise be to the gods!”

Ah! In the face of so many confessions, I did *ask not to have any more choices!*

“I see you remember, then,” Liebeskhilfe said. “When I received your prayer, I ensured your thread would not be bound to anyone but your suitors at the time.”

What a disaster! To think it was my own prayer that cost me whatever future I might have had with Lord Wilfried...

It was surprising enough that my words had reached a goddess, let alone that they had restricted my choice of suitors to those I wished to be with or

who had proposed to me at that moment in time. I had not confessed to Lord Wilfried or even recognized my feelings for him until *after* praying to Liebeskhilfe.

“Just how poor can my timing be?” I muttered as the world around me began to sway.

The Goddess of Time rested a hand on her cheek and sighed. “It hardly seemed poor to me. Liebeskhilfe will bind any two threads together, but there is no guarantee they will mesh well. Some combinations turn out to be quite poor. You chose to withdraw, did you not? Forcefully attempting to mend a severed connection seldom ends well.”

“Excuse me...?”

Did she consider Lord Wilfried and me a poor match? I turned my focus to the more cooperative Goddess of Binding, hoping she would protest.

“As long as they desire it, what does it matter?” Liebeskhilfe asked. “True lovers will accept any misfortunes that befall their union, and watching them suffer is such a delight! Work can be so dull; should we not seek entertainment where we can?”

Beneath her amiable grin, I suddenly beheld a bottomless well of malice. To the gods, watching us go about our lives and granting our wishes was both their duty and a form of amusement.

“Work is work; it must be treated with the utmost seriousness,” Dregarnuhr said. “And while I tolerate your tendency to treat everything as a game, I would rather you refrain from toying with my threads.”

“What’s the problem? More strange bindings, more fun!”

At once, I recalled Lady Rozemyne’s warning that the gods existed in a world entirely separate from our own. She had no doubt witnessed their immense power and unreasonable behavior when receiving the Grutrissheit from Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom.

I cannot be more thankful that Liebeskhilfe’s divine power did not alter the past.

“Um, has Lady Rozemyne not yet returned...?” I asked, my voice quivering as I tried to change the subject. Dregarnuhr was becoming more and more agitated from her conversation with the Goddess of Binding.

In truth, the answer was obvious; my return to the present had come about as a result of my own actions, not Lady Rozemyne’s completion of her work, and Wentuchte the Goddess of Weaving refused to look away

from her loom. Still, my endeavor proved successful—Dregarnuhr sighed, letting her anger fade, and directed her gaze toward Wentuchte's hands.

"As the thread in question was cut in several places, her work will take quite some time. However, I can confirm that she has safely repaired one section."

Hearing about Lady Rozemyne's progress put my mind at ease. Everything seemed to be going well, which was more than I could say for my trip to the past.

"You are here in mind alone, Hannelore," Dregarnuhr reminded me. "Do not wait for Rozemyne. Return to your body—it will not last without you."

I nodded. As I did not understand the ways of the gods or their culture, any number of problems could arise from my staying here. In response, the goddess raised a hand to return me to my world.

"O holy Dregarnuhr, I thank you ever so much for allowing me to keep my memories."

"And thank you for granting me the use of your body. I shall respect the history that Wentuchte has woven with Lady Rozemyne's and your aid," the goddess said with a smile. "Please rest easy."

As my vision faded to white, I found solace in knowing that the past two decades would not be lost. I could rest assured, I thought—but then, the Goddess of Binding forced her way back into view.

"I didn't get the chance to thank you for all your prayers! This time, I've made it so you can pick whoever you want!"

Um, wait... Hold on.

Her tone was kind, but something about her declaration made me uneasy. What could possibly happen next?

"Continue to send me your gratitude!" Liebeskhilfe exclaimed, her bright voice getting quieter and quieter. "I'll be waiting!"

Given all that she had done, the thought of praying to her again scared me. But equally terrifying was the idea of refusing a straightforward request from a genuine goddess. I was lost for what to do—and in either scenario, my future felt unbearably bleak.

I awoke in blue liquid.

Cordula noticed my eyes open and assisted me as I tried to sit up. "Is that you, Lady Hannelore?" she asked. The concern in her voice spoke to

the impact of the Goddess of Time's descent.

"Indeed, it is," I assured her with a nod. "This is my bath, correct? Am I sitting in a jureve?"

"Yes. Lady Rozemyne advised that we soak you in one until your consciousness returned. Had we not, your mana would have hardened as the absence of your conscious mind caused your body to waste away. I am glad to see you are well. As the bath is currently in use, forgive me, but I must perform a waschen to cleanse you."

As my retainer, it was considered inappropriate for Cordula to point her schtappe at me. I understood why she would apologize, but given the circumstances, it was the only way to wash the jureve from my body.

"I will speak on your absence once you are changed," she continued in a hurried tone once she was done. "Things have become quite problematic in your absence." Her usual poise was gone, and it worried me to see her so openly concerned.

Looking around, I could not see any of my other retainers. My head attendant set about dressing me on her own.

"Cordula, where is everyone?"

"I shall tell you what happened as I understand it. Stay strong of heart, milady."

"Strong of heart"? What on earth happened in my absence?

Cordula's words took me completely by surprise. I steadied my breathing and steeled my resolve, then gave a slow nod. Even after leaving the changing room and returning to my bedroom, I saw no sign of anyone else in my retinue.

"I have yet to inform anyone that you are awake," my head attendant explained as she poured me some tea. "I thought you might need time to process what I am about to share with you."

I took a sip of my drink, and a comforting warmth spread through me. It was then that I realized just how cold the jureve had made me feel.

"Please, take a seat as well, Cordula," I said, facing her directly. "It must have been exhausting caring for me while I was unconscious, and I doubt your story is a brief one."

She eyed me for a moment, then said, "You seem to have changed somewhat, milady..." before sitting down. "Now, where to begin? I should warn you that my knowledge of what transpired at the gazebo is far from

perfect. Should you have any questions when I am done, I can arrange for Kenntrips to speak with you as well."

Cordula spoke of the moment when Dregarnuhr had seized control of my body and the great beam of light that had appeared. As soon as the goddess made contact with Lady Rozemyne, I had crumpled to the ground, teetering on the brink of death. It was then that Lady Rozemyne advised that I be immersed in a jureve.

"We had no choice but to contact Dunkelfelger, have Lord Lestilaut send the jureve he made prior to his engagement, and then soak you in it while we awaited your return from the world of the gods. You have been here since then, but that is far from the end of the story."

Cordula paused, lowering her eyes in thought.

"As I recall, the trouble started with Korinthsdaum," she eventually said. "They insisted that it was cruel to make a saint joined to the Goddess of Time marry an archnoble. Then their aub proposed, citing his royal blood as ample reason."

"That makes no sense," I uttered. "It is a father's decision whom his daughter weds. If the people of Korinthsdaum take issue with my engagement candidates, they should challenge us to bride-stealing ditter." As much as Lord Sigiswald was trying to leverage his former status, he was not doing so through the proper channels.

"They asserted that as you have yet to choose a suitor, they have no reason to consider you engaged."

"Indeed, nothing has been formally arranged. I suspect Father would also have found it difficult to refuse a former royal."

Never had I expected Lord Sigiswald to use his position to try to force an engagement. Still, Father held a rather low opinion of the former prince; if marrying into Korinthsdaum did not appeal to me, he would do what he could to help me refuse.

"Your father carefully declined the proposal, explaining his desire to have you stay in Dunkelfelger. It was then that Lord Ortwin of Drewanchel made his own proposal."

"Lord Ortwin?! But why?!"

Was there no end to the surprises? If my memory served me right, he had been there when I confessed to Lord Wilfried. Why, then, had he proposed to me again?

Was he so composed in the gazebo because he knew Lord Wilfried would turn me down?

"It would seem he is rather well-informed on our duchy's customs," Cordula said. "He expressed a desire to win your hand through bride-stealing ditter."

"Is my father aware? Might there be confusion and a lack of preparation between parties, as there was last time?" Lord Ortwin knew about Dunkelfelger proposals, so I doubted he was rushing into things as carelessly as Lord Wilfried, but I remained cautious all the same.

"Both parties were on the same page, as I understand it. It was a formal arrangement for a match between Lord Ortwin's duchy and ours. Aub Dunkelfelger was much happier with his challenge than with Korinthsdaum's bad faith and accepted the petition out of hand, issuing orders for Rasantark and Kenntrips to protect you."

But before the bride-stealing ditter could commence, Korinthsdaum declared its intention to participate. The outcome was a messy free-for-all.

"And then..."

"Is there truly more?" I groaned.

"Lord Raufereg announced that he also wished to participate."

"He what?!" I exclaimed at the mention of my half-brother, who had only taken an interest in me to pursue a life spent playing ditter.

Cordula pinched the bridge of her nose, doubtless sharing my agony. "He claimed it was within his rights to voice his opposition to the archduke and that, by securing his rightful place as your husband, he could make you the next Aub Dunkelfelger. It was an outright declaration of war against Lord Lestilaut."

"Wait just a moment. No matter what bold declarations Raufereg might make, I do not intend to oppose my brother. Nor do I think I would make a suitable aub..."

Raufereg's announcement had apparently sent a great shock through the nobles of our duchy.

"The aub cannot accept Lord Ortwin's challenge in one breath and then deny Lord Raufereg the right to participate in the next," Cordula explained. "It would seem that Lord Raufereg is using his retainers to rally those who are against Lord Lestilaut and those who share his desire for you to become the next aub."

Dunkelfelger should have united around the suitors my father chose for me. Instead, Raufereg's intervention had divided us, creating a critical weakness that prompted other duchies to extend their own challenges.

"And so," my head attendant said, "an enormous game of bride-stealing ditter is about to be held to determine your groom. You are being hailed in a chaotic fervor as the second divine avatar; how you act and the decisions you make will be of greater importance than ever before." She sighed. "Matters are sure to escalate the moment your awakening is announced."

"I meant only to bid the others farewell. It was truly a coincidence that I was in the gazebo when I prayed. And the only reason Dregarnuhr wished to use my body was to summon Lady Rozemyne; I was not granted power or anything of the sort. How have things come to this?"

No sooner had the words passed my lips than I remembered the Goddess of Binding's parting declaration—that she would enable me to pursue anyone I pleased. Biblical stories abounded with tales of her pranks, and this demonstration of her might rendered me speechless.

Please, no! Anything but this! The last time she intervened, it was my own fault, but this—this was completely unprovoked!

I considered praying to Liebeskhilfe in protest but decided against it. Instead, I did everything I could to keep my mana from bursting free in my frustration.

Epilogue

The Dunkelfelger Dormitory buzzed with activity after the Goddess of Time's descent into Hannelore and the wave of ditter challenges that followed. Things showed no sign of calming down.

"Here," Andrea said. "Lindenthal gave me a letter for the aub after class today. Please add it to the pile."

"Does it never end...?" Kenntrips asked, a weary smile crossing his face. "Fine. Leave it with me."

There was little more he could do. Bride-stealing ditter challenges were arriving without end, and Dunkelfelger's students were being treated as ordonnanzes, tasked with carrying letters from one aub to another. While students from other duchies took pride in the role, it had grown tiresome for Dunkelfelger, who found it hard to resist meeting each new letter with frustration.

"Kenntrips, it's almost time to train," Rasantark said. As both Lestilaut's guard knight and one of Hannelore's suitors, he was dedicating every moment he could to preparing for the upcoming ditter match. Then he caught sight of the latest letter next to the growing stack of mail. "What, another one?"

"Yes, another one," Kenntrips said, skimming through its contents. "At this point, something is clearly wrong. It's unthinkable that a lesser duchy—especially one as minor as Lindenthal—would challenge Dunkelfelger to bride-stealing ditter. I should very much like to find out who's pulling the strings."

"Crushing them all should resolve the matter. I *will* protect Lady Hannelore."

"I don't doubt that," Kenntrips replied, for there was little else to say. He envied Rasantark's great strength and the assurance it gave him, yet begrudged his knightly single-mindedness. Brute force was no panacea.

"Is she still asleep?" Rasantark asked.

"To my knowledge. Andrea brought me this letter; had there been any

changes in Lady Hannelore's condition, I trust she would have informed me."

Kenntrips carefully closed the box containing their many letters, then gazed toward Hannelore's room. Rasantark did the same. Ten days had passed since the incident, and still, she was unconscious.

◆

"Please accept my sincerest apologies, Lady Hannelore. As an archduke candidate of Ehrenfest, I cannot risk sowing seeds of chaos or destruction in my duchy."

Hannelore offered a sad smile and squeezed her wrist—a gesture Kenntrips recognized as a sign that she was containing intense emotions. Her reaction was more than justified; she had just confessed to Wilfried, only to be rejected in front of her peers.

This was cruel of me, but...

Kenntrips had given Hannelore the push she needed to propose, fully aware that her love would not be returned. She was stubborn to a fault and would never have found closure unless she acted on her own and reached some kind of resolution. Had she agreed to marry one of her suitors while still interested in someone else, it would only have been a matter of time before her uncertainty brought about disaster.

It was because Kenntrips understood the importance of such closure—for both Hannelore and the duchy as a whole—that he had swallowed his own bitter affection and urged her to take action. She would surely weep for some time, as she had been known to do in her youth, but she would come to terms with her emotions and rise more capable than before.

She has the strength to recover; still, that doesn't change the pain she feels right now.

Seeing the girl once labeled a crybaby doing all she could to contain her emotions, Kenntrips took a step forward. "Lady Hannelore, are you okay?"

Ortwin appeared just as concerned; he put down his sound-blocker and suggested they end their meeting there. Hannelore agreed and set about bidding him and Wilfried farewell.

"Allow me to offer prayers and gratitude to Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time for weaving our threads together this day."

As she spoke, a bright glow enveloped her wrist. Kenntrips recognized the source as a charm made by Cordula, dedicated to the Goddess of Time. Its feystone, carved with Dregarnuhr's sigil, traced a magic circle in the air with slender yellow light.

What's going on?!

Those present could only watch in a daze as the magic circle took shape. They had no idea what was happening—or what to do. The circle flashed, then rained down light that swiftly wrapped around Hannelore. Her body rose into the air as though carried by invisible strings.

"Lady Hannelore!" Kenntrips exclaimed. He reached out in a desperate bid to free her. His hand was repelled, and a sharp pain rendered it numb.

"Leave, insolent ones," Hannelore said, opening scornful eyes. The relief that Kenntrips and the others had felt at her being okay was painfully short-lived.

That's not Lady Hannelore!

She continued to float in the air, enveloped in yellow light that now seemed to radiate from her. Her eyes had turned the same vivid shade, no longer their usual red, and the tenderness she normally exuded was gone. Instead, she emanated an overwhelming intensity that compelled all in her presence to kneel. Hannelore would probably have been aghast if she had known, but Kenntrips was shocked to learn her face was even capable of such a domineering expression.

"I told you to leave," she repeated, waving her hand with visible displeasure as she sat in midair. At once, everyone inside the gazebo—which now shone with yellow light—was expelled.

Hannelore sat alone. Few could approach the gazebo in its current state—only archduke candidates and archnobles from high-ranking branch families. Even then, the younger students among them would stumble. Hannelore's retainers were scattered as well.

"I guess you need a certain amount of mana to even get close to the gazebo," Wilfried observed.

Kenntrips turned just in time to see a crowd rushing out of the scholar building. They wanted a better look at the source of the commotion, but the goddess's power stopped them short. How close they could get provided a more precise measure of their mana than any one person's mana-sensing. Wilfried stood about two paces behind Kenntrips, indicating that their

capacities were fairly similar.

He has more mana than I expected. Not long ago, Ehrenfest was near the bottom of the duchy rankings; now, he has a capacity that rivals that of an archduke candidate of a greater duchy.

Wilfried stood almost shoulder to shoulder with Ortwin. Kenntrips, though only an archnoble, was Aub Dunkelfelger's nephew; he had never imagined that such a person would come so close to matching him.

"I am Dregarnuhr, the ruler of time," the being that had taken Hannelore's form announced.

As the charm on Hannelore's wrist had indicated, the Goddess of Time had indeed descended. Kenntrips could feel the elation of those around him, aware they were witnessing an event that would go down in history... but he did not share in it. A shudder ran through him as he feared what Hannelore's possession would mean for her.



“There is an emergency of an urgent nature,” Dregarnuhr said. “Summon her who arbitrates between mankind and the gods.”

“The Zent! Summon the Zent!” Ortwin shouted.

It was taught during theology class that the Zent served as an intermediary between humans and the gods. Some within earshot shouted about sending her an ordonnanz—or a magic letter if she was in the Sovereignty. Others proposed asking the professors to use their emergency contact tool.

“Could she be referring to Rozemyne?” Wilfried asked, considering Dregarnuhr’s demand from a different perspective. Kenntrips’s eyes widened at the audacity, but the goddess gave a confirming nod.

“Yes, Rozemyne. Bring her to me at once,” she said. “Disaster has befallen her other half. Unless she intervenes, the Grutrissheit will vanish, and two decades of history will collapse.”

Dregarnuhr’s tone was calm—relaxed, even—but everyone present drew a sharp breath. Though no one knew what had occurred, it must have been serious to warrant possessing Hannelore. In moments, fear and shock enveloped the gardens.

“Rozemyne, this is an emergency! Come to the gazebos by the scholar building NOW!”

As fearful cries debated what to do next, Wilfried sent out a single white bird. In most cases, one would consider his an unthinkably rude message to send to the aub of another duchy—whether she was his younger sister or not—but these were extenuating circumstances. Amid the chaos, he alone had kept his calm and acted with composure.

Kenntrips, in contrast, was at a complete loss, despite being Hannelore’s suitor. He knew not what he should—what he *could*—do to help her.

How can I end this possession?

He took a sharp breath. No matter how he considered the situation, he could not foresee a positive outcome. Hannelore would be heralded as one chosen by the gods, as had happened to Rozemyne, and duchies would mobilize en masse to secure the country’s second divine avatar.

The more Kenntrips thought about it, the worse things seemed to get. Perhaps this possession was but the first of many to come—perhaps the gods would summon Hannelore out of the blue, as they were doing with Rozemyne. Would he be able to resolve such incidents? An overwhelming

sense of worry and unease began to work its way through him.

“The ordonnanz returns!” someone shouted, snapping Kenntrips back to his senses.

And yet, the white bird bore no message. It returned to Wilfried, perched on his wrist, and then simply reverted to being a yellow feystone. One person shrieked that Rozemyne must have died, and the panic reached a fever pitch. If she truly had passed on, there would be no way to satisfy the goddess.

“She was merely out of range,” came a quiet yet severe voice. “Track her down at once.”

The light radiating from Hannelore’s body intensified, and the divine power she exuded swelled so much that those around her could barely even breathe. Her brief admonishment silenced the clamor and compelled everyone to kneel.

Will Lady Hannelore’s body be able to endure this much divine power?

Kenntrips dared not ask; he could not risk angering the goddess with such an impudent question. He forced his head up and started giving instructions.

“Send ordonnanzes to all of Lady Rozemyne’s retainers and several students of her duchy. Explain the circumstances and insist that she come at once!”

As responses trickled in, it became clear that an emergency in Alexandria had made it necessary for Rozemyne to return home as the duchy’s aub.

“Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time, it would seem that Lady Rozemyne has gone to Alexandria, and it might be some time before she returns,” Kenntrips explained. “The sun is setting. Shall we wait somewhere warmer?”

“I cannot leave this magic circle,” the goddess replied. “Anyone who takes issue with the cold may simply depart. I do not have business with any of you.”

“No. I shall stay by Lady Hannelore’s side.”

“So be it.”

Professors and archduke candidates edged closer, taking advantage of their sizable mana capacities as they strained to glimpse the Goddess of

Time. Meanwhile, Cordula sent ordonnanzes back to the Dunkelfelger Dormitory, seeking to mobilize Hannelore's retainers and the duchy's apprentice archknights. It was a rather messy situation.

Lady Rozemyne, hurry!

"There she is!"

"Make way, everyone! Make way!"

Cries eased the ever-growing anxiety. So long had passed that many of those gathered had completely lost track of time. The crowd parted, forming a path for the new arrival to reach the gazebo.

Rozemyne was dressed in strange attire, covered with feystones and magic tools. Her hair was in a single ponytail, a far cry from her usual, more intricate style. She looked noticeably similar to when she had appeared at Dunkelfelger's country gate. Coupled with the severe look on her face, one could not help but feel that she had come prepared for war.

"Lady Rozemyne, is that apparel not a tad *aggressive* for one answering the summons of a goddess?" Ortwin asked, as if speaking for all those present.

"Far from it," she said, unfazed. "This is not nearly enough."

The goddess had nothing to contribute.

Could dressing in that manner have been the correct response?

Kenntrips inhaled sharply. Rozemyne had received no more news about the Goddess of Time's intentions than anyone else. For her to have prepared as she had, retrieving the Grutrissheit from the gods must have been a perilous, life-threatening endeavor.

"Rozemyne," Wilfried called, rushing to meet her. "Hannelore's in trouble because of you. Go save her."

"Because of me?" Rozemyne echoed with a grimace. "The gods are to blame, not I. And need you tell me to take action? That I mean to rescue her goes without saying." She turned to Kenntrips, her usual elegant smile lost beneath the intense stare of someone ready to do battle. "I have instructed one of my attendants to advise you on what to do with Lady Hannelore when the goddess leaves her body. Speak to her when you can."

"You have my utmost gratitude," Kenntrips replied. Despite his outward composure, he was stunned that Rozemyne had the wherewithal to consider —and make arrangements to ensure—Hannelore's safety on top of

everything else. It was a great comfort to know someone would guide him through what could not have been a more unexpected turn of events.

“I doubt it will be easy—there is already a clamor over the rise of a second divine avatar—but please cooperate with Aub Dunkelfelger to protect Lady Hannelore,” Rozemyne insisted, then continued past everyone to kneel before the gazebo. “I am sorry to have kept you, O Goddess of Time. I am Rozemyne, the archduchess of Alex—”

“Time is short,” the goddess interjected. Then she held out her hand and said, “Let us hurry.”

Rozemyne stood without question, speaking to her experience with goddesses. Then she entered the gazebo with ease, despite Kenntrips and the others having been blown away by the sheer force of the exuded divinity.

“I shall ask that you elaborate immediately upon our arrival,” she said. “I mean to release Lady Hannelore at the earliest opportunity.”

“Indeed. For as long as her body and mind are apart, the former shall remain in a state of near death. All the more reason for us to depart.”

The light swelled and consumed Rozemyne, who seemed to melt into thin air.

“Lady Hannelore!”

Kenntrips rushed into the gazebo before its candor could even begin to fade, fearing the harm that might come to Hannelore if she collapsed. He managed to grab her before she could crumple back onto her seat or the cold stone underfoot.

The light dimmed, and the weight returned to Hannelore’s body. Kenntrips was glad to have a sign that the goddess had departed, and the pressure squeezing his chest relaxed, but the girl in his arms remained perfectly still. She wasn’t even breathing. He had not been able to fetch her any warm clothes, despite the lowering temperature, so her skin was cold to the touch.

“Let us take her from here,” one of Hannelore’s apprentice knights said. “It is better that we carry her.”

Kenntrips nodded and acquiesced; even as her suitor, it would be scandalous to embrace her much longer. “She will remain on the brink of death until she regains consciousness,” he cautioned. “So said the Goddess of Time.”

“What?!”

“Be calm. Lady Rozemyne swore to return her safely.”

In the goddess’s absence, they could rely only on the facts as they understood them. Kenntrips gave Hannelore to her guard knights, then called out to stop a rather pale Cordula, who had turned to depart with them.

“One moment, Lady Cordula. Lady Rozemyne has instructed one of her attendants to advise us on treating Lady Hannelore.”

“Yes, that would be me,” came a young woman’s voice. “I am Lieseleta, Lady Rozemyne’s head attendant.”

It had taken Lieseleta a moment to make her presence known; her smaller mana capacity had meant she could only move so close to the gazebo. She was young enough that one would never have thought her the head attendant of an aub, but she had seen to Rozemyne’s well-being both before and after the latter’s possession by a goddess. Cordula seemed to recognize her, and the color quickly returned to her face.

“Your wisdom is greatly appreciated. Before we speak, may I send the others ahead to our dormitory?”

“Of course,” Lieseleta answered with a smile. Then she held out a veil and continued, “Please use this to cover Lady Hannelore’s face, if you do not mind the fact that my lady has worn it many times before.” It was a means to prevent one’s unconscious charge from becoming a spectacle, and the revelation that Rozemyne carried it at all times said a lot about her health.

“I would be glad to accept it,” Cordula said. “I am more grateful than I can put into words.” She used the veil to cover Hannelore’s face and watched as the other retainers rushed their lady back to the dormitory.

“If she does not regain consciousness quickly now that the goddess has taken her leave, soak her body in a jureve so her mana does not harden,” Lieseleta insisted, launching straight into her advice. “If she has not prepared one, then a jureve belonging to her brother or mother will suffice.”

Although students learned to brew jureves during their fifth year at the Royal Academy, Hannelore had yet to make her own. Cordula formed an ordonnanz before uttering even a word in response.

“Forgive my rudeness,” she said at last. “I can waste no time in passing on your guidance, lest our teleportation circle be closed for the night.”

On that note, Cordula sent a message to the knight stationed by Dunkelfelger's teleportation hall, asking whether Lestilaut still had the jureve he made before his marriage, or if Sieglinde simply had one to spare.

"If there is still divine power within her when she wakes, then others will struggle even to touch her, which will cause all manner of problems in her day-to-day life," Lieseleta explained. "You will need to contact the Zent"—her voice lowered to a whisper—"for you will need to borrow silver cloth."

Her caution was fully warranted; only a select few knew of the silver cloth, even among the duchies that had participated in the war against Lanzenave.

Lieseleta's advice largely related to Hannelore's attendants; Kenntrips could not help but feel out of place when the conversation turned to bathing Hannelore with silver cloth. Unable to hide his discomfort, he stepped away to look around. The sun had long since set, but the commotion outside the scholar building and the curious professors attempting to enter the gazebo meant things were far from quiet.

I see that Lords Wilfried and Ortwin have yet to leave.

They shouldn't have had any further business at the gazebo, but they were deep in conversation. Kenntrips strained his ears to listen to them.

"Wilfried, it's no small miracle to have won the affection of a divine avatar. Why not propose to her back?"

"I stand by what I said. The daughter of a greater duchy's first wife was already too much for Ehrenfest; a divine avatar is completely out of the question."

It seemed that not even the descent of a goddess had changed how Wilfried felt. Kenntrips was relieved, to say the least.

"I never once thought I would be able to support Rozemyne, so I can't be so arrogant as to think I could support Lady Hannelore," Wilfried continued, with sincere concern in his voice. "Instead, I pray she finds a man who can ease her heavy burden as Uncle does for Rozemyne."

Kenntrips recalled the many times Hannelore had praised Wilfried as kind. He had assumed she was blissfully unaware of the truth, given how stubbornly she defended the man who had betrayed his promise to her and burdened her with such great hardships—but evidently not. She had seen a side of him that Kenntrips and the others hadn't known existed.

“So you won’t mind if *I* propose, then?” Ortwin asked.

Kenntrips was taken entirely by surprise. Hannelore had refused Ortwin’s proposal outright, from what Cordula had told him, and the day’s events made her true feelings abundantly clear. To pursue her nonetheless would be to scorn not only her and her suitors but also Aub Dunkelfelger himself.

This is no joke.

Ortwin was an archduke candidate of Drewanchel, which made him far more troublesome to deal with than Ehrenfest. At a time when Dunkelfelger already had its guard up against Korinthsdaum, a formal proposal from a greater duchy would make things all the more unpleasant.

And are other duchies not likely to approach us, seeking to marry Lady Hannelore?

Only then did it dawn on Kenntrips what Rozemyne had meant when she had asked that he protect Hannelore in the midst of all the chaos to come. And yet...

“I could trust you to care for her, Ortwin,” Wilfried said. “You have my approval.”

Don’t just concede to him!

Drewanchel might have appeared to be a powerful greater duchy from the perspective of a middle duchy like Ehrenfest, but it still placed below Dunkelfelger in the rankings. It was on awful terms with Korinthsdaum due to Adolphine’s divorce, and its ties to the new Zent were practically nonexistent. Hannelore would be far safer at home than anywhere else.

A union based on love might have been acceptable, but Aub Drewanchel had already expressed an interest in making Ortwin the second husband of either Aub Alexandria or Zent Eglantine. Combined with the fact that Hannelore still clearly wished to be with Wilfried, a marriage to Ortwin would have no personal basis, only a political one. Drewanchel would use her status as the second divine avatar to better trade blows with Korinthsdaum and the Zent.

No matter how Kenntrips thought about it, Drewanchel was far from the ideal environment for Hannelore, the former Lady Crybaby. She had a tendency to overthink things and stubbornly kept her opinions close to the vest. Though such behavior was overlooked in Dunkelfelger, owing to the duchy’s focus on warfare, Drewanchel specialized in knowledge; its

archducal family would almost certainly not approve.

“Wait a moment. Do not get ahead of yourselves,” Kenntrips said, moving to intervene. “Rasantark and I are Lady Hannelore’s chosen suitors.”

“Perhaps, but is either one of you truly capable of protecting her?” Wilfried asked. “Archnobles do not have the status to marry a divine avatar, be they from the top-ranked duchy or not. If you cannot plan countless steps ahead and eliminate her enemies as Uncle does for Rozemyne, Lady Hannelore will be stolen before you can even get a handle on your allies.”

That is not true.

Kenntrips wished to protest but said nothing. Given their respective statuses, any further disagreement could escalate into an interduchy incident.

“Protect her well,” Wilfried said. “Otherwise, the treasure of your duchy shall naturally be drawn to where she belongs. Perhaps... Drewanchel, for instance.”

◆

Kenntrips had been irritated by Wilfried’s warning, but now he was faced with countless calls for bride-stealing ditter. To make matters worse, the Dunkelfelger Dormitory was being split into opposing factions led by Rasantark and Raufereg.

For as long as Hannelore remained unconscious, Raufereg held the highest status in the dormitory. He was an archduke candidate, which meant archnobles such as Kenntrips and Rasantark could not keep him fully under control. Even as Hannelore’s formal suitors, they could not risk being too defiant without her or their lord around to support them.

It was hard to imagine Dunkelfelger losing a game of bride-stealing ditter to another duchy, but the fracturing of their forces was anything but ideal.

More than ten days had passed since Dregarnuhr’s descent. What was happening to Hannelore? When would she finally wake up? Had the goddess’s power caused tremendous damage to her body? Lady Rozemyne’s head attendant had explained only how to attend to one suffused with divine power, not the consequences or nuances of a mind

returning to a body once possessed. So many questions remained unanswered that Kenntrips could not help but worry.

Still, I must do what I can while time remains.

"Kenntrips, where are you going?" Rasantark asked, following him out of the meeting room.

"To my room. I wish to develop new tools for this ditter match."

"Make something so fearsome that even ditter's Lord of Evil would tremble. I'll be at the training grounds."

Kenntrips nodded at Rasantark, who was clearly in high spirits, and continued on his way to his room. It was only when he approached the stairs that he heard a quiet whisper speak his name. He looked around, cautious, then noticed Cordula waiting in the shadows. She wasn't hidden, merely out of the way—somewhere she would not be seen unless one looked carefully. Kenntrips approached as subtly as he could.

"Lady Cordula. Could it be that Lady Hannelore has...?"

"Yes, not long ago. Do you have a moment? She wishes to know the details of what happened at the gazebo."

From those few words, Kenntrips understood the situation: they wished to better grasp the events of that fateful day without announcing that Hannelore was awake. He nodded his assent.

"Follow me, then," Cordula said.

Kenntrips expected to be taken to a meeting room. Instead, the head attendant led him to a hallway for servants. It seemed they would be going to Hannelore's room—which he opposed, even in their current circumstances. Suitor or no, boys were forbidden from going to girls' rooms at the Royal Academy.

"But this would—"

Cordula shook her head. "If we took her to a meeting room, then we might as well inform the entire dormitory that she is awake. Now... do not misuse this hallway."

"I would never," Kenntrips insisted on instinct.

Cordula chuckled and said she was well aware. Kenntrips could not claim to appreciate being teased, but it brought him joy to see her more at ease—especially with all they had endured over the past ten or so days.

Thank goodness Lady Hannelore awoke.

Kenntrips followed Cordula down complex, narrow hallways and up

creaky stairs, though he could barely hear them over the pounding of his heart.

Regular Reports for the Aub

“It is seventh bell, Lady Rozemyne.”

I was resting on a sofa in my room in the Alexandria Dormitory. Dinan, a large magic tool in the shape of an aqua-blue shumil, sat facing me on my lap. Seventh bell meant it was time to give my report.

It was my first year back at the Royal Academy since leaving Ehrenfest and becoming an aub. Based on prior experience, we knew that anything I said or did ran the risk of snowballing into a major incident, which was why Ferdinand had advised me to provide regular, spoken updates on my situation.

I wish I could just write them. It would spare me a lecture.

Frustratingly enough, Ferdinand refused to trust my written reports. He insisted that no one who saw how drastically my old ones differed from those submitted by Wilfried would ever be convinced to accept them. My intention had been to keep them short and simple, but Ferdinand mistook my brevity for deception.

Thus, we had switched to spoken reports. It was the superior approach, Ferdinand assured me: it was easier to ask for details, there was no delay in my responses, and my tone of voice, among other things, revealed whenever I was trying to hide something. If only they didn’t always turn into tongue-lashings.

“Rozemyne, I expected to be told that you resolved the hairpin incident during class,” Ferdinand said, speaking through Dinan. “What is this about an urgent tea party with Dunkelfelger?”

To my vexation, my adorable toy had been transformed into a not-so-adorable lecture machine. It amazed me just how much of a change a voice could make.

Thinking about it, could this be some kind of whimsical fantasy telephone? Hmm... No, not quite.

Dinan was simply too restricted to warrant the comparison. He could relay messages only when I was touching his feystone, and as it stood, only

one person could speak at a time.

In the midst of our preparations for this academic year, Ferdinand had seemed so terribly concerned about the fresh problems I might cause him. In an attempt to put his mind at ease, I had said that I would simply ask the Zent to lend me one of those water mirrors if ever something was amiss. Days later, he had informed me that he had equipped one of the tools he was making for my return to the Royal Academy with its very own communication function. It was so strange.

He's insanely busy transforming Old Ahrensbach into Alexandria. What drove him to go to all that unnecessary trouble?

"And why did you accept such an abrupt invitation from Dunkelfelger at this difficult time? You should not have permitted their self-serving request," Ferdinand continued. "*Myne.*"

Ferdinand wasn't using my old name for the fun of it; "Myne" was an incantation of sorts that served an important purpose when making use of Dinan's communication feature. He used it to activate the tool and to end each message, which let me know when I was expected to respond. My version was "Dino," which didn't resemble his name quite as much.

"I... I mean... Lady Hannelore said it was urgent," I replied. "And, of course, I mean to assist my friends whenever I can. *Dino.*"

Hannelore had agreed to help with—and played a crucial role in—my operation to rescue Ferdinand; if she was in trouble, then I owed it to her to return the favor. Not that I could ever ignore a dear friend in need.

"If she seeks your aid, then her problem must be too great for Dunkelfelger to manage alone. Getting involved could easily spiral into another troublesome interduchy conflict. *Myne.*"

"But I can't ignore a friend!" I declared, the blood rushing to my head. "Troublesome or not, I want to do as much as I can for Lady Hannelore's sake. *Dino!*"

Ferdinand made a point of sighing loud enough for me and everyone around me to hear. "You must understand that, now, 'as much as you can do' goes beyond your personal capacity to include all that you can do as Aub Alexandria. It would be extremely problematic if you involved yourself in matters that would further trouble our duchy in its current state. You might wish to help her for personal reasons, but there is no guarantee that others will see it that way. The duchies belonging to those who were

formerly royalty will insist that they, too, exceed Alexandria in rank and attempt to force their own frustrating concerns on us. Please learn to appreciate that your actions will impact *everyone* here in the duchy. *Myne.*"

I pursed my lips and squeezed the aqua-blue shumil. Ferdinand made so much sense that I could not hope to argue with him. Yes, I actually agreed with his point—it wasn't good to casually assist Hannelore now that I was an aub—but I still couldn't accept being told not to help a friend in need.

"I know all that. But I still want to help Lady Hannelore, even if doing so might cause problems between duchies."

Despite the strength of my resolve, my voice grew quieter with each word. I understood that I was being selfish and that an extensive lecture awaited me. Accepting my fate, I made one last declaration.

"I will not give up on her! I shall assist her without our duchies being drawn into the mix! *Dino!*"

"Who do you think will bear the brunt of the consequences if your actions cause trouble at the Royal Academy?" Ferdinand asked, his voice as cold, irritated, and exasperated as one would expect. "*Myne.*"

"You," I said at length. "*Dino.*" I held my breath, bracing for his scathing rebuke... but it never came.

"Who told me to prioritize my health above all else? *Myne.*"

"I did. *Dino.*"

"Then what should *you* be prioritizing? *Myne.*"

"You, I guess...?" I answered with a quizzical tilt of my head, saying what I assumed he wanted to hear without knowing why he wanted to hear it. "*Dino.*"

"Good. As long as you understand."

"Good"? I don't understand at all. But it can't be good if he's permitting me to help Lady Hannelore.

As if able to hear my thoughts, Ferdinand let out another long sigh. "In any case, give only ambiguous responses to any calls for aid, and maintain that you will come to a decision only after you have returned. Ask Lieseleta and Gretia to assist you, and keep Dinan's recording function on from the start of the tea party till its conclusion. If those conditions are met, and I determine that it will not negatively impact Alexandria, I will provide what assistance I can. *Myne.*"

"You don't mind, then?! I thank you ever so much! *Dino.*" I squeezed

the shumil to my chest and gazed up at my head attendant, a broad grin on my face. “Lieseleta, Ferdinand gave me his permission!”

It had never once crossed my mind that he might relent—and without lecturing me, no less. He wanted me to record my entire tea party with Hannelore, but I could tolerate that. It was far better than being refused outright.

Lieseleta regarded me with a kind smile and giggled. “He knows you will never give up on those precious to you, no matter who tries to stand in your way. No doubt, he would rather know what you are doing as it happens than find out abruptly afterward.”

Ferdinand clicked his tongue. “It is much easier to clean up the messes you make when I am aware of what you are doing. *Myne.*”

Seriously?! They’re in total agreement!

Not even my daily reports had earned me their trust, it seemed. I pouted and glared at Dinan, who stared back at me without a word, his golden eyes beady and vacant. He had already entered transmission mode.

“To be clear,” I said, “I shan’t make a mess in the first place. *Dino.*”

“How I wish that were true.”

Ferdinand sounded so certain that I would cause trouble that I started to worry as well. However, I had no intention of making his life any busier. I needed to prove to him that he had nothing to fear.

As I clenched my fists, Ferdinand spoke once more: “It is late. You should rest for tonight. May you sleep well with Schlaftraum’s blessing. *Myne.*” His tone was surprisingly kind, and although I knew he was merely speaking the incantation, it felt as though he really was using my old name.

The same kind of comfortable ease I got from my lower-city family washed over me, along with a sudden wave of embarrassment. “You should go to bed too, Ferdinand. May you sleep well with Schlaftraum’s blessing,” I said. “Until we speak again at seventh bell tomorrow. *Dino.*”

I considered addressing Ferdinand as “Dino” the next time we snuck into the lower city together. Maybe then he would understand the blush that had risen to my cheeks. It was with that scheme in mind that I concluded the day’s report.

Break Time Breakdown

Even on Earthdays, Dunkelfelger's archducal retainers were expected to train. That held true not only for knights but for attendants and scholars as well, whether they were of the sword or not. Those serving Lord Lestilaut, Lady Eineliebe, Lady Hannelore, Lord Raufereg, and Lady Lungtase were required to attend, but a suddenly scheduled tea party with Aub Alexandria meant that all of Lady Hannelore's retainers were absent.

"Lady Lungtase's retainers, conclude your rest and start coordination training with Lord Raufereg's retainers! Lord Lestilaut's retainers, rest in their place!"

I sat at the edge of the grounds, waiting to be analyzed. We always began our rest periods with a review of our performance. In this case, we apprentice knights were taking the lead and serving as attackers for the apprentice scholars and attendants to defend against. Our aim was to teach them what to focus on when they had to defend their lord or lady.

"Put more thought into your attacks, Rasantark. This might only be training, but your moves are far too predictable."

As the oldest of the knights still enrolled at the Academy, Vestaert was the highest authority. He specialized in thinking up all sorts of surprising attacks, and this was far from the first time he had put me through the wringer. My mana capacity was greater than his, yet he almost always claimed victory in our duels.

"Codenest, learn to counterattack more," he continued. "It's one thing to be cautious, but you were practically standing still."

Codenest was a second-year apprentice attendant, and not one "of the sword." He was the son of one of Aub Dunkelfelger's brothers, which made him Lord Lestilaut's cousin in the same fashion as Kenntrips and me. To my knowledge, he had not become a retainer by choice; although he took no issue with attendant work, he made it clear that he hated combat training. He had a wealth of mana—as expected of someone from a branch family—but used it for his own defense more than anyone else's.

As long as Codenest helped us keep our lord safe, I didn't much care about his shortcomings—but Vestaert was not satisfied. I had once heard him grumble about how much he envied Codenest's mana, insisting that he could put it to better use.

"I see Lady Hannelore's retainers are all absent," said Gulaheld, a fifth-year apprentice attendant. He turned his gaze to the grounds entrance. "What drove her to schedule a tea party on one of our training days? I cannot help but wonder what she is discussing with Lady Rozemyne."

Gulaheld had ample reason to be concerned; Lady Hannelore would never usually organize a tea party when she knew her retainers had training.

"It was arranged rather suddenly, was it not?"

"Lady Hannelore gave the invitation, so I doubt Alexandria means to request anything of us."

The balance of power in Yurgenschmidt had shifted—three new duchies had arisen, and Dunkelfelger, now first in the rankings, would receive more favor from the Zent than even her home duchy of Klassenberg. It was no wonder, then, that far more students were clamoring at Dunkelfelger's heels than usual: those from duchies desperate for connections to the top ranks, who wanted as much intelligence as they could get, and who sought to have their requests heard by the Zent. Even during the Archduke Conference, Lady Magdalena had petitioned Dunkelfelger to support Blumenfeld, and Lord Lestilaut had warned that Korinthsdaum was after Lady Hannelore.

It would not have been strange if Lady Rozemyne wished to make a request of Dunkelfelger through Lady Hannelore—in fact, many nobles anticipated it. She was an underage aub whose archducal family had only one adult in Lord Ferdinand. Her blood relatives lacked the status to adequately support her, and one could expect she would face hardships in ruling a greater duchy.

"The worst part is that none of us were allowed to attend," Gulaheld said with a heavy sigh.

Something unexpected was bound to happen whenever Lady Rozemyne and Lady Hannelore came together. In an effort to prepare ourselves, we had requested that one of Lord Lestilaut's or Lady Eineliebe's retainers be allowed to attend, only for Cordula to refuse. She would report on the events of the tea party, as the aub had instructed her to observe Alexandria and Ehrenfest, but she had no intention of allowing anyone else's retainers

to join them.

“She said it would prevent Lady Hannelore from relaxing. How could we argue with that?” Kenntrips asked, doing his best to console Gulaheld.

After the bride-stealing ditter match held during my third year, a chasm had opened up between Lady Hannelore and those of us who served Lord Lestilaut. Things had improved thanks to her participation in true ditter and Lord Lestilaut inheriting the foundational magic, securing his place as the next aub, but some wounds had yet to heal.

“You’re her suitor, Kenntrips—you really should do more to act the part,” Vestaert said, slapping him on the back. “It’s up to you whether we can learn anything from her at all.”

I raised my eyebrows. Kenntrips wasn’t her only suitor, so why was he the only one getting words of support? “Give me some encouragement too, Vestaert!” I cried.

“To what end? You have no hope of gathering any meaningful intelligence.”

“Ngh...!”

As an apprentice scholar, Kenntrips had me beat in that regard, but it still frustrated me to be treated as the inferior suitor.

“Why does nobody support me?!” I cried. “I clearly love Lady Hannelore far more than Kenntrips does!”

“Calm down,” Gulaheld said. “No need to have a jealous fit. At this rate, she’ll end up with you no matter what.”

What does he mean?

Kenntrips and everyone else seemed to understand. But how, when I was completely in the dark?

“Gulaheld,” I said. “Explain.”

“As it stands, Lady Hannelore will fail to convey her feelings to Ehrenfest. Not only has she experienced the damage that acting on her emotions can do to her duchy and reputation, but she also knows that the other party does not seek her hand in marriage.”

Even so, why would she end up engaged to me instead of Kenntrips? I scanned the others’ faces, my nerves all the more intense, but they merely shook their heads at me.

“If you think about Lady Hannelore’s character and the way she acts, it should be obvious,” Vestaert said, clapping me on the shoulder. Then, with

a wry smile meant to end the conversation, “Even if you don’t get it, that’s no problem. You just need to wait.”

“I don’t want to wait! I’m going to court Lady Hannelore and win her over properly!”

“Try all you like, but you’re so bad at ‘courting’ that she didn’t even know how you felt until something completely unrelated brought it up. I’d advise you to use your head *outside* of practice too.”

“Nghhh...!”

It was far from the first time he had told me to think more, but this attack cut me especially deep. Prior to the hairpin incident, I’d never even considered that Lady Hannelore didn’t know how I felt. Rather, I’d thought it was precisely *because* she understood that she was trying to keep her distance from me.

“You fell in love at first sight, didn’t you, Rasantark?” Vestaert teased. “Focus on that.”

“Thanks for the warning, but you’re a little confused,” I said with a slight smile and a dismissive wave of my hand. “It was *Kenntrips* who fell for her that quickly, not I.”

“Huh? As in... *our* Kenntrips?”

“Rasantark?!” the man in question exclaimed, overwrought.

Everyone exchanged glances.

“That’s a surprise,” Vestaert continued. “You’re always going on about her, Rasantark. Kenntrips, on the other hand, never says more than is absolutely necessary.”

“He didn’t seem all that pleased to be chosen as her suitor,” Gulaheld agreed.

“Well, he tries to keep it hidden,” I said. “At *home*, however...”

“That’s enough, Rasantark!” Kenntrips shouted. “Hold your tongue!”

Angering him further would only make him a pain in my neck, so I relented. Still, our fellow retainers couldn’t keep the grins from their faces and promptly set about barraging him with questions.

“When did you first meet Lady Hannelore, Kenntrips?” Vestaert asked. “Was it during her baptism?”

“Or was it perhaps when you became Lord Lestilaut’s retainer?” Gulaheld added. “If so... that must have been right after *you* were baptized, right? As a blood-related retainer, you would have been permitted to

accompany Lord Lestilaut into the archducal living area from the start.”

The pair got straight to work theorizing. Noble children were raised exclusively among their relatives and tended not to leave their estates until they were baptized. It was only natural to place so much importance on their baptisms, as only then were they allowed to access the castle.

Unfortunately, as blood relatives of the aub, we first met her even earlier.

I swallowed my response, not wanting another lambast from Kenntrips.

“Kenntrips and Rasantark started going to the castle *before* their baptisms, didn’t they?” Codenest asked, his head cocked to one side. “I remember seeing them at our family meetings.”

As the son of the current aub’s younger brother, Codenest had also entered the castle before his baptism. He, Kenntrips, and I shared the aub as an uncle, though his father was the aub’s younger brother, and ours, the elder. Our mothers were from other duchies, so the only relatives we met before our baptisms were members of the Dunkelfelger archducal family. Naturally, we had attended gatherings of all the blood-related children.

“I’ve heard of your family meetings, but I can’t pretend to know much about them,” Vestaert said.

“We are summoned so that the aub’s children, who cannot leave the castle, can experience socializing with those of their generation. That was how we met Lord Raufereg and Lady Lungtase before their baptisms,” Codenest explained, searching through his memories as he spoke. “As I recall, my first conversation with Lady Hannelore was right before her baptism.”

On the days of such meetings, all retainers outside of the archducal family were allowed to rest. I remembered enjoying our old gatherings, as we simply spent the time playing together, but now they always seemed to end in someone getting chastised.

“Some degree of rudeness from one’s relatives can surely be overlooked, but is it truly wise to send pre-baptismal children to the castle?” Gulaheld asked. “There are some who don’t behave even when old enough to attend the Royal Academy.”

The former eldest apprentice attendant had graduated alongside Lord Lestilaut, meaning the task of guiding the new students had fallen to Gulaheld. He found that stressful enough, so the thought of a bunch of

young children gathering before the archducal family must have seemed a veritable nightmare.

“Well, they can’t attend until they have their parents’ permission and can give a proper greeting,” I said. “That’s why, although everyone gets baptized at seven years old, the age at which a child starts socializing can vary. Usually between three and five, I think?”

I remembered attending my first meeting at four years old. Kenntrips had gone to his a tad sooner—just as he was leaving three.

“Between three and five?” Gulaheld echoed, looking more anxious than anything else. “Kenntrips, were you really that young when you fell in love?”

“It was not *actually* love at first sight,” Kenntrips shot back, his face twisting in the start of a grimace.

I scoffed. “And yet you wouldn’t shut up about how cute she was.”

“I really doubt that happened,” Kenntrips retorted, but his protest was in vain. I remembered clear as day the look he had given me upon returning from his first gathering—a kinder smile than he had ever worn before—and the very declaration he had made to me.

“She’s the cutest Lady Crybaby the world will ever see.”

Such was my oldest memory related to Lady Hannelore. I had been too young and inexperienced to leave my father’s estate at the time, and Kenntrips had been the only friend with whom I could socialize. Hearing him rave about her had wounded me, as though someone had stolen my closest companion. It had also made me envy Kenntrips for being able to leave the estate; he had gone and made a new friend without me.

Not a single pleasant emotion had come from that day—no wonder I remembered it so clearly. Even just thinking about it caused the same intensity that had coursed through me then to threaten to resurface.

As that storm of outrage had eventually subsided, a new idea had taken root: to put my envy to rest, I needed to start visiting the castle as well. So, I wasted no time in pleading with my father to let me go, to the point of sobbing on my knees. In hindsight, it was the worst move I could possibly have made. He had watched me weep with cold eyes, then waved me away as if my request weren’t even worth considering.

“The castle is a place of elegance,” he had said. “If you wish to go there, then you must learn to behave properly. I cannot bring a child who can

neither control his emotions nor give a proper greeting.”

From that day forth, my education had grown so much more intense. Mother had even started taunting me, informing me that Kenntrips had been invited back to a second gathering and that she might even join him. Only when I was four years old was I deemed capable enough to attend as well.

“You two—quit glaring at each other,” Gulaheld said, slotting himself between us. “It’s been so long that I doubt either one of you remembers exactly what happened. Let us not forget the timeless battle between facts and feelings.”

Vestaert nodded along. “Even if it wasn’t love at first sight, Kenntrips was surely charmed by her adorableness. I assume Rasantark felt the same when he first saw her.”

“Not at all,” I retorted, shaking my head. “I just thought, ‘Huh, she’s as normal as they come.’”

“What?!” Kenntrips exclaimed. “That’s a bald-faced lie!”

“It’s not. I didn’t find her especially cute.”

Kenntrips had spoken about Lady Hannelore with such a goofy ear-to-ear grin that I had assumed she was someone truly special. Upon actually meeting her, however, I had found she was just a regular girl.

In retrospect, my reaction had probably stemmed from feeling that I was in competition with Lady Hannelore, fighting for Kenntrips’s attention, but she hadn’t seemed at all cute to me. Nothing about her had explained why my friend adored her so much.

Whenever we played together in the northern building’s garden, Lord Lestilaut would inevitably end up leaving Lady Hannelore behind. She would start to sob, and Kenntrips would console her as though it were a matter of course.

I remember wishing he would ignore her, and play with us as he’d always used to.

In the end, I would give them no more than a glance before chasing Lord Lestilaut as best I could. I never stood a chance of catching up to him—the three years that separated us gave him too great an advantage, especially at that age—but I enjoyed it nonetheless. It was my first time playing with a boy other than Kenntrips.

“I came to appreciate Lord Lestilaut for playing with me long before I developed any feelings for Lady Hannelore, who seemed to cry at every

chance she got," I said. "I remember thinking she'd have a hard time getting anything done in those frilly clothes she used to wear."

Upon hearing my response—which was my honest opinion, might I add—everyone around me burst into laughter. "Classic Rasantark," one said. I was tempted to ask them what they meant by that.

"When *did* you start fancying her, Rasantark?"

"It was before my baptism, but not by much. Maybe just before I turned six."

"So it *was* before you were baptized," Vestaert said, looking eager. "Do you remember what started it?"

I thought back. As well as being a chance to socialize, our family meetings had served as an excellent opportunity to see who would make a good retainer for Lord Lestilaut. Our parents and the archducal couple had watched us to see how well we meshed together, then debated who was best suited to being a knight, an attendant, or a scholar.

In the lead-up to our baptisms, when we had to decide on our courses, we participated in archduke candidate training ourselves. I had been working hard to pass the knight selection, so I couldn't wait.

Of course, the training had extended to *all* archduke candidates, meaning Lady Hannelore had taken part as well. She had seemed so small that I found it hard to believe we were the same age, and—true to her nature—she had broken down in tears whenever she and her brother were apart. I had doubted she would make it through the training.

"Waaah... Bweeeh..."

"Lady Hannelore, would you like to stop for the day?"

Yeah, I remember. I saw her crying on the ground and assumed that was it. But then, surpassing my expectations, Lady Hannelore wiped away her tears and stood.

"No..." she had said. "I need to press on."

Despite her sobs, Lady Hannelore refused to give up. She repeated the technique over and over again, determined to do it as instructed.

"This will be your last attempt."

"Understood!"

Lady Hannelore corrected her posture and slowly lowered her hips. She spun the stick in her hands, stopped, then brought her back foot forward as she stepped into a powerful thrust. Her hips then dropped again as she drew

her foot back and swung the stick in a downward slam. She had successfully executed the technique.

“Excellent work.”

A few words of praise later, the instructor had announced the end of training. Lady Hannelore had met the compliment with a proud, beaming smile, and at that moment...

Ah. She’s beautiful.

Lady Crybaby had vanished, replaced with someone I almost didn’t recognize. Her talent with weaponry far exceeded my own; while my technique depended on brute force, hers was so elegant that it burned into my mind the moment I saw it. She had developed a fighting style meant to compensate for her small stature, and she kept her head high as if determined to keep her enemy in sight. So stunning was the figure she cut that I still remembered my instructor scolding me for not paying attention.

Not that I would tell the others.

“I refuse to answer,” I said. “My words are for her ears only. I’d rather she hear the unadulterated version from me than the butchered mess any of you would pass along.”

Vestaert raised an eyebrow and chuckled. “Is that so? Well, good luck with that.”

I was unsure what he meant—at least until Gulaheld clapped me on the back. “So you’re going to confess with her retainers all watching?” he asked. “Yeah—good luck.”

I could already imagine it—Cordula and Lady Hannelore’s other retainers glaring at me with their guards up. No matter what sweet words I whispered, I would never be able to create a romantic atmosphere in their presence.

“Ngh... I want to speak with Lady Hannelore alone!” I cried. “How can her retainers be so defensive when the aub chose me as her suitor?! They’re actively interfering!”

“If you want to get close to an archduke candidate, then her retainers’ help is indispensable,” Vestaert said. “That you have no allies among them speaks purely to your own incompetence.”

I ground my teeth, unable to argue.

“Perhaps not,” Codenest interjected, attempting to mediate. “Lady Hannelore’s retainers are especially uncooperative, owing to that whole

mess with our bride-stealing ditter match."

"I understand that much," I said. "Lady Hannelore's guard knights are defensive because they are loyal to her and committed to their duties. Still, as a suitor who can't even meet with his potential partner, I've got every right to be annoyed. Don't I, Kenntrips?"

I turned to him, counting on his support, only to receive a noncommittal smile. "To resolve the current situation, I believe Lady Hannelore must first come to terms with her emotions," he said, speaking as though he knew exactly how she felt. "Her retainers are only so cautious because she is protecting her thoughts and keeping us at arm's length."

"And you're just going to let that continue?" I asked, my frustration bubbling to the surface. "Letting her 'come to terms with her emotions' means letting her meet with that craven Lord Wilfried. What will you do if she turns this peace on its head and starts on another rampage to marry into Ehrenfest?!"

I glared at Kenntrips for being such a fool. It made far more sense for us to secure her retainers' support in winning her over than to let her explore some fruitless romance.

"If she is going to marry one of us and stay in Dunkelfelger, then it is imperative that she settles matters with Lord Wilfried first," Kenntrips assured me. "Lady Hannelore is as stubborn as they come—when she comes to a decision, she holds it fast and refuses to let go. Unless she gives up on her romance by choice, there will be no knowing when she might betray us again. At that point, I would rather she wed into another duchy entirely."

I stared at my fellow suitor in shock. There were more than a few people pushing for Lady Hannelore to become the next aub, now that she had taken part in true ditter and developed a strong bond with the divine avatar. Yes, she had sided with Lord Wilfried during our ditter match, betraying both her duchy and Lord Lestilaut in the process. And yes, she probably still harbored feelings for him. But with everything that had happened, there was no way she would turn her back on us again.

You should know that, Kenntrips!

"As an archduke candidate, Lady Hannelore must obey the archduke's will," I said. "She might be stubborn, but she would never forget her place."

"Instead, she would suppress her unhappiness, allowing it to fester for

years on end. Dare we let that happen, not knowing when she might eventually explode? She would need to give up on her romance for the sake of duty and her position. Would *you* be able to do that, Rasantark?"

As much as it pained me, he was right—the last thing we wanted was to deal with such uncertainty. And yet, I still couldn't agree with him.

"How can someone so smart say such stupid things?!" I exclaimed. "You're a moron, Kenntrips!"

"That means painfully little from someone too obtuse to come up with a more creative insult," he shot back. I racked my brain for another mean word to use, only to realize he had a point.

"Sh-Sh-Shut up! That's not what I mean! I'm saying we don't need to manipulate Lady Hannelore in this weird, roundabout way. We should face her directly!"

"Manipulate her? I mean only to cherish her emotions. She should see them through, not feel compelled to hide or obscure them."

"Huh?! Do you *want* Lady Hannelore to leave us for Ehrenfest?! Think before you speak... idiot!"

How can you expect her to face her emotions when you won't even admit your own?!

If we let Lady Hannelore put her heart above the suitors her father had chosen for her, she would be betraying the nobles of her duchy for the second time. More than that, though, it was hard to imagine her finding true happiness in Ehrenfest when they had already cast her aside once.

"How can you risk Lady Hannelore getting sent to another duchy?! You love her just as much as I do!" I shouted. "Instead of resorting to all this nonsense, why don't you just confess to her and do what you can to make her feel the same way? It's because she means so much to me that I resolved to protect her!"

Lord Wilfried had shamelessly demanded to take Lady Hannelore as his second wife, despite never having intended to marry her in the first place. I would treat her so much better than such a deceptive wretch ever could.

"I envy how straightforward you are," Kenntrips said at length, lowering his eyes and letting out a hollow laugh.

At once, I recognized the resignation in his smile. A long time ago, Lady Crybaby had asked him to become a knight to protect her from Lord Lestilaut. He had agreed, only for his parents to decide he should serve her

brother instead.

At least back then, Kenntrips had actively sought to become a knight. He would surely have excelled no matter which path he took, but his father had ordered that he become a scholar, forcing him not to take the knight selection test. He had worn the same forsaken expression back then as well—*and* when he gave Lady Crybaby a magic tool to defend against Ehrenfest, only for her to concede to Lord Wilfried without even using it.

In short, Kenntrips only wore his current expression when he was pushing down the frustration, sorrow, and other such negative emotions rising in his chest, not wanting to cause a fuss.

What are you giving up on this time?

The only thing that came to mind was his potential engagement to Lady Hannelore. In an instant, irritation more intense than I could describe surged through me.

"Stop running, Kenntrips!" I yelled. I couldn't stand the way he never acted on his emotions. Seeing him give up on his desires as though it were the wise, correct thing to do frustrated me to no end.

"I'm not running. I just can't protect her with my usual methods."

He just had to confess his love to Lady Hannelore, win her over, and then never let her go. It really was that simple, so why wasn't he even trying to marry her?

"I could understand accepting defeat if you'd expended all your options, but your refusal to even try makes my blood run hot. If you won't see sense, then I'll punch some into you!"

"You two! If you're going to fight, do it in the grounds proper!"

I'd tried to leap at Kenntrips, but Vestaert had grabbed me first. I attempted to brute force my way free, with no success; he seemed to know exactly how I would try to escape him. He used enhanced arms to throw me, then Kenntrips, to the very center of the grounds.

I twisted in midair, locking on to Kenntrips's position. He had traveled farther than me, so I raced toward him as soon as my feet touched the ground.

Kenntrips landed as well, only to retreat at the very sight of me. He sprinted toward those training nearby—but they ran to the wall and took their highbeasts up to the stands so as not to be involved. I used all my might to catch up to my target amid the chaos.

“Quit running away!” I roared.

“And do what, exactly? You’re a knight, remember; don’t get so serious about fighting a scholar.”

“Shut up! Face me!” I declared. It was time for him to challenge me head-on, as his heart desired.

Don’t let others get to you! You can’t protect Lady Hannelore by marrying her away! Listen to your heart! Don’t run from what you’re feeling!

“Where’s Professor Rauffen?!”

“Someone contact Lady Hannelore!”

Shouts rang out all around us, but I didn’t have time to think about the lecture I’d receive. I needed to wake Kenntrips up and get him to stop moping as though giving up were his only option.

My fists clenched, I charged straight at him.

In an Office in Korinthsdaum

“Lord Sigiswald, it is about time for letters to arrive from the Royal Academy. I shall go acquire them.”

I was in a meeting with the northern giebes when a scholar murmured into my ear, then made for the teleportation hall. It was the perfect time to depart, I thought, so I took the hand of my wife Nahelache and turned to address the room.

“It would seem that Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time is weaving her threads with exceptional smoothness today.”

“Oh? Is it that time already?” one of the giebes asked.

“A scholar has requested our presence, so duty calls... Please, continue your pleasantries for as long as you desire.”

Leaving behind an attendant and scholar each, Nahelache and I said our farewells, smiling all the while, and started toward the archduke’s office. We had concluded the important part of our meeting, so we were no longer needed as long as there was an attendant present to host our guests and a scholar to record their conversations. Having to find the proper time to leave had not changed since my days as royalty.

“Lord Sigiswald, Lady Nahelache—please rest here until the letters from the Royal Academy arrive,” said my head attendant, who had moved to Korinthsdaum from the royal palace.

At last, Nahelache and I could relax. We were in the presence of people we knew, able to enjoy tea brewed to our own preferences rather than those of our guests.

“Ahh...” I sighed. “This is even more tiring than I expected. First, there was much ado about sending students to the Royal Academy. Now, I must hold regular events for winter socializing so that the nobles can gather intelligence.”

It was my first winter since the Archduke Conference that had seen me made Aub Korinthsdaum. It was with tremendous difficulty that I performed my archducal duties, which differed so greatly from my role as

crown prince.

Gathering the disparate giebes and listening to their grievances was one of the more important jobs of an archducal couple, it seemed. As a prince, I had received my fair share of petitions from nobles, so I thought I was a reasonably capable listener, but the constant stream of meetings and guests had grown a little tiresome.

"This is your first winter as an archduke, Lord Sigiswald. One can hardly blame you for being overwhelmed," Nahelache said. "For the royal family, winters were mostly uneventful aside from closing the royal palace and participating in the Interduchy Tournament and graduation ceremony."

"Mostly uneventful," were they? For two years, the Sovereignty spent its winters navigating the absolute chaos that Rozemyne caused.

I chose to hold my tongue and nodded in agreement. "It certainly is true that being an aub is nothing like life in the royal palace. If not for your experience in Hauchletzte's archducal family, Nahelache, I do not know where I would be."

Korinthsdaum was a duchy made up of deposed territories under the Sovereignty's management. One could say it had more mana-rich land than Old Werkestock, which now fell under Father's rule, but there were other factors to balance the scale. Father had three wives, while Adolphine's forceful divorce left me with only Nahelache.

"My advice can only do so much," my wife said. "Having an archducal family with only two adults is a death sentence for any duchy. If only Lady Adolphine had not been so quick to divorce you—or rather, if only Lady Eglantine and Aub Drewanchel had not given her self-serving demand their permission—the burden on you now would not be so great."

"In other words, to supply Korinthsdaum with the mana it needs and establish relationships with other duchies, I will need to take two wives from the archducal families of top-ranking duchies..." I mused.

Nahelache nodded, heaving a tired sigh. She regretted that her work as a first wife kept her from spending time with our young son, who was just as upset about the sudden changes to his life and environment.

"Being from Hauchletzte, I cannot hope to support you on my own," she continued. "I can only bemoan how lacking I am."

Adolphine was a member of our neighboring greater duchy's archducal family. Had we retained her support, all of our burdens would have been

considerably lessened.

But before that, had Ferdinand not prattled on about the new Zent giving their name to Rozemyne, I would be in charge right now. In the first place, should Rozemyne not have valued my opinion as the crown prince above Ferdinand's and given me the Grutrissheit without question?

The more I thought about the past, the more I realized that everyone had thought too little of my being the crown prince. It was unjust, through and through—but now that Eglantine had the Grutrissheit, I could only embrace my future as Aub Korinthsdaum.

"I married you with the intention of serving as your second wife, but that plan was thwarted when Adolphine took her leave," Nahelache said. "The burden of being a first wife is too great for me to bear alone."

By marrying the crown prince—me—Nahelache had secured Hauchletzte a higher place in the duchy rankings. Now that I was no longer part of the royal palace, I suspected its upward trajectory would reverse a tad, but that didn't change the expectations placed on Nahelache as my first wife. She would need to socialize with top-ranking duchies, which was by no means a strength of hers.

"Once again, Lady Hannelore of Dunkelfelger—now the country's top-ranked duchy—is your ideal first wife," Nahelache remarked. "She is the daughter of an aub's first wife, so even her mana alone would aid us greatly. And as she is a fifth-year, it would not take too long for an engagement to bear fruit."

In truth, I had intended to propose an engagement to Hannelore during the last Archduke Conference. Drewanchel had stopped me, though, insisting that it would be unsightly to plan another marriage so soon after an unexpected divorce. They had insisted that I wait a year, leaving me unable to pursue Hannelore or anyone else.

I had indirectly expressed my intention to marry Hannelore to Dunkelfelger's first wife, only to receive no response. Perhaps her lack of comprehension was to blame. It was none of my business, but I could not help but wonder if she truly was fit to serve as the first wife of the top-ranking duchy.

As it stood, the students of Korinthsdaum were gathering information about Hannelore under my command. Their reports revealed that she had two suitors, both Dunkelfelger archnobles, but would not be formally

engaged until the Zent gave her approval at the Archduke Conference. I could thwart them both by negotiating with Aub Dunkelfelger during the Interduchy Tournament. Surely, a fellow archduke would understand the positions we were in.

"Lady Hannelore aside, Lady Gentiane of Klassenberg—or perhaps one of Lady Adolphine's half-sisters from Drewanchel—could make a capable first wife," Nahelache said.

"Although we have much to gain from top-ranking duchies, Gentiane is far too young for the role, and Adolphine will surely interfere with any attempts to take a bride from Drewanchel's archducal family. Not only is she shockingly heartless, but she also has an unquenchable lust for power. She would seethe with envy at the mere thought of one of her half-siblings becoming the first wife of a duchy such as ours."

Nahelache's head tilted at a curious angle. "If Lady Gentiane is too young, could you not take a third wife from elsewhere? It would give her time to grow."

"A third wife, you say?"

"Indeed. Take a bride from a branch family of a top-ranking duchy—or an archduke candidate from a middle-ranking duchy—with plans to one day demote her to third wife. You have many more candidates for third wives."

Given the urgency with which we needed to expand Korinthsdaum's archducal family, focusing on taking a third wife was an excellent decision.

"Drewanchel outpaces other duchies in adoptions, and talent is so abundant within its archducal family that the seat of aub is fiercely contested," Nahelache continued. "Brothers and sisters form strong bonds through their shared mothers, which leads to bitter rivalries among half-siblings."

"I see. There is bound to be an archduke candidate among them who will give their elder or younger sister to me in exchange for becoming the next Aub Drewanchel over Adolphine's brother Ortwin."

My status as former royalty would prove advantageous in building a lasting and cooperative engagement with Drewanchel. I would soon gain the public's sympathy once they learned that Adolphine was a power-hungry woman, unwilling to support a crown prince and so heartless that she abandoned her husband the moment he came upon hard times.

Even with Adolphine's grievances, I could cultivate a productive

relationship with Drewanchel through her opposing half-siblings. Its aub would surely cooperate once I made the value I could offer his duchy clear.

"Yes, this is a solution worth considering," I said with a nod.

Nahelache's face lit up at my response.

"Lord Sigiswald," said my scholar from the meeting room, hurrying into my office with a board in hand. "Something terrible has happened at the Royal Academy."

Just seeing the retainer's expression, I could tell who was to blame. I thought back to my days at the royal palace, recalling the many times scholars had approached me with serious news.

Incidents during winter, when manpower is low, can usually be traced back to Rozemyne.

Her experience as High Bishop had given her a wealth of knowledge about prayers and religious ceremonies, which, combined with her obsession with books, paved the way for her to obtain the Grutrissheit. When it was decided that she would become the king's adopted daughter—due to the high chance of her acquiring the Grutrissheit from the Royal Academy's library—she attached conditions to her adoption as I informed her she would become the third wife of the next king.

Then, last year, she had vanished from the Royal Academy and returned with a body that was drastically more mature—the gods' work, she had said. The next thing anyone knew, she had declared that she was going to rescue Ferdinand, treated the proposal magic tool I gave her as "proof of royal approval," and then publicly reduced the tool to gold dust.

It was her abnormal actions and complete lack of consideration that made her stand out so much. Since her enrollment, she had become the Divine Avatar of Mestionora, disregarded my authority as crown prince by bestowing the Grutrissheit on Eglantine instead of me, and established her own duchy as the aub of Alexandria.

And now her rampage continues.

Letting out a short sigh, I accepted the board from the scholar and steeled my resolve. Its message was both far beyond and completely in line with my expectations.

"Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time descended into Hannelore. She demanded to see Rozemyne, then departed with her."

I passed the board to the other scholars in the room and sighed again. My thoughts raced for a solution, only to quiet as I realized that, as Aub Korinthsdaum, it no longer fell to me to fret about the affairs of the Royal Academy. It was, in fact, a relief to be free from the same breed of chaos that had caused a child to suddenly vanish before a statue and return transformed into a young woman.

“Um, what exactly does this mean?” Nahelache asked as she read the board next.

“It is more ambiguous than a report from the Royal Academy should be,” the scholar noted, also confused.

“We should take the message literally,” I said. “More likely than not, a blunt explanation was the only way to convey the absurdity of what happened. Suspecting falsehoods would simply be a waste of your time.”

My time spent navigating Rozemyne’s madness as a member of royalty had taught me plenty about what to expect from her. If my suspicions were correct, then a goddess truly had descended to summon her.

“The most important aspect of this news to me is that Dregarnuhr descended into Hannelore,” I continued. “It should be a cause for great celebration that a goddess chose someone other than Rozemyne.”

The gods have not abandoned me after all; they have created a new divine avatar just for me.

If she had served as a host for Dregarnuhr, then I suspected that Hannelore had the potential to invoke the Goddess of Wisdom as well. As the former crown prince, I needed to make her mine; she had too much potential to marry anyone else.

“Contact our students at the Royal Academy at once,” I said. “Have them spread rumors posthaste.”

“What kind of rumors?”

“Hmm... If we reemphasize the fact that archnobles are not worthy of one chosen by the gods, Hannelore’s suitors should give up on her for fear of what society might think. A mere archduke candidate could wed archnobles of a branch family within her duchy, but a divine avatar? It is only right for her to marry royalty.”

By that logic, she would need to wed Anastasius, Hildebrand, our father, or me. Eglantine, the Zent, could always take another husband, but Anastasius was in no position to take a second wife. Father already had

three wives, and Hildebrand was both too young for Hannelore and already engaged to Letizia by royal decree. I was the perfect choice, especially since I had intended to marry Hannelore to begin with.

"Spread word to the populace: the second divine avatar marrying anyone but a royal will sow the seeds of war in Yurgenschmidt once again. Give them every reason to question and criticize Dunkelfelger."

"Understood."

"Seek help from Hauchletzte, Gilessenmeyer, and Blumenfeld," I said. "We must make it seem as though this perspective is the norm, not just our own creation. Securing their assistance should be trivial, considering the rewards I will reap upon acquiring a divine avatar."

"As you wish."

If everyone at the Royal Academy agreed that Hannelore's current suitors were unworthy of her, Dunkelfelger would find it even more difficult to justify their engagements. From there, I would propose, and my status as crown prince would deter anyone else from pursuing her.

"Once the rumors are circulating, we will need to submit a formal petition to Dunkelfelger," I continued.

No longer were we dealing with the backward, backwater duchy of Ehrenfest; an archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger would surely understand the logic of complying with us. I would propose in short order and work out the particulars with Hannelore's father during the Interduchy Tournament. Then, the Zent would approve the engagement as part of the Archduke Conference.

By then, a year would have passed since my divorce. No duchy could claim that I was acting in haste.

No sooner had the scholar set out for the teleportation hall to send my response to the Royal Academy than I turned my attention to my head attendant. "Proper groundwork will need to be laid such that my engagement to Hannelore can progress smoothly. Contact Anastasius—having the Zent declare that I am the most ideal partner for the new divine avatar will aid me greatly."

"Understood."

"I would also like Father's support, if possible."

Because the royal family's crimes regarding Lanzenave had never been made public, society at large believed that Father had peacefully abdicated

the throne to Eglantine once she was given the Grutrissheit. As it stood, many lesser and middle duchies still valued his opinion over that of the new Zent, who openly favored Rozemyne and Dunkelfelger over preexisting duchy relationships.

"We should also have Father speak with Dunkelfelger," I said. "Lady Magdalena becoming his first wife should make it easier for him to pass on our request."

In the end, both Anastasius and Father refused me. "I do not believe Aub Dunkelfelger will allow his daughter to marry into Korinthsdaum after hearing how Adolphine was treated," the former said. "Furthermore, the Zent has stated that she has no intention of giving Dunkelfelger orders on this matter."

To think such words could come from kind, obedient Anastasius. Perhaps staying in the royal family as the Zent's husband had gone to his head. By all rights, *I* should have risen to power—or at least married the woman who did instead of me. Irritation surged through me at the thought that my little brother had forsaken the throne for love, only to end up with both.

I erred in letting him be with Eglantine. He should have married Adolphine in my stead.

It was too late to regret such ancient choices, but I should never have prioritized my affection for my brother over my own security. If I had married Eglantine, I would have been the husband of the highest authority in the country and would not have needed to cast Adolphine aside for all her willfulness and greed.

Father's response had taken a more severe tone: "It was your own shortcomings that kept you from becoming the Zent. You could not pay the Divine Avatar of Mestionora the respect she deserved, nor could you build a healthy relationship with Adolphine. Not a word of any new engagement of yours shall pass my lips. I am an aub now, not the Zent—I have my own duchy to manage, and I will not anger Dunkelfelger for your sake."

Despite his harsh rebuke, I saw nothing wrong with my treatment of Adolphine during our engagement. Our union had served a purpose—to bring more mana into the royal family—and the birth of my child with Nahelache had come first.

In fact, why was the blame being thrust upon me? Our entire family had given her administrative duties to complete, and we had all gained from the mana she provided us. How shameless my father must be to turn on me for my actions, despite having enjoyed the fruits of my engagement. I refused to be the only one penalized.

“By the look on your face, I assume their responses were far from ideal,” Nahelache observed.

“Indeed. Father and Anastasius have chosen simply to watch as we fight to keep our heads above water. Do you not think it wrong of them to abandon their own family?” I sighed. “I would never have guessed they were so heartless—that their own flesh and blood means so little to them.”

Nahelache gave a resigned smile. “Perhaps Lord Trauerqual does not have the leeway to assist you. The land of Old Werkestock, now part of Blumenfeld, was utterly ravaged, and its people harbor a deep-seated resentment toward the former royal family. Not to mention... maybe those of Blumenfeld wish to secure the new divine avatar for themselves.”

Her speculation sent a chill down my spine. I had dismissed Hildebrand out of hand, deeming him too young to marry Hannelore, but what if she waited for him to come of age? As cousins, they had met even before his baptism, and their time together in the Royal Academy’s library committee had made them closer than most students.

As the coup de grâce, the boy’s mother—Father’s first wife, Magdalena—hailed from Dunkelfelger. If, as Nahelache suspected, Blumenfeld sought to take the second divine avatar for themselves, such a connection would prove invaluable. I might have been a more suitable partner in terms of age, but my Gilessenmeyer heritage put me at a considerable disadvantage.

Just as I desired a Grutrissheit from Hannelore, Hildebrand might seek to repair his inferior schtappe. In such a case, I could see Blumenfeld resorting to any means to secure her. Against the country’s former Zent and Magdalena, I would barely stand a chance.

“I would have liked to wait for our rumors to spread, but alas—I cannot let them get ahead of me,” I said. “I shall submit a formal proposal to Dunkelfelger posthaste.”

“Understood.”

Determined not to surrender the second divine avatar to another duchy, I

had proposed without a moment's hesitation. Dunkelfelger had yet to respond.

"What could be taking so long?" I grumbled.

"Perhaps they are waiting for Lady Hannelore to regain consciousness."

"It is a father's right to decide whom his daughter marries. Whether she is conscious is irrelevant." Aub Dunkelfelger's absurd approach to decision-making exasperated me. Delaying a response to a former royal was unforgivable.

"Despite being a Dunkelfelger noble, her suitors' father will need to be placated," a scholar explained. "An immediate response might be too much to hope for."

In hindsight, rather than submitting a proposal, it might have been better to wield my authority as a former royal and order that Hannelore become my wife. Aub Dunkelfelger could then have used my demand to silence any complaints from his family. It was a most unfortunate oversight.

"Hmm... How goes our endeavor to spread rumors through the Academy?" I asked the scholar. "Have we kept Aub Dunkelfelger from being able to rush an engagement with Hannelore's current suitors?"

"Yes. The rumors gained traction and continue to circulate."

According to the students' reports, there was a growing consensus that it would be improper for a divine avatar to marry a mere archnoble. I was contemplating my next move when another scholar hurried into my office.

"Lord Sigiswald—a response from Dunkelfelger."

I accepted the letter from the scholar and started to read through it.

"Drewanchel has sought Hannelore's hand and challenged Dunkelfelger to bride-stealing ditter. To that end, we can accept no external proposals. If you wish to marry her as well, then you must also challenge us to bride-stealing ditter. We appreciate your understanding."

Bride-stealing ditter?!

I was at a loss for words, barely able to comprehend the message before me. I read it over and over again, but the text did not change.

"Lord Sigiswald, what does it say...?" a scholar asked.

"It would seem that Drewanchel intends to give me no quarter," I said, showing the contents of the letter.

"'Bride-stealing ditter'?" the scholar read aloud, eyes wide with shock.

What a brutish way to resolve a proposal from another duchy.

This was a matter to be settled through discussion, not by force of arms. Against the battle-hardened front-runner in the duchy rankings, how could lower-ranked duchies ever hope to make their voices heard otherwise?

"Aub Korinthsdaum, what are we to do?"

"I cannot allow anyone to take the second divine avatar from me. She is key to my ambition of becoming the next Zent."

"Shall we issue our challenge, then?"

The scholars and knights in the room swallowed at the thought.

I gave a single, curt nod. "One would normally consider it foolish to challenge Dunkelfelger to battle, given their claim to being the Zent's sword, but we can secure victory if we take the right approach."

"Is that so?"

"The proposed game might resemble treasure-stealing ditter, but it differs in one key respect: Dunkelfelger will have a bride to protect, while we will not. Against just Drewanchel and Korinthsdaum, they would surely emerge victorious, but what if more than half of the country were to propose? Would they be able to protect Hannelore from such a formidable onslaught?"

Without a bride to keep safe, we could take an entirely offensive approach. My knights must have recognized our potential for victory because, at last, they nodded in agreement with me. I closed my eyes and smiled knowingly; we would need to lay as much groundwork as we could before issuing our challenge.

"Spread the word," I commanded.

"At once," a scholar replied, brisk and eager. "What shall we say?"

"The truth. Make it known that Drewanchel's actions have enabled any duchy to challenge Dunkelfelger to bride-stealing ditter. This is the perfect opportunity to propose to the second divine avatar—a chance victory, and she is ripe for the taking."

Neither Drewanchel nor Dunkelfelger could deny the facts as they stood. If one wished to marry Hannelore, they would need to take part in bride-stealing ditter.

"At the same time," I continued, "exaggerate the strength of the bond the winner will forge with Dunkelfelger."

The country's aubs had seen for themselves that Eglantine prioritized Dunkelfelger even over her home duchy of Klassenberg now that the

former had secured its place at the top of the rankings. Considering the long-term advantages such a relationship would offer, any duchy would view pursuing Hannelore as a worthwhile endeavor.

"And on that note—claim that Dunkelfelger, being as obsessed with ditter as they are, will rejoice at having so many challengers. Use their bride-stealing ditter match against Ehrenfest two years ago as an example."

If we emphasized that the match was between future aubs, that it was held at the Royal Academy, and that the relationship between their duchies had only strengthened since, every duchy in Yurgenschmidt would surely want to participate.

"Do not forget, anything that is *not* true must be presented as speculation. Ensure that our words cannot be used against us," I said. "I doubt Dunkelfelger would criticize us—not when they were guilty of their own trickery—but there is no harm in being cautious."

The scholars wasted no time in writing down my instructions. I had to wonder if we could seize victory by any means other than increasing the number of attacking duchies.

Hopefully they can wear down our enemy's forces.

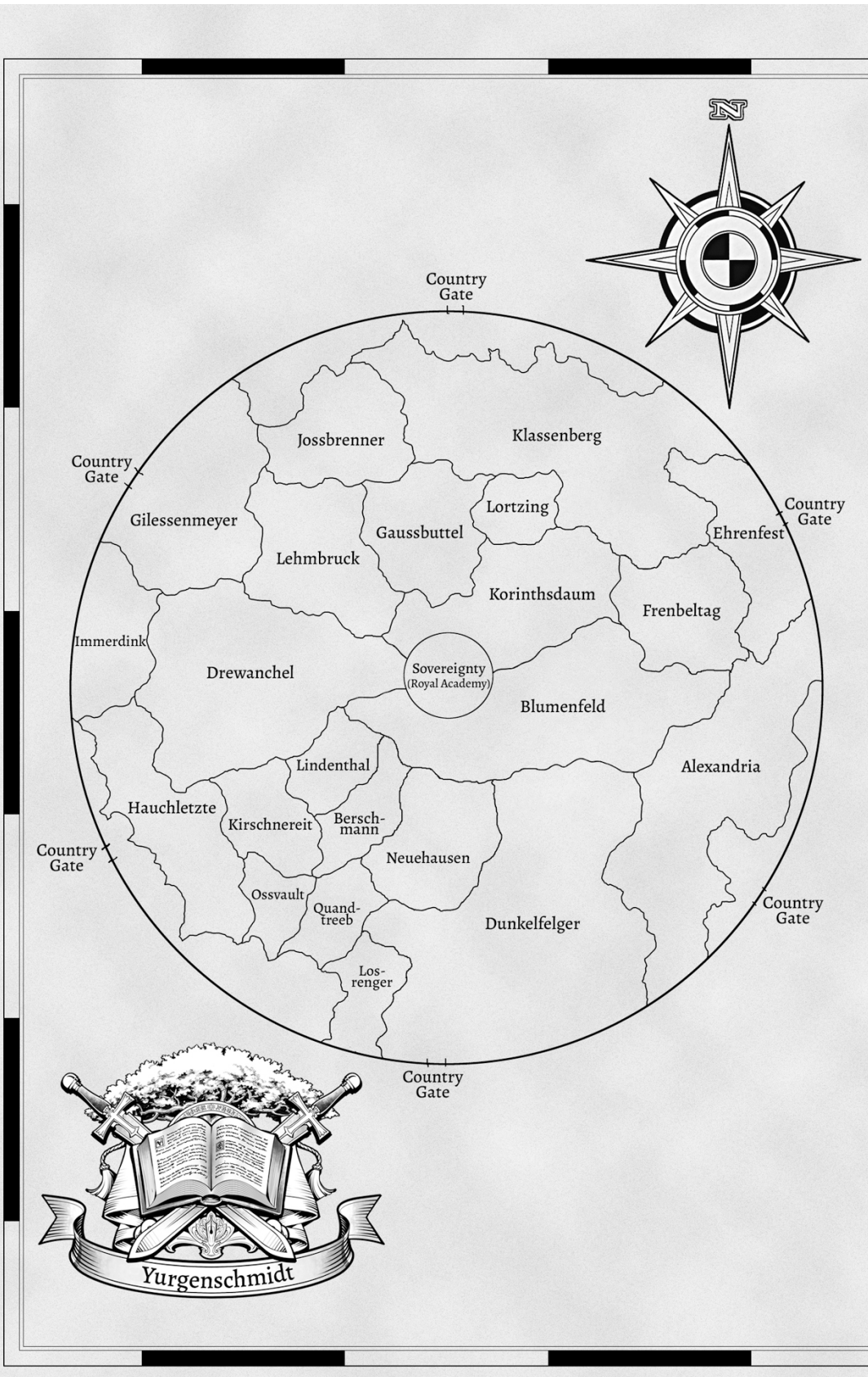
"Oh, and what of that first-year?" I asked as a certain ditter-obsessed archduke candidate came to mind. "Can we use him to fracture Dunkelfelger?" I had already been manipulating him into causing trouble at the Royal Academy, intent on knocking his duchy from the top of the rankings, but now seemed an especially opportune time to use him.

"He already seems to be causing unrest in his dormitory. I will instruct the students to goad him further."

"Good. Tomorrow afternoon, we shall challenge Dunkelfelger ourselves. Prepare the documents."

"As you wish."

Content with the scholar's response, I instructed my head attendant to prepare some tea. The past few days had been a nightmare, and I was more than ready for a moment of peace.


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Immerdink
Drewanchel
Sovereignty (Royal Academy)
Blumenfeld
Lindenthal
Alexandria
Hauchletzte
Kirschnereit
Bersch-mann
Neuehausen
Ossvault
Quand-treeb
Dunkelfelger
Los-renger
Yurgenschmidt

Afterword

Hello again. It's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Hannelore's Fifth Year at the Royal Academy*.

This side volume featured Rozemyne's dear friend Hannelore as its protagonist. I held a poll asking which short stories readers wanted me to write after finishing the main series, and the results led to the creation of this very book.

The prologue was written from Cordula's point of view. Through her conversation with Hannelore's mother, we were able to see the impact of Hannelore's friendship with Rozemyne and the process by which it was decided that she needed suitors.

Most of this volume focused on Hannelore battling to choose her own partner, despite suitors having already been thrust upon her. Her father decided on Kenntrips and Rasantark, both Lestilaut's retainers, but romance can never be simple—her half-brother Raufereg, Ortwin of Drewanchel, and Sigiswald of Korinthsdaum also threw their hats into the ring. And let's not forget Wilfried, the true(?) object of Hannelore's affection.

Back in Part 5 Volume 3, Hannelore declared that she wanted to be considerate of Ehrenfest and understand what value she could provide them. What answers did she find? And how did she respond when the descent of a goddess landed her in very hot water?

Hannelore agonizes over her situation, trying her best to reach a conclusion befitting an archduke candidate. I hope you enjoy watching her grow and her romantic situation become increasingly complicated. Not that she's some kind of zoo animal to be gawked at, but her way of thinking is so far removed from what we'd consider normal in Japan, and the culture of her duchy is so strange, that it might be best to observe her from a distance.

It was surprisingly fun to write about life in Dunkelfelger's dormitory, since it stands out so much from Ehrenfest's. Having a supervisor who actually spent time with the students was a game changer, although I was so accustomed to the elusive Hirschur that I almost forgot Rauffen would be

around during mealtimes. (Haha.)

The epilogue, an expanded version of a short story I posted online, was told from Kenntrips's perspective. I thought he would be an appropriate choice to elaborate on what happened when Hannelore was possessed and then rendered unconscious.

This volume's original short stories were written from the perspectives of Rasantark and Sigiswald, respectively. Rasantark didn't have much of a presence in this volume, despite being one of Hannelore's suitors, so I aimed to give readers a stronger impression of his character. I hope you enjoyed seeing his impressions of Kenntrips and Hannelore in their youth—I tried to weave in memories that only childhood friends could share.

Sigiswald's story touched upon his first winter as Aub Korinthsdaum. It should provide some insight into the state of his duchy, the importance of a first wife, the influence held by former members of royalty, and—in a general sense—what the erstwhile crown prince has been up to.

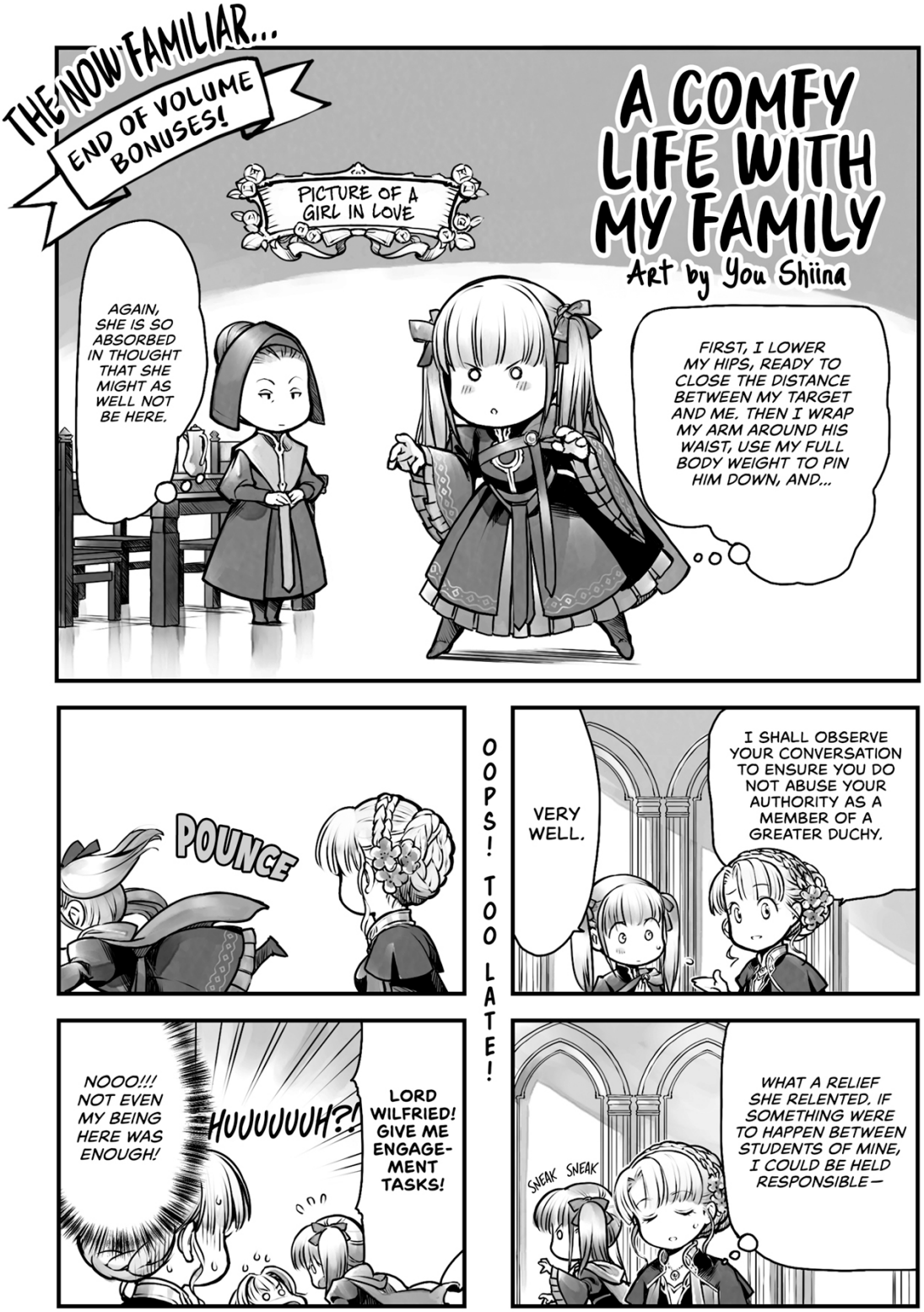
The cover art for this volume shows Hannelore with her suitors—and Rozemyne, who set out on her own adventure to repair a severed thread. It looks a lot like an illustration for an otome game, don't you think? Hannelore's timid, troubled expression is so cute.

The color illustration depicts the gods performing a Starbinding. I was so pleased to see them in color. (Hannelore and Rozemyne are there too, of course.)

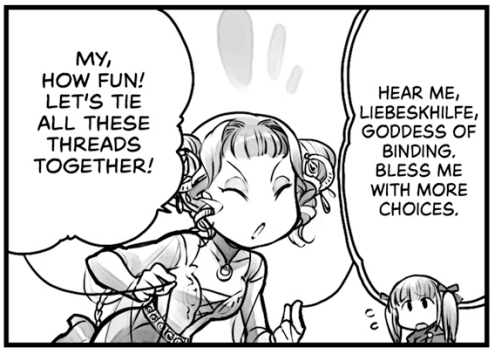
You Shiina-sama—thank you very much.

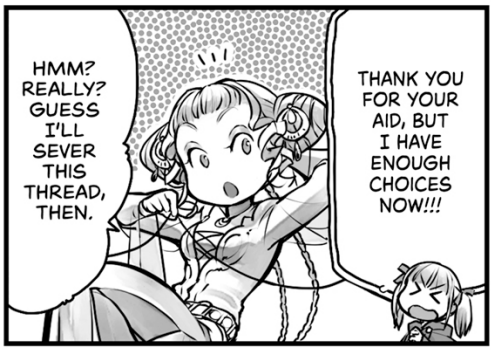
Last but not least, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to all of you who read this book. Thank you.

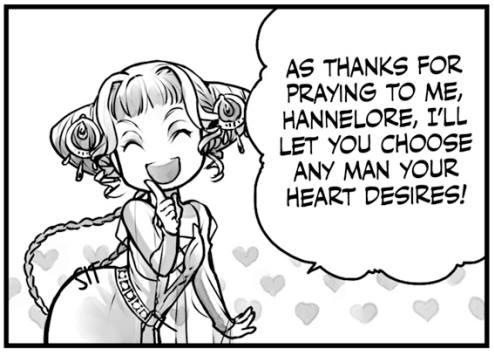
May 2024, Miya Kazuki

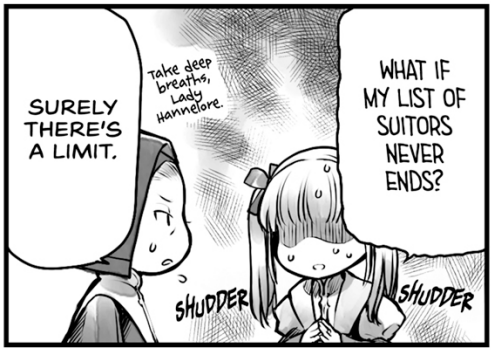

THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME BONUSES!
PICTURE OF A GIRL IN LOVE
A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY
Art by You Shiina
AGAIN, SHE IS SO ABSORBED IN THOUGHT THAT SHE MIGHT AS WELL NOT BE HERE.
FIRST, I LOWER MY HIPS, READY TO CLOSE THE DISTANCE BETWEEN MY TARGET AND ME. THEN I WRAP MY ARM AROUND HIS WAIST, USE MY FULL BODY WEIGHT TO PIN HIM DOWN, AND...
POUNCE
OOPS! TOO LATE!
I SHALL OBSERVE YOUR CONVERSATION TO ENSURE YOU DO NOT ABUSE YOUR AUTHORITY AS A MEMBER OF A GREATER DUCHY.
VERY WELL.
NOOO!!! NOT EVEN MY BEING HERE WAS ENOUGH!
HUUUUUUH?!
LORD WILFRIED! GIVE ME ENGAGE-MENT TASKS!
SNEAK SNEAK
WHAT A RELIEF SHE RELENTED. IF SOMETHING WERE TO HAPPEN BETWEEN STUDENTS OF MINE, I COULD BE HELD RESPONSIBLE—

HEART-STOPPING SERVICE

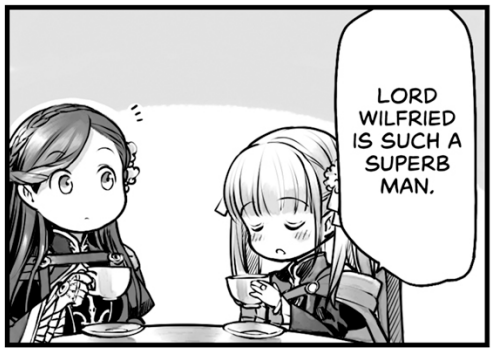


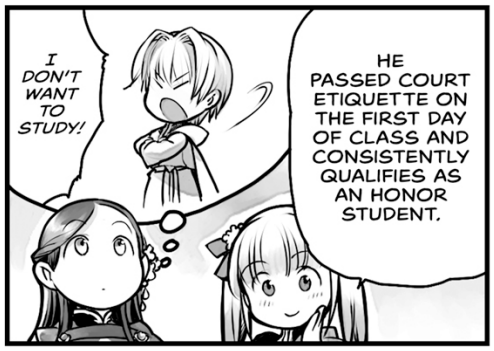


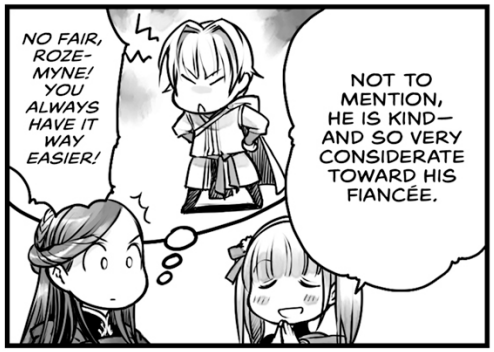


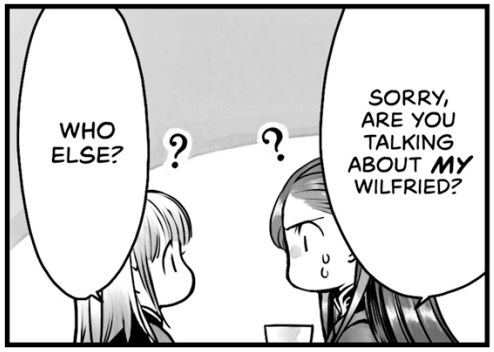


SORRY, WHO?







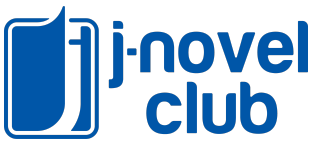












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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Hannelore's Fifth Year at the Royal Academy Volume 1
by Miya Kazuki

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Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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