ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to become a librarian!

Part 3 Adopted Daughter of an Archduke Vol. 3

Author: Miya Kazuki

Illustrator: You Shiina



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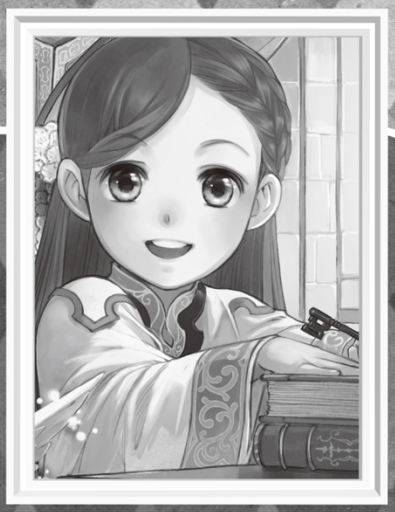



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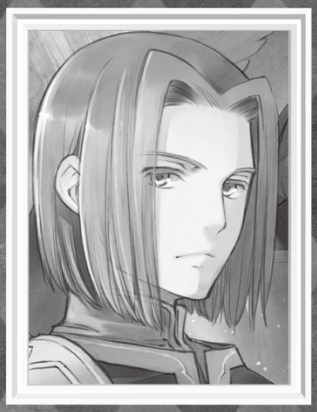


Cast of Characters

The Archduke's Family



Rozemyne
The protagonist. She went from the daughter of a soldier to the adopted daughter of the archduke, changing her name in the process. But her personality hasn't changed at all – she'll do whatever it takes to read books.



Ferdinand
Sylvester's brother from another mother. He is Rozemyne's guardian in the temple.



Sylvester
The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.



Florencia
Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.



Wilfried
Sylvester's oldest son, and now Rozemyne's older brother.

Summary of Part Two:

After becoming an apprentice blue shrine maiden, Myne built a workshop in the temple, giving food and work to the starving orphans while busily spending her days developing printing through trial and error with her Gutenbergs. However, she was suddenly attacked by a foreign noble brought in by the High Bishop. In order to gain enough status to protect her family and attendants, Myne resolved to become the archnoble Rozemyne, soon to be adopted by the archduke.

The Knight Commander's Family



Karstedt
The commander of Ehrenfest's knights. Rozemyne's noble father.



Elvira
Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.



Eckhart
Karstedt's oldest son. Works in the Knight's Order.



Lamprecht
Karstedt's second son. A knight who serves as Wilfried's guard.

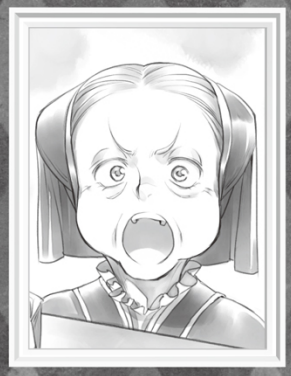


Cornelius
Karstedt's third son. An apprentice knight who serves as Rozemyne's guard.

Rozemyne's Retainers

Angelica
An apprentice knight and a mednoble. A lithe girl of few words who has fairy-like beauty.

Ottilie
An attendant and an archnoble. Elvira's friend.



Rihyarda
Rozemyne's head attendant in the castle. An archnoble who took care of Ferdinand, Sylvester, and Karstedt when they were kids.



Brigitte
A knight and a mednoble. Giebe Illgner's younger sister.



Damuel
A knight and a laynoble who continues to guard Rozemyne.

Lower City Family



Gunther
Myne's father.



Effa
Myne's mother.



Tuuli
Myne's older sister.



Kamil
Myne's little brother.

Lower City Merchants

Benno	Head of the Gilberta Company.
Mark	Benno's right-hand man.
Lutz	A leherl apprentice.
Gustav	Guildmaster of the Merchant's Guild.
Frieda	Gustav's granddaughter.
Corinna	Benno's little sister. A talented seamstress.

Temple Attendants

Fran	In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.
Gil	In charge of the workshop.
Wilma	In charge of the orphanage.
Monika	A cook who also helps in the High Bishop's chambers.
Nicola	A cook who also helps in the High Bishop's chambers.
Fritz	A new attendant. Runs the workshop.

Rozemyne's Personnel

Ella	Rozemyne's personal chef.
Rosina	Rozemyne's personal musician.

Gutenbergs

Ingo	Foreman of a carpentry workshop.
Zack	A smith. Comes up with ideas.
Johann	A smith. Turns ideas into reality.

Other Nobles

Oswald	Wilfried's head attendant.
Moritz	Wilfried and Rozemyne's instructor.
Justus	Rihyarda's son, a tax official who accompanied Rozemyne during the Harvest Festival.
Philine	A laynoble in the same class year as Rozemyne.

Other

Kampfer	A blue priest being trained by Ferdinand.
Frietack	A blue priest being trained by Ferdinand.
Zahm	A gray priest and Ferdinand's attendant.
Hasse's Mayor	A man friendly with the previous High Bishop.
Richt	A relative of and assistant to Hasse's mayor.

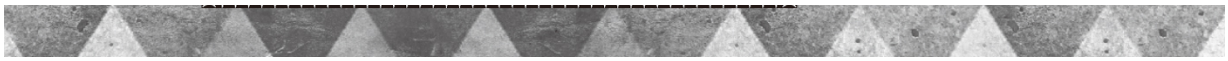


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Prologue

Fran's master, Rozemyne, returned from the castle. She did not feel comfortable there yet, since she had just risen from being a commoner to the archduke's adopted daughter, but as she returned to her own chambers to enjoy some tea, the anxiousness in her expression instantly melted away.

Fran, who had poured the tea, took this to mean that she wanted to relax, and thus took a step back.

"So, Fran—what do you think about me getting more attendants?" Rozemyne asked out of nowhere.

Fran forced a slight smile as his mind raced to process the question. He needed to work out what had led Rozemyne to ask this before giving an answer, otherwise his young master would surely charge in a ridiculous direction as she had done so many times in the past. Fran would never forget the time she had attempted to take on every single orphan as an attendant just to give them an excuse to leave the orphanage.

"Lady Rozemyne, may I ask where this question is coming from?" Fran replied.

"I was talking to Wilma, and she mentioned that I don't have as many attendants as I should for someone serving as a forewoman, an orphanage director, and the High Bishop. I had assumed that this was a normal number of attendants for a High Bishop, but now I realize that everyone's workload is just too much."

Wilma was correct. Rozemyne had five attendants, but as Nicola and Monika were often in the kitchen helping the chefs, they were not yet doing the proper work of an attendant. This meant that her three other attendants were currently handling almost all of the work, which was simply unreasonable.

But Fran knew Rozemyne's finances better than anyone, and it had been at his suggestion that she had taken on both Nicola and

Monika to replace Delia. He couldn't ask her to take on even more attendants on top of that.

"I spoke to Ferdinand about getting more attendants as well," Rozemyne continued.

Fran leaned forward a bit. Ferdinand the High Priest was his former master, but since Fran was still carrying out his order to regularly report back on Rozemyne, he couldn't help but feel that Ferdinand continued to be his master in part. At certain times and places, he would even prioritize Ferdinand's orders and views over Rozemyne's, especially in regard to matters concerning reading or her health.

"What did the High Priest say?" Fran asked.

"Mm... He said it was up to me to determine whether things are progressing smoothly. I can increase my number of attendants if they aren't, but otherwise I don't need to," Rozemyne replied. "But with the money I'm making, my pay as the High Bishop, and the child support that Karstedt and Sylvester are giving Ferdinand for taking care of me at my disposal, I think we should take on more attendants if you think we can manage it. It seems that we're so free of money problems right now that my decision here really is enough to make it happen. Do you agree that we should take on more?"

Now that Fran knew she had permission from Ferdinand, he could finally relax and think over the actual matter at hand. "I would also advise increasing the number of workshop administrators," he said. "Gil is largely running the workshop by himself at the moment, but he will often need to be absent from the temple as we establish new workshops like the one in Hasse. With that in mind, I think we will need at least one gray priest to manage the workshop alongside him."

Establishing new workshops would always involve the Gilberta Company, and in cases where they asked for workshop employees to be sent over, Gil would always be selected due to how much time he had spent with them. And since the workshop's location in the boys' building made it difficult for women to manage, Fran would need to do all of Gil's work until he returned. They really were in dire need of more male attendants.

“Okay. I shall ask Gil and Lutz to select one of the gray priests from the workshop,” Rozemyne replied. “After all, whoever takes this position will need to work well with them.”

She had taken Fran’s advice without a second thought and was entrusting the selection of the new attendant to Gil and Lutz. That was unusual as well, as far as Fran was concerned. When it came to selecting new attendants, she had always prioritized the opinions of her existing attendants over her own.

Ferdinand, on the other hand, selected his attendants through brutal meritocracy. Whenever he needed a new person, he would take on ten at once and immediately pile work onto them. From there, he would send them back to the orphanage one by one the moment he determined they were not good enough.

“...But with that decided, how will we select the new attendant for the orphanage?” Rozemyne asked.

“There will be no need. You entrusted the orphanage to Wilma so that she could continue living there, taking care of the young children who had been abandoned in the basement without gray shrine maiden caretakers. But to begin with, it is not normal for the orphanage to have any such administrator at all. If you have multiple attendants there working as administrators, the next orphanage director will surely encounter problems upon your retirement,” Fran explained.

Ferdinand had said that Rozemyne would continue to be involved in temple business until she came of age. It was hard to imagine that the orphans would continue to receive such thorough care when this happened, since the next orphanage director would likely be unwilling to take on several attendants just to manage them. It was true that Rozemyne had brought much change to the orphanage, but nobody wanted to reach a point where her successor would be unable to do their job.

Fran’s explanation made Rozemyne clap her hands together in realization. “Now that you mention it, I took on Wilma as an attendant purely for my own reasons, and put her in charge of the orphanage on my own.”

She had apparently forgotten all about the circumstances in which

Wilma was hired, likely because she was doing such a good job managing the orphanage.

"What about my High Bishop duties, then?" Rozemyne continued. "I think we need more help there than anywhere else."

"If you could take on someone who is already capable, much like the High Priest's attendants are, then that would be very much appreciated. But we have no need for an untrained attendant who must be educated. Monika is very intelligent and a hard worker, and we can worry about hiring new apprentice attendants once she is fully trained," Fran replied honestly. He appreciated that Rozemyne was trying to decrease his workload, but his hands were already full enough training Monika and Nicola.

Rozemyne gave a small, disappointed smile. "And here I was hoping to decrease your workload a little, Fran."

But Fran was glad that his master cared enough to try. As he savored the joy flowing from his heart, he thought about the current state of the High Bishop's chambers and why the training of the two new recruits was not going so well.

He found an answer immediately—it was quite simply the fact that Monika and Nicola were spending so much time in the kitchen, which wasn't somewhere attendants were supposed to be. What Rozemyne needed wasn't new attendants for her High Bishop chambers, but new chefs instead.

"Lady Rozemyne, could you hire new chefs?" Fran asked. "What used to be done by Hugo, Todd, and Ella is now only being done by Ella, which is a bit unreasonable. Furthermore, Monika and Nicola are cooking while you are absent, but that is not work attendants should be doing. It would be a considerable help if you were to hire chefs who could remain in the temple when you leave for the castle."

Monika and Nicola had been taken on as attendants for helping Ella while Rozemyne was stuck in the temple for the winter, so they had continued to work in the kitchen as a matter of habit. But if doing this was causing problems for their attendant work, then there was little point in taking them on as attendants at all.

As Fran pointed that out, Rozemyne cradled her head, realizing that cooking was indeed not the work of an attendant. She was doing

her best to act as a noble would, but her emotions were so transparent at times that it was clear how vulnerable she still was.

Fran could see Brigitte subtly move her head to the side, so as to pretend not to see Rozemyne clearly acting like a commoner. Damuel noticed this as well, and since he knew that Rozemyne was of commoner origin, he quickly spoke to Brigitte to draw her attention away.

“Fran, I will ask Benno to send us new chefs again so that we may train them for the Italian restaurant as well. That should solve this problem,” Rozemyne said, her noble facade having returned by the time she raised her head.

Fran had expected that she would recover quickly, and it was because she was already so aware of her faults that he did not boorishly inform her of the mistake.

“That will give us more chefs, but Nicola really enjoys working in the kitchen, doesn’t she?” Rozemyne asked. “I have a feeling that’s where she’ll be the most happy, so rather than having her quit, I believe it would be better if we allow her to keep helping in the kitchen and simply train another attendant in her place.”

No other noble in Ehrenfest would allow their apprentice attendant to help in the kitchen, no matter how much they enjoyed it. But the glimmer in Rozemyne’s golden eyes made it clear that she had already come to a conclusion, and ultimately, it was down to her to decide what work to give her attendants.

“I shall entrust that decision to you, Lady Rozemyne.”

“In that case, I shall be going to the workshop. I would like to ask Lutz and Gil to select the new attendant.”

And so Fran sent Monika to the workshop to inform them of their visit, before taking Rozemyne there alongside her guard knight, Damuel. It was getting colder as autumn came to a close, but due to all the people, the workshop was much warmer than the temple halls. Everyone was working on finishing the year’s last batch of paper, to the point that their hands were turning red.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Gil and Lutz said, rushing over upon seeing her.

Rozemyne promptly began explaining the need to hire another

attendant to manage the workshop. Fran couldn't help but smile; he could tell that she was choosing her words carefully to ensure that Gil did not feel his position was being threatened. His master remained the same at heart, even after being adopted by the archduke.

"Gil, I intend to make more workshops in the future as we are doing in Hasse. Each time I do, you will need to leave the temple, will you not? I would like the two of you to recommend to me a gray priest who you would feel comfortable entrusting with the workshop. They will need to be capable of doing business with the Gilberta Company, so it should ideally be someone you're on good terms with. Does anyone come to mind?"

The two boys looked around the workshop in thought, before each coming to their own conclusions and suggesting names.

"Fritz or Bartz should work," Lutz suggested.

"Nolte or Fritz could handle it... if I may make a suggestion," Gil said.

They had both listed Fritz, so Fran thought back to what he knew about him. He was a gray priest who had previously served as an attendant to the blue priest Shikza before his return to noble society. Shikza had been an especially self-centered master, and for that reason, Fran had once mused that Fritz must have had a supremely patient personality. Fritz's experience as a former attendant also meant that he knew proper manners, so he would be able to work in both the workshop and the High Bishop's chambers.

"Lady Rozemyne, I believe it would be wise to take Fritz as an attendant," Fran said.

"...And so she decided to take Fritz on as an attendant so that he may help manage the workshop once his chambers have been prepared, while Nicola shall continue to assist the chefs," Fran said, reporting back to Ferdinand in his High Priest's chambers as he always did. "Lady Rozemyne will also be speaking to the Gilberta Company about the possibility of us receiving new chefs to be trained."

Fran noticed Ferdinand's eyebrow twitch upon hearing that

Rozemyne wished to continue letting Nicola work in the kitchen, but Fran continued regardless. He had been trained to prioritize finishing his reports over everything else.

“I find it disagreeable that she would make an apprentice attendant do such lowly work. She is not planning to purchase her as a chef and move her to the servants’ quarters, is she?”

“I believe she intends to allow Nicola to continue doing chef work while being accommodated as an attendant. I do not believe there will be any issue with this, however. Just as Sister Christine had her attendants focus on artistic work such as music performances and composition, it is plausible—albeit much rarer—for an attendant to do chef work for amusement,” Fran said in her defense.

Ferdinand raised an eyebrow in surprise. “It seems that Rozemyne has poisoned your mind a great deal,” he said in a sincerely worried tone.

Fran looked down at his hands. It wasn’t something that he was very aware of, but he was no doubt being influenced by Rozemyne in more ways than one. He couldn’t remain unchanged from the days where he had served Ferdinand.

“Regardless, from what I can tell, the burden on you has been quite significant for some time now,” Ferdinand continued. “If you need the assistance, I can transfer one of my attendants to you.”

“I very much appreciate the offer, High Priest, but that would ultimately just increase your own burden,” Fran responded, declining the kind gesture.

Ferdinand shook his head. “I have more leeway than usual now that I have less work to do in the castle. In fact, I now have enough time to train new attendants alongside Kampfer and Frietack, so you would do well to instruct Rozemyne to request one of mine.”

This extra leeway was entirely thanks to Rozemyne, so Fran found it heartwarming that Ferdinand had chosen to use it for her sake. And as Fran continued to happily muse over this, Ferdinand’s brow wrinkled in a slight smile.

“Both you and Rozemyne worry only about others, Fran. Does the servant take after the master, I wonder?”

“...Lady Rozemyne once said the same thing to me before,” Fran

said, remembering the time that she had called him a serious and stubborn hard worker just like Ferdinand.

Hearing that made Ferdinand visibly grimace. Back when Fran had served him, such clear shows of emotion had been exceedingly rare for him.

...It seems that I am not the only one having my mind poisoned by Lady Rozemyne.

Ingo and Improving the Printing Press

“Lady Rozemyne, Lutz has brought a letter from the Gilberta Company,” Gil said, holding out a letter once he had finished today’s before-bed report.

I took the letter, feeling a bit confused. It wasn’t often that I received a proper letter from them; I would usually just ask Gil or Lutz to tell Benno to call me over whenever he had the time, or alternatively, they would approach me to say that Benno wanted to see me. As such, we almost always handled things through direct communication.

...Did something happen? I wondered as I opened the letter.

A quick skim revealed that it was an official request for a meeting from the Gilberta Company, and that they wanted to bring Ingo to my hidden room to discuss improving the printing press.

This isn’t good. I wonder what I should do?

The fewer people who knew who I was, the better. While I was aware that Benno would only send this letter if he deemed it absolutely necessary for us to meet in person, I didn’t know Ingo very well at all, nor did I feel comfortable bringing him into my hidden room to talk.

“Mm...” I mumbled to myself, then hurriedly placed a hand over my mouth. Putting on a smile in an attempt to recover from my blunder, I looked up at Gil, who was awaiting my response. “Gil, tell Lutz that I would like to discuss this matter in more detail before replying to the letter.”

“As you wish,” he replied.

I spoke to Lutz in my hidden room the next day. He had come over as soon as Gil delivered my request.

“So, Lutz—why does Ingo want to speak to me? Weren’t we going to have him improve the printing press with the help of the gray priests?” I asked. They must have encountered some kind of problem while attempting to discuss it on their own.

“Ingo came to the workshop, and we talked about improving it, but...” Lutz began.

The printing presses in the workshop were currently as simple as they could possibly be: The letter types were lined up within the forme, which was locked into place in a box-like structure. The forme was then slathered with ink and paper was set on top, at which point one could place the box beneath the printing plate and press down. We had made these by slightly modifying normal presses, but they still weren’t much different from the ones used to juice fruits and the like.

There was a generic stand next to each printing press where the ink and paper was placed. Under ideal circumstances, the stand for the forme and paper would be pushed and pulled to slide into place beneath the printing plate. But we had to do all that by hand, which made it a fairly poor printing press, all things considered. As a result, we had decided to have the gray priests think up potential improvements as they got used to working with them.

During their discussion, Lutz had apparently suggested that Ingo make the printing presses closer to the complete design I had mentioned before. Ingo had listened with a confident grin at first, but by the end of Lutz’s long explanation, he was angrily demanding to speak to whoever could provide more details.

“He was real mad, yelling about how he doesn’t wanna have to go through loads of unnecessary trial and error if someone already knows what the finished form is supposed to look like. That didn’t bother me, but the gray priests weren’t used to how rough a craftsman can be, so they all got too scared to talk anymore. It was all a big mess. But honestly, I see where Ingo was coming from,” Lutz said with a defeated shrug.

I personally didn’t think that the trial and error would have been a waste, since they might have been able to make a printing press better than the one I was familiar with, but it was hard to argue when

the craftsman himself wanted more details.

“Believe me, I told Ingo that you couldn’t go outside like you used to, and that it wouldn’t be easy to get him in a room with you for a conversation. But he told me there was no reason that you wouldn’t be able to talk to a person from the lower city if you really wanted to, since you used to walk all around as a weird rich girl. In other words, you’re already talking to me about it, so there wasn’t really anything I could say back.”

Ingo had apparently been quite insistent that if I could talk to Lutz about the printing press despite him being a commoner, then I could obviously talk to him—the actual craftsman—as well. Ingo knew me from when I had traveled with Benno and Lutz to his workshop to make orders, and in his mind I was a rich person capable of talking to lower city craftsmen without any issues, whether I was a noble or not. Still, it was rare for someone so familiar with the danger that nobles posed to not back down after thinking that.

“...I would have thought that a normal craftsman wouldn’t prod a noble so deeply. Is this really okay?”

“They normally wouldn’t, but he’s gotta finish every job you give him to as good a standard as possible. He’s pretty desperate about this, since it’ll play such a big part in his future,” Lutz said.

Ingo had started his own carpentry workshop at a very young age after getting his beruf certification, and was just a little older than Benno at thirty-three. There were some foremen who ended up in charge of a workshop due to inheritance or marriage, but most who started their own were forty or older. Ingo being in his early thirties put him far below this average, which meant he wasn’t treated with much respect in the Carpentry Guild. No major jobs were ever sent his way.

That was why he was desperate to earn the guild’s approval here. I was becoming increasingly famous as the High Bishop capable of giving real blessings, so exclusively giving him my business would completely change his standing within the guild.

“Wait... Aren’t I already exclusively giving him my business?” I asked. I had assumed that was already the case since I had given him all of my orders for winter handiwork wood and the printing

presses. At this point, I was already considering him as one of my Gutenbergs.

Lutz crossed his arms. “It’s a tough call. When it came to Hasse’s monastery, you placed your order directly with the Carpentry Guild through Master Benno and the guildmaster, remember? We didn’t have much of a choice, since finishing things quickly was our highest priority, but normally you should’ve spoken to Ingo first and had him delegate the work to other workshops.”

I had ordered the carpentry work for Hasse’s monastery under the High Bishop’s name. Benno and Gustav had gone to the Carpentry Guild to discuss the matter, both acting as my representatives, and since they hadn’t even had time to iron out who was giving who exclusive business, they had just allowed the guild to organize everything themselves.

Ingo, however, hadn’t been among my representatives. It was supposed to be his job to organize the work as the foreman I exclusively gave my business to, but as he hadn’t heard about the task until the guild mentioned it to him, they had started to question whether his really was the only workshop I gave business to. We had been able to finish the monastery in time thanks to giving our order directly to the Carpentry Guild, but as a result, Ingo’s status was being called into question.

“They think you’ve hired him for work in the past, but either didn’t like the results or just plan on using other workshops as well,” Lutz explained. That was the kind of interpretation that could mean life or death for a craftsman, so it wasn’t strange to think that he’d risk some personal danger to secure my exclusive business. And since this was a problem that had occurred due to me prioritizing speed and efficiency over everything else, it was my responsibility to restore Ingo’s now damaged reputation.

“...Okay. I’ll speak to him here,” I replied. “They won’t like me meeting with an associate from my Myne days who doesn’t know the circumstances behind me becoming Rozemyne, but I would like to talk to him personally about this matter, if possible.”

It would certainly be ideal to hear how Ingo intended to improve the printing press from the man himself. Plus, since he was willing to

take on the risk of dealing with nobles, I thought it only fair that I repay his bravery.

I sent a response to the Gilberta Company's request for a meeting, and on the scheduled day, Benno and Lutz came to my orphanage director's chambers with Ingo. He had cleaned himself up from head to toe in preparation for meeting a noble, so the person before me was nothing like the sweaty man with a scraggly beard that I remembered. I hadn't seen his hair back at the workshop, since there had been a towel wrapped around his head like a bandanna, but now I could see that his hair was ocher and his eyes bright blue. Coupled with the nice outfit that had replaced his usual dirty work clothes, he was like a completely different person from the guy in the workshop.

Benno gave his long noble greetings, and I replied in turn. Meanwhile, Ingo kept kneeling in silence. He had never done business with a noble before and thus had no idea what to say, as would be the case for most craftsmen.

"Now then, shall we move things to the back room?" I asked.

"As you wish," Benno replied, giving Ingo a slap on the shoulders once the door had closed behind us. "Alright, Ingo—you can talk in here. Lady Rozemyne'll turn a blind eye to whatever's said in this room so you don't have to be perfect with your language, but take care not to be too rough or in her face."

"That's good to hear. I had no friggin' idea what to say back there," Ingo admitted with a sigh. But then he turned to look at me, a serious glint in his bright-blue eyes. They were strong eyes, filled with the resolve to stand strong despite his fear and distrust of nobles.

"Now girlie— Er, *High Bishop*. There's one thing I wanna ask. It's something real important. Is my workshop the only carpentry workshop you plan to do business with?"

"I would like to think so. When it came time to work in Hasse, we were so pressed for time that we went directly to the Carpentry Guild, which has regrettably made life difficult for you. But in general, the work you provide is more than satisfactory."

"...Alright then," Ingo said, the tension visibly draining from his

shoulders as he let out a sigh of relief. It seemed that he had really been driven into a corner by this whole situation, and I couldn't help but feel responsible. But before I could say anything to him, Ingo spun his shoulder once and looked at me head-on, giving the hard look of a craftsman brokering a deal. "In that case, I'm gonna ask you to tell me everything you know about how to improve the printing press. I wanna make the best thing possible here."

His eyes made his request clear: he wasn't going to settle for anything less than the best, and if I knew how to make that happen, then I should just tell him. But my knowledge from my Urano days told me that even the initial printing press that Gutenberg had made from a grape press was improved slowly over time, until it was eventually a largely metal contraption. The printing press in our workshop was made entirely of wood, and it was very likely that we wouldn't be able to keep up with Gutenberg's advancements unless that changed.

How much could we improve the printing press, really? I tried to remember what the printing press in the Plantin-Moretus Museum looked like. It came from the oldest printing workshop that had ever existed, so I wanted to improve our printing press up to that point at the very least. But I didn't know enough to draw up a detailed blueprint.

"At the moment, we put paper on the box with the forme inside, then place it directly beneath the printing plate, correct? Well, it would be a lot easier to use if we could attach a stand like *this* to it, which we could just push and pull. The printing press that I know has a handle on the side that you can turn to slide it in and out," I explained, drawing a simple design on a sheet of paper and gesturing in the air.

But all Ingo did was frown hard. It was hard to visualize something that you knew so little about, and that only got worse when you had to make it.

"We're using a screw-based design like most presses right now, but printing will be a lot easier if we utilize the (principle of leverage)," I continued. "It's just that I don't fully understand how (leverage) is utilized, or how to make a design with it."

“It’ll be easier if we utilize what-now?”

I wrote out an explanation in my diptych, describing the points of effort, load, and so on, but Ingo just shook his head in confusion. It seemed that we were still having trouble making fundamental improvements to the design.

“Eeeh. I can manage this pushing stand thing, but wood’s real heavy. We’ll need to use metal so that we can get it sliding smoothly, right?” Ingo asked.

“Correct. Using metal for parts of the printing press will increase both its speed and stability. Shall I discuss this matter with my smiths?”

If we wanted to use metal for its strength and ease of use, then our best option would be to bring Johann and Zack into this. Plus, Zack had designed a ton of rollers back when we were making the wax stencils; there was a chance that he would be able to make designs for the press based just on my explanations, too.

“Alright. Now I know you’ve got a much, *much* better printing press in that head of yours. It’s just so complicated that nobody else gets what you’re saying. I think I’m gonna have to speak with those smiths of yours. They’re craftsmen who’ve done work with you before, yeah?”

“Yes. They both came of age recently, and they have completed many jobs for me in the past. I consider them proud members of the Gutenbergs, each essential to the spread of the printing industry,” I said in a proud tone.

Ingo’s eyes immediately sparkled with interest.

The Gathering of the Gutenbergs

Having decided to include metal in the printing press to help with Ingo's improvements, I asked Benno to bring Johann and Zack with him next time.

"...Are you sure about this, Ingo?" Benno asked in disbelief, despite the fact that calling over Johann and Zack was nothing unusual for me. It was apparently exceedingly unusual for a smithy to be involved in the designing process of a job given to a carpentry workshop. Under normal circumstances, since it was the carpentry workshop doing the job, they would design the product themselves and only contact the smithy to order the required parts.

"The problem is, I only deal with wood, so I dunno how the metal should be used here. The best thing to do would be to get an expert involved from the start, since all that matters is making a product that satisfies our customer, the High Bishop," Ingo replied, firmly announcing that he was willing to collaborate with craftsmen from another field—something which was nigh unprecedented.

"...Is it not normal for people from different fields to share their opinions?" I asked.

"We order nails and hinges from smiths when making furniture and doors, but we never talk to people from other fields when making the design. In fact, we don't even talk to other workshops. If we did, there'd be conflict over who was actually given the job and who should earn the money from it," Ingo explained. I could imagine that the whole "exclusive business" stuff had been established for similar reasons. "Guess I can't expect a noble like you to know too much about craftsmen though, huh?" he continued, giving a shrug and shaking his head.

I could see Benno and Lutz glaring at me from behind him, as if to say, "But she *should* know by now."

...Sorry, Ingo. I wasn't even raised a noble and I still don't know.

My dad was a soldier, and while my mom and sister were employed by workshops, they weren't involved with the giving and taking of jobs. Though maybe it was possible that I was just so obsessed with making books that I hadn't bothered to learn anything about how the world actually worked.

"In that case, I will try to think of as many possible improvements as I can," I said.

"Yeah. Thanks."

Once Ingo was gone, I tried to remember as much as I could about printing presses, writing down every improvement that came to mind. It was all notes and doodles, since I couldn't form an actual schematic, but I hoped that it would at least help them to come up with some ideas.

Ingo returned to my chambers a few days later, this time joined by Johann and Zack, who were looking all over the place. Johann just looked scared of what might happen to him, but Zack was curious and obviously looking for anything neat that might be lying around.

"And so, I have summoned you both because I would like to use metal to improve the printing press. Your assistance will be needed," I explained.

Johann nodded at once, but Zack furrowed his brow. "I understand the circumstances, but this is a job you've given to a carpentry workshop," he said. "It's not a job for my workshop, so what's in it for me?"

"I mean, I do intend to pay you," I responded, but Zack shook his head.

"Money isn't the only problem here; helping other workshops won't raise our standing in the Smithing Guild. That's why Johann's reputation is so poor—all he does is help other people with their work without getting many jobs for himself. Those he helps and their workshops get a reputation boost for a job well done, but Johann's own reputation doesn't improve at all. I don't want to end up in that situation too," Zack explained, thus teaching me why Johann's reputation was so poor despite the quality of his work.

"You say that it won't help your reputation, but is that really true?

It should benefit both your and Johann's reputations if the metal parts are ordered through your smithing workshops—or at least, that is what Ingo has told me."

The order for the printing press had been given to Ingo's workshop, and the orders for the metal parts would be given to Zack's and Johann's workshops. It wouldn't be that much different from a normal job, but maybe I was wrong about that. I glanced at Ingo, but he nodded to reassure me that I was in fact right.

"...But Johann's way better than me at precision work," Zack murmured, giving the roller that had been used for the wax paper as an example.

The machine that Johann had made was definitely a lot easier to use, and I knew that Zack had been beyond frustrated that he could not create the machine that he himself had designed. It was frustration born from an understanding of just how superior Johann's smithing ability was.

"The orders for the parts are all gonna go to Johann. It's not gonna help my reputation at all," Zack concluded, lowering his gray eyes at the thought that all the work would be stolen away.

Zack had shown his designs to Johann in the past thinking that he would never be able to make them, but now that he knew this was not the case, he was extremely on guard. But that was a problem for me. By having them on guard around each other and refusing to work together, it would be harder to create new inventions. And I was relying on Zack's creativity to turn my vague explanations and wishes into concrete form.

"Johann may be superior when it comes to making parts, but you are overwhelmingly better at coming up with ideas and designing schematics, Zack. I am relying on your creativity to improve the printing press. Will your reputation improve if I buy the schematics through your smithy?"

Zack's eyes widened in surprise. "'Buy the schematics'? The heck are you thinking? They're not a product," he said, so surprised that he had stopped using polite language entirely. I myself was hit by a wave of culture shock; buying designs and schematics apparently wasn't normal here.

“You would be thinking up the schematics, would you not? I want to create the product, so it only makes sense that the schematic would have value. I would thus like to buy your schematics. Surely that would help your reputation, no?”

“E-Err... So in other words, you wanna order a schematic from me and then buy it...? Lady Rozemyne, you sure say some ridiculous things sometimes...” Zack replied, blinking in surprise a few times before dismissively waving his hands. I really didn’t understand what was so strange about it.

Johann, seeing me cock my head, clapped a hand on Zack’s shoulder with all the confidence of someone who had experienced this exact thing many times before. “Zack, it’s not just sometimes that Lady Rozemyne says ridiculous things—it’s all the time.” His voice then dropped to a murmur. “Better this than her launching into a prayer out of nowhere.”

I pursed my lips in response, but Zack’s gray eyes gleamed as he watched us. “Schematics are made during discussions with the customers, and the schematics are never sold since they’re only used during the production stage,” he said. “If a customer wants something you’ve made in the past, they’ll be introduced to your workshop by whoever you made it for, so you don’t sell the schematics to other workshops either... I never thought about selling schematics before, but if you order one and buy it, then that will definitely help my reputation.”

And so, we agreed that I would buy the schematics from Zack through Benno, which secured his assistance in improving the printing press.

“What do you want me to improve, then?” Zack asked once we had gotten all that in order.

“Our current printing press model is made entirely of wood, but we were hoping to start using metal parts for their strength and ease of use,” I said, spreading out my notes covered in writing and drawings of everything I could remember. “First, I would like a movable stand like this for the press. I want to be able to put the forme on it, then place the paper here. I would then lock this board after folding it, and move it under the printing plate like this...”

I pointed at various illustrations and gestured with my hands as I explained. Zack was mumbling something as he listened, while Johann was watching with a serious look on his face.

“At the bare minimum, I would like to incorporate metal so that it slides smoother.”

“Well, I can do that,” Johann said with a relieved look, but Zack’s gray eyes were gleaming with determination.

“...‘The bare minimum’? What’s the best-case scenario, then?”

“We would ideally be able to move the stand by turning a handle in a circle, but is that too hard to picture?” I asked, trying to aid my description by turning an invisible handle in the air.

Zack crossed his arms and fell into thought. “Moving the stand with a handle?”

“There should be a way to move the stand in the same way that you would turn a spool of thread. Is that comparison at all helpful?”

“A spool of thread, huh...? Everything’s coming together,” he said, which implied that he had thought up an idea of some kind. I would expect nothing less from the creative genius that was Zack. He truly was worthy of his Gutenberg title.

As I waited for Zack to finish putting his thoughts together, Ingo looked at me with his bright-blue eyes. “Is there anything else, High Bishop? Putting aside whether they’re actually feasible, if you have any more ideas for improving the printing press—or anything else that you’d want me to make, for that matter—just lemme hear them.”

But despite his enthusiasm, it was hard for me to imagine that he would understand any of my explanations.

“You really don’t mind me saying anything that comes to mind? I can’t imagine everything I suggest will be possible to make,” I replied.

“It’s not about whether it’s possible or not; a single word of yours might make me realize that there’s something we can do, like what just happened with Zack. There could always be something else I can do, so just say anything that comes to mind,” Ingo said.

Zack gave a firm nod of agreement, before looking at me with eyes full of anticipation. If that was their attitude, then I decided that I might as well be unreasonable and suggest improvements that may

have actually been impossible to make.

“Very well. In that case, please consider using (springs) as well.”

“Using what?”

“They’re these little metal coils that I’m sure smiths use. They look like this,” I said, drawing one and explaining how it was used.

At that point, Johann clapped his hands together. “Ah right, springs! How would they be used in the printing press, though?”

“I have no idea.”

“What?!” Johann exclaimed, looking at me with shock. But what did he want me to say? I had read books about the history of the printing press and how it had been improved over time, but it wasn’t like they contained detailed blueprints. And even if they had, I wouldn’t have remembered the precise details after such a long time.

“All I know is that they help with moving the printing plate up and down to apply pressure. How they are used in the future printing press, or whether they will even be used at all, are decisions that I entrust to the both of you. The springs would be convenient if implemented properly, but they don’t absolutely have to be included.”

All I could do was list things that I remembered from history, and I had no doubts that there were all sorts of minor improvements I didn’t know about. But if they could take my advice and actually figure out how to implement it into the printing press, then we would be able to leap one or maybe two hundred years ahead in printing history.

But I just thought it would be nice if we could. It wasn’t essential, by any means.

“Oh, also, there’s one more thing...” I began.

“There’s still more?!” Zack exclaimed, his eyes wide open. I didn’t know why he and Ingo looked so shocked when they had specifically told me to say everything that came to mind.

“This will require changing the printing press on a fundamental level, so it doesn’t need to happen immediately. Right now, the press is dependent on screws since it’s based on a juice squeezer, but a future printing press would ideally just use the (principle of leverage).”

“Right, that thing you mentioned before,” Ingo said, his brow

furrowed as he remembered not having understood the last time I mentioned it.

I once again explained how leverage worked, just as I had previously done with Ingo. When I explained that it was probably being used for things like construction and provided a few examples, everyone finally nodded in understanding.

“I get what you’re talking about, but I have no idea how it could be useful in a printing press,” Johann admitted with a shrug, but Zack shook his head with gleaming eyes.

“The hell are you saying?! This is brilliant. You can move huge things with only small amounts of force. Moving the plate requires the most energy for the printing press we have now, right? If we can get them to move using less force, operating the press will be way easier. And the same design could be used for a lot more than just printing presses, right?” Zack raved enthusiastically.

“Your creativity is as impressive as I expected, Zack. As you say, we can use both leverage and springs in other inventions as well. I would personally like for beds to be made using springs, but the printing press comes first. The printing press *always* comes first.”

Books were more important than a comfortable mattress to sleep on. They could use leverage and springs to make other things once the printing press was done, but they could do that without me.

“In any case, I’ll try drawing up some schematics. You *will* buy them, right...?” Zack asked, looking a bit uncertain.

“Of course. I shall send an order to your workshop for printing press schematics, and then I will buy all of the ones I like,” I reassured him.

Zack’s expression quickly became one that made it clear that he was deep in thought. It seemed his mind was already overflowing with ideas.

Seeing that, Ingo let out a heavy sigh. “Whew, you young’uns sure are impressive. I didn’t understand a word of what the High Bishop was saying.”

“Johann and Ingo, you can leave all of the creative designing work to Zack. All you need to do is pick the most feasible printing press from his designs and actually make it. It’s all about leaving the

right job to the right person," I said, proudly puffing out my chest.

Johann let out a sigh and shook his head. "Is there even a need to improve the printing press right now when you're only making picture books anyway?"

"If we don't finish the printing press now, it'll be a problem for us later, won't it? What are you even saying, Johann? A proper Gutenberg should never say something like that."

Johann responded by giving me a look that screamed, "I don't want to be a Gutenberg," but I simply ignored it. He was a Gutenberg and that was that.

"Ingo and Johann, I have another request for you two while Zack is busy making the schematics," I said as I held out some blueprints. I went ahead and ordered type cases and a typesetting stand from Ingo, as well as composing sticks and some interline spacers.

"Type cases and a typesetting stand...? And what's a composing stick?"

"A type case is a box for putting metal letter types into, designed to account for the quantity of each type and the frequency with which it is used," I explained. "The typesetting stand is what the types are set into, named as such because this process is called typesetting. You fit the letter type cases here, put the manuscript here, and then typeset them like so."

Ingo nodded. "What about the stick and the interline spacers? They're a lot smaller than the cases and stand."

"The composing stick is a long, thin box used to line up the letter types. You made one for me before, remember?"

"I do, but I had no idea what it was being used for."

The composing stick was open on one side, so it technically wasn't a complete box. It was about five or six centimeters wide and as long as the short side of an A4 sheet of paper, making it easily holdable in one hand, and it was used to assemble the letter types into words and lines. These types would be lined up in the stick on top of the typesetting stand.

"If you put the letter types into the composing stick, then what's the interline spacer for?"

"It's a thin board that you put into the composing stick first. It

marks the length of a line and keeps the space between each line consistent," I explained. It was a bit shorter in height than the letter types so as to not interfere with printing, its length was used to govern the length of a line, and its width was used to determine the space between each line. It was important to have multiple copies of the same interline spacer, since they were always placed between consecutive lines.

"Ingo, since your workshop was capable of making numerous boards of the same size for winter handiwork, you should be able to make interline spacers as well. Right?"

"It's surprisingly hard to keep everything the same size. It's good practice for the apprentices, but..." Ingo trailed off and simply accepted the job, but Johann was looking at the design documents with his reddish-brown eyes narrowed. I had ordered some whitespaces and setting rules from him, but I didn't think either would be too hard to make.

"Johann, is there something you don't understand?"

"Lady Rozemyne, what's a setting rule? It seems to be a really thin plate of metal."

"That is correct. Once you put the interline spacers into the composing stick, you tightly press the setting rules against them. It'll help the letter types to move more smoothly," I explained. In order to accomplish this, each setting rule had to be a thin, flat plate of metal. My hopes were fully placed in Johann's talents.

"Also, haven't I already made a lot of these blank letter types...?"

"You have made spaces, but you haven't made quads or justifiers yet, have you? Plus, we'll need furniture at some point if we're going to make a book that only contains words."

Spaces were for creating a thin gap between words. These spaces weren't full-width themselves, and quads were used at the end of lines when you needed two letters or more worth of space. We had just been using a bunch of spaces in a row thus far, but since quads came in all sorts of varying lengths, it would be much more efficient to use them for long spaces.

And then there were justifiers, which were used to make several consecutive rows of blank space. You could line a few up together if

you wanted space for a small illustration, or even fill the entire box with them if you wanted a completely blank page. They were hollow on the inside to make them lighter.

"Furniture" was a typesetting term that didn't refer to house furniture, as one might assume at first glance. Rather, they were blank spaces even larger than the justifiers, used for when you wanted multiple blank pages—such as for a big illustration or a two-page spread. They would also be important for making top and bottom margins.

"We haven't needed them before now, since picture books only have a fraction of the pages of normal books, but they'll be necessary once we move on to adult books that are packed with text. And since we'll need a lot, it's better that we start preparing them now rather than later. The deadline is quite far away, but building the printing press will start midway through it, so the sooner you can finish them, the better."

"You sure like to plan ahead," Johann said, scratching his head and clutching the schematics close to his chest.

About ten days later, Benno sent another letter. Zack had finished his schematics. I sent back a positive reply, and they once again arrived on the scheduled day, with Zack holding seven boards of schematics. He was wearing the grin of someone who had just tasted success.

Ingo and Johann were with them, too.

"Now then, Zack—I shall examine these schematics you have brought," I said, rifling through them until I found a printing press closest to the one in my memories.

"This is it! Can you make this?! It's the closest one to the press I know! Incredible, Zack! I can't believe you could make something so close to the original with my terrible explanations!"

As I continued piling my praise onto Zack, he looked over at the schematics with a confident grin and started showing me what modifications he had made, and why he had made them. It seemed that he had also paid close attention to the improvements that the gray priests had requested, having heard them from Ingo and Gil.

His care and attention to detail made it clear why he had so many customers.

“Hold on a second, Lady Rozemyne. This one uses leverage, so it’s a lot more impressive,” Johann said, examining the boards and picking up a different one.

“...Are you purposefully looking for the hardest one to do?! All you care about is the one that requires the most precision!” Zack exclaimed.

Johann grimaced for a second, but then he pointed at the board with a gleam in his eyes. “I can do it. I can make this one,” he said firmly.



“Alright, listen up, you three. Calm down and wait just a second,” Ingo said, spreading out his hands to stop us. I looked up at him, blinking in surprise, and he scratched his head awkwardly while looking over us. “First up: Zack. I really didn’t think you’d make so many schematics, and such clever ones, too. You did good. I never would’ve been able to make schematics like these.”

“Er, well... It’s my job... And what I’m best at,” Zack said with an embarrassed smile at the explicit praise.

Ingo smiled back, then looked at me with a small frown. “High Bishop. You picked that one ’cause it’s the closest to what you’re used to, but you should look over the others for their strengths and weaknesses. I get that you’re happy, but you’ve gotta calm down a bit.”

I glared at Benno and Lutz, who were stealthily grinning at me being scolded, then reached out to the other schematics.

“And finally: Johann. As a craftsman, it’s important to want to test yourself on hard jobs, but are you thinking of which design will actually be best? Which will satisfy the customer the most? That’s what’s most important when it comes to making a product. Not showing off your skills.”

“...Sorry,” Johann mumbled.

After Ingo’s lecture, we all went back to looking over the boards. We discussed removing some parts, adding others, and modifying parts of the designs while Zack redrew the schematics over and over again. The result was a blueprint for a fairly advanced printing press. There wasn’t much doubt that we had managed to advance printing technology two hundred years in a single day.

“There’s gonna be a lot of work to do over the winter,” the craftsmen said, eyes gleaming with motivation to get this printing press made. They were all patting each other on the back and saying they would get it done by spring no matter what.

...May my Gutenbergs be blessed by Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom.

The Start of Winter Socializing

I could feel winter getting closer and closer. Each gust of wind was like hundreds of cold daggers pricking my skin, and even with my fireplace lit, I struggled to leave my blankets in the morning.

As of late, I had seen carriage after carriage passing by the temple, going through the Noble's Gate to the Noble's Quarter. The nobles were evidently moving there in preparation for winter socializing now that the autumn Harvest Festival was over. I hadn't noticed them at all last year, since I had been in the orphanage director's chambers, but there was a window in the High Bishop's chambers that gave me a clear view of the Noble's Gate.

"So, Fran—what is my winter schedule looking like?" I asked. "Has Ferdinand told you when I'll be heading to the castle?"

"You will be moving to the castle once the winter baptisms are complete," Fran replied.

Zahm, who had also come to my chambers to deliver a message from Ferdinand, gave a nod. "Traveling between the temple and the Noble's Quarter will be difficult with all this snow. Please do take care of yourself."

It had been decided that once Ferdinand had finished intensely training the blue priests, and had thus secured Zahm's replacement, he would send Zahm over to become my attendant. Such was the result of me informing Ferdinand that I wanted one of his skilled attendants, since Fran was so busy these days.

For some time now, Zahm had been helping Fran with his work whenever he dropped by with news from Ferdinand. For that reason, Fran had assured me that he would be a massive help once he was officially assigned to be my attendant. It seemed that, with Gil always in the workshop, my chambers were mostly filled with girls, so Fran was unexpectedly happy to be getting a male coworker.

Alongside his temple work, Ferdinand was using the time he had

saved not going to the Knight's Order and the castle to train blue and gray priests. This training was intense enough that the gray priests often said anyone who served him would be turned into a first-rate attendant whether they liked it or not.

Ferdinand hadn't needed to rely on potions to keep himself going lately, and in fact seemed to be exceedingly lively. He kept going on about what task to give them next, and I was glad to see him having fun cooking up study plans. He wasn't the only one giving out intense instructions, though—his attendants were working hard to train the next generation of attendants. What a reliable bunch.

Even Kampfer and Frietack—the blue priests I had recommended—were getting pretty teary-eyed over how grueling Ferdinand's training was, but the amount they were being paid for their work was more than enough to improve their overall quality of life, so they were working hard nonetheless. Incidentally, their attendants were being trained alongside them, too; they had risen forth and deepened their bonds to face the common foe that was Ferdinand, with both master and servant completely throwing themselves at each task.

While that was heartwarming to see, I couldn't simply sit still and watch them or else I would be given work of my own, so I always had to do so stealthily.

"Lady Rozemyne, a delivery from the Gilberta Company has arrived," Fran said with a glance my way.

I smiled in anticipation; today was the day that Mom and Tuuli would be delivering the hairpin that I was going to wear during my winter debut. I would be going to my hidden room after fifth bell to receive it, but in the meantime, I needed to memorize the words to the winter baptism's prayer, among other things. I couldn't wait to see them, though, since I had prepared gifts for Tuuli and Kamil.

"Lady Rozemyne, may I ask you to go to the orphanage director's chamber?" Fritz asked, calling for me when the time came. He was a calm-looking man with scorched-brown hair and eyes who had become my attendant just the other day.

Several years ago, Fritz had managed to serve a fairly aggressive blue priest within the temple without issue, having developed an

impressive amount of calm and patience in the process. In other words, he basically never got emotional. It was always Fritz who stepped in to mediate when Gil and Lutz got into arguments, so he had been something of a supporting pillar in the workshop for quite some time.

But even now that he was my attendant, Fritz still went to the workshop every day with Gil, so I generally only saw him in the morning and during evening reports. Not to mention, he was one of the gray priests whose minds had been thoroughly corrupted by the saint propaganda; he always got super nervous in front of me, speaking rigidly and with an equally stiff smile.

"Monika, Fritz—pay close attention to her walking speed. Furthermore, do not forget the items," Fran instructed.

"Understood."

And so I headed for the orphanage director's chambers with Monika, Fritz, and my guard knights. Upon my arrival, Gil returned from the front gate with Lutz, Mom, and Tuuli.

"My apologies for the wait, Lady Rozemyne."

"We may speak in the other room. Monika, please hand the box to Gil," I said, before looking over at Damuel. He nodded at my silent instruction, at which point Brigitte took a step back. Monika then did the same once she had given Gil her box.

We stepped into the hidden room, and only once the door was completely sealed behind us did Lutz delicately set his own box on the table and open it. "Here are the delivered goods," he said. "Please look at your leisure."

Lutz was much better at taking the hair stick out this time than he had been before, so I could guess that he had been practicing with Tuuli. The hair stick itself was decorated with large flowers that were a deep red to match the divine color of winter. They were gathered with lace into a bouquet, just as I had ordered, and adorned with bird feathers of a radiant white, the other divine color of winter. These two colors would match the outfit that I was planning to wear during my winter debut.

...The red and white design of the outfit kind of makes me look like Santa, though. I understand why winter has two divine colors,

but did it really have to be those two colors of all colors?

My outfit was mostly red, with white fur around the neck and wrists for warmth. I had wanted to reject the design, in all honesty, but Rihyarda had looked so excited as she picked it out that I completely missed my opportunity to speak up. Not that anyone would have understood my misgivings, anyway.

“Exactly as ordered,” I said. “May I ask you to put it on me?”

Mom stuck the hair stick in with a smile, and when I asked whether it looked good on me, Tuuli pumped a fist and exclaimed, “Of course!” But as a nostalgic smile started to spread across my face, Damuel cleared his throat, prompting Tuuli to hurriedly correct herself.

“...It looks very good on you, milady.”

“Of course it does. Anything you make looks good on me, Tuuli,” I said with a smile.

At that, Tuuli returned a smile of her own—one that very clearly seemed to say, “I know, right?”

“Lady Rozemyne, my husband was overjoyed to have been assigned to guard the priests at Hasse,” Mom said. “And thanks to your bonuses, it seems the soldiers at the gate often fight over who should be picked to accompany him.”

“He also said that the food at the monastery was super tasty,” Tuuli added, both her and Mom keeping an eye on Damuel’s expression as they spoke. I was glad to hear even that small piece of news.

“I am glad they enjoyed it. The priests will be returning to Hasse come spring, so I will be asking the soldiers to guard them once again when that time comes,” I replied.

They went on to talk about Dad, I spoke about the orphans, and then the conversation naturally progressed onto Kamil’s growth. He was apparently in the middle of a fierce struggle, trying to pull himself up to stand. My only memories of Kamil were of him sleeping at home and being carried in front of the temple doors, so it really surprised me how quickly he had grown. That said, I had heard from Wilma that Dirk had taken his first steps the other day, so it made sense that Kamil would be making progress as well.

“...Gil.”

“This, Lady Rozemyne?” Gil asked, before setting the box that Monika had given him onto the table and opening it. Inside were gifts for Tuuli and Kamil.

I took out the ball of cloth that I had made with Delia and Wilma, then bounced it on the table. When I did, the bells that were inside started to jingle.

“This ball has bells inside, so I think even babies should be able to enjoy playing with it,” I said. “It being made of cloth means it should be easier to grab and also reduces the risk of any potential injuries. Do you think it would sell in the Gilberta Company?”

From what I could remember, we still had some leftover bells at home. I was pretending this ball was an example for Tuuli to work from, but in reality, it was a present for Kamil. Mom promptly accepted it, having guessed my true intentions.

“Furthermore, as thanks for the hair stick, I would like to give you this, Tuuli. Please read it when you have the time,” I said, handing Tuuli a volume of our third picture book. It was a little thicker than usual thanks to the letter I had slipped inside, which Tuuli noticed as soon as she took it. She didn’t open the book, but her lips curled upward ever so slightly as she slipped it into my old tote basket along with the cloth ball.

As I looked at the basket, surprised that they were still using it, I noticed Mom staring at me. She reached out a hand, but pulled it back with a clouded expression before giving an awkward smile.

“Lady Rozemyne, the upcoming season will be cold and harsh. Please take care and watch your health so that you do not end up bedridden with a fever,” she said.

“The same to you. May you and your family be safe.”

After the autumn coming of age ceremony had ended, on a morning where snow had started to pile up on the streets, the winter baptism ceremony began. My family was nowhere to be seen, since I had told them not to come in case Kamil got sick, but Lutz mentioned that Kamil had been very excitedly playing with his new cloth ball, so I was more than satisfied.

Once the winter baptism ceremony was over, Ferdinand and I informed the blue priests in the temple what they would be doing in our absence. Kampfer and Frietack let out dying wheezes upon seeing the pile of work stacked in front of them, but the silent pressure that Ferdinand was exuding forced them to accept it.

We quickly finished our preparations, and it was soon time for me to head to the castle. Once Ella and Rosina had gotten into their carriage, I climbed into mine and turned to look at the attendants who had come to see me off.

“Gil, Fritz—please take care of the orphanage alongside Wilma. And be especially sure to put your all into the printing that you shall be doing as winter handiwork.”

“Lady Rozemyne, err... good luck with business?” Gil said.

I smiled and gave him a nod. I would be selling learning materials to all the noble kids no matter what.

“Lady Rozemyne, please consider your health above all else, and take care not to push yourself,” Fran added.

“Thank you, Fran. I hope that you all take care of yourselves as well.”

Meanwhile, Ferdinand was giving precise instructions to his own attendants. “Kampfer and Frietack are preparing for the Dedication Ritual, but they will need your assistance,” he said.

“Understood,” his attendants replied.

At some point, Ferdinand’s attendants had all received diptychs of their own. It had apparently all started when Zahm asked Fran for one, which was then ordered from Lutz through Gil. They had since become essential tools not just for my attendants, but for Ferdinand’s, Kampfer’s, and Frietack’s as well.

“That will be all for now,” Ferdinand concluded.

“We shall await your safe return.”

And so, as snow fell upon Ehrenfest, my living quarters were moved from the temple to the castle.

“Welcome home, Lady Rozemyne. Welcome back, Lord Ferdinand.” Norbert, Sylvester’s head attendant, welcomed us upon our arrival, before guiding us to the nearest waiting room in the northern building. There we found Rihyarda, who went on to inform

me and Ferdinand of our schedules over tea.

“The baptism ceremony will be performed three days from now, on Earthday,” she said.

The winter baptism marked the beginning of winter socializing, followed by the debut of all the children who had been baptized that year. And as all of the nobles gathered, the children who would soon be joining their ranks would be invited to join.

“...Baptism ceremony? Am I going to be performing that one, too?”

“No, since the winter baptism ceremony overlaps with the debut, I will be performing it instead,” Ferdinand said. “Watch closely, though, as you will be performing it next year as the High Bishop.”

...So the High Priest will be performing the baptism in the High Bishop’s place? Aww... If he hadn’t banned me from selling illustrations of him, I could have made a ton *of money. What a shame.*

“Rozemyne, I can tell from the look on your face that you are plotting something rotten,” Ferdinand observed, watching me with narrowed eyes.

“Well, it’s not a plot that I can actually execute, so there’s no need for concern. Sigh...”

I had thought about slipping illustrations into the financial reports for the harspiel concert, but Ferdinand had instantly rejected the idea. And when I asked whether I could distribute them for free instead, he just called me an idiot.

“Milady, you need not think about that right now. Please focus on what I’m telling you,” Rihyarda interjected. “During your debut, you will offer up a song to the gods, praying for future protection and gratitude for the growth you have experienced. The order is such that nobles of a lower rank go first, while those of a higher status play later.”

“I’ll be playing before Wilfried, then.”

Hierarchy was very important to nobles. Wilfried was the archduke’s son and heir, so as a former archnoble turned adopted daughter, I would be considered beneath him socially. That was why I had assumed that I would play before him, but Rihyarda shook her

head.

“No, you will be playing last, so as to announce that you have been adopted by the archduke. There will be nobles gathering here in the winter who were not present for your summer baptism.”

“That would make sense,” Ferdinand said with a nod, but that just confused me more.

“But why? Isn’t going against hierarchy a bad thing?”

“Officially speaking, there is no hierarchy between the children of the archduke,” Ferdinand replied. “That is why, under normal circumstances, a successor would not have been picked yet.”

“But even then, aren’t adopted children on a different level from normal children?”

“You must learn to read between the lines. By introducing you last, we avoid Wilfried playing after you and being unfavorably compared to your performance. Am I correct, Rihyarda?” Ferdinand asked.

Rihyarda had no choice but to nod. “My boy, Lord Wilfried has been progressing so fast that you wouldn’t believe it. But he hasn’t even been practicing for a single season, whereas you’ve been practicing for years, milady. Everyone will notice how much better at the harspiel you are than him.”

“Oh, that’s what you mean. Now I understand.”

Once Rihyarda had explained what would happen during the baptism and the debut, Ferdinand told her our plans for the Dedication Ritual. Traveling between the temple and the castle would limit how much time I had for meetings and spending time with other kids.

“I imagine that there will be many requests to meet with Rozemyne, but prioritize her health above all else. I trust you to make the proper arrangements,” Ferdinand said.

“As you wish, Ferdinand, my boy.”

Once the discussion was over, Ferdinand stood up to head to his estate in the Noble’s Quarter. I assumed that he would be leaving at once, but he instead glared down at me and started listing off warnings.

“I will be leaving potions with Rihyarda, but take care to manage

your health. Do not go to the book room yourself; have your books brought to you instead. Do not speak directly to nobles you do not recognize; have your attendants speak to them for you. Furthermore __"

"That should be enough, my boy," Rihyarda interrupted, clapping her hands together a few times. "I can give her such minor instructions myself. Besides, if you list them all off at once, she won't remember them."

"Ah, yes. I had forgotten that there are others who can keep her on a leash," Ferdinand murmured before leaving the room. The next time we would meet was for the baptism ceremony in three days' time. At last, I could spend some time relaxing without him constantly butting in to say one thing or another.

A short while after our discussion, I changed clothes and went to check on Wilfried, at Rihyarda's suggestion.

"Lord Wilfried is progressing shockingly quickly, though he seems to have grown just a little smug lately, which is leading him back into laziness. He truly does resemble Lord Sylvester," Rihyarda said with a troubled yet nostalgic smile. She had already requested a meeting with Wilfried, so I was let straight into his room.

"Wilfried, I hear that you have grown considerably. May I look at your task list?"

"Sure, take a look. Impressive, huh?" Wilfried said, proudly holding out the sheet. Almost everything on the list had been marked off, and I could tell that he had been working fairly hard. But at the same time, it was obvious that being this close to finishing had made him somewhat apathetic; everyone was probably telling him that he had done well to get this far, and that it didn't necessarily matter whether or not he finished.

But while this certainly was impressive to those who were used to Wilfried's past behavior, the task list was the bare minimum he needed to accomplish as the archduke's son. Not completing it would be deemed a failure, no matter how close he was.

"My, I see that you truly are working hard. But it doesn't quite seem like you'll make it," I commented.

There were still five tasks that hadn't been checked off, which

meant that his chances of success were precariously balancing between possible and not possible. But I didn't say that aloud, and instead deliberately framed it as though he had already failed.

"That's a shame, but don't feel too down about it, Wilfried."

My words caused Wilfried's eyes to open wide in anger, and a stir spread among his attendants.

"What?! I-It's not over yet! There's still time before the debut!" Wilfried protested.

"...Three days, you mean? Can you really finish everything here that quickly?"

"Of course!" Wilfried declared. "Let's do it, Moritz!"

It appeared that my taunting had reignited his motivation, and he called Moritz over before starting to study as fervently as ever. I watched for a short while, and then stealthily exited the room with Rihyarda.

Once I was back in my chambers, I had my things from the temple put away while I leisurely read a book that Rihyarda had brought me from the book room. Then, at dinner, Oswald reported that Wilfried had completed another one of his tasks. This announcement was met with considerable praise by Sylvester and Florencia.

Wilfried puffed out his chest and looked at me. "See, Rozemyne? I can do it when I try."

"Oh yes, it's very impressive. And as you just implied, you don't get anywhere when you don't try. Realizing this is the most important step that you can make," I said to taunt him further.

My words earned me a frown from Sylvester, who quickly protested. "Look, Rozemyne—you gotta do something about Ferdinand."

"What do you mean by that?"

I hadn't known about this, but Sylvester went on to explain that he had sent several SOS messages to Ferdinand asking for help. They had all apparently ended up being refused in the same way: "Unfortunately, I cannot assist you without the High Bishop's permission."

"So I've been telling him to get your permission, but he just says

you're either absent or busy. It's pretty clear that he just hasn't been contacting you at all."

...You know, I think I can see Ferdinand giving one of his evil smiles right now.

But either way, by permitting Ferdinand to come back to the castle to help out, I would be allowing things to go right back to how they had been before.

"With all the scholars in the castle, I am sure you can handle things yourself. The very reason that Ferdinand entered the temple was to signal his withdrawal from the world of politics, so it is strange that he has been visiting the castle and helping with your work at all," I said in rebuttal.

No matter how stealthily Ferdinand did the work, it clearly wasn't something he should be doing in the first place.

"Ferdinand is currently in the middle of quite joyously training replacements in the temple," I continued. "I have heard that there was a massive purge that greatly diminished the number of nobles, but Ehrenfest ended up relatively unscathed due to maintaining a neutral position during the civil war, correct? Now is the best time for us to train newcomers and build strength for the future."

They were relying on Ferdinand so much at the moment that there would be countless problems if something were to happen to him.

"So, in other words... you have no intention of handing Ferdinand over?" Sylvester asked.

"Oh my, that's not the case at all. You may inform the scholars that those who absolutely require Ferdinand's assistance may visit the temple to seek his counsel," I said, knowing that no noble would visit the temple of their own volition unless the situation truly was dire. Well, perhaps one noble would; I could imagine a certain someone gleefully infiltrating the temple in order to explore.

"Rozemyne, you must know that Sylvester needs him," Florencia began, but I shook my head.

"Florencia, dearest mother, your worries are unfounded. The one and only Aub Ehrenfest would never be so weak as to give up on his work while his own son is striving to one day become the archduke

himself," I said, landing a powerful blow.

Sylvester averted his gaze with a pout that was just like his son's, at which point Wilfried looked up with a glint in his eyes and eagerly tried to counter me himself.

"Father's incredible, Rozemyne," he said proudly. "No way is he weak."

...And now it'll be even harder for him to avoid doing his work. Good job, Wilfried!

I spent my days practicing harspiel with Rosina and playing the role of a taunting sibling to motivate Wilfried, and soon enough, the morning of the feast where all the nobles in Ehrenfest would gather had arrived. I was washed as early as I usually would be before a baptism ceremony, ate my breakfast, and then had my hair done while dressed in my debut outfit.

Once everything was ready, we moved from the northern building to a room in the castle's main building that was close to the big assembly hall. We had made sure to depart extra early to account for how woefully slow I was and to avoid the looks of sheer bafflement that anyone who saw my highbeast would surely give us.

I was with Rihyarda and Rosina, the latter of which was carrying my harspiel, and would be waiting in the room for debuting kids until third bell. Cornelius and Angelica were my guards for the day, and both were wearing dark yellow capes clasped with brooches. I had seen the members of the Knight's Order in similarly colored capes during last year's trombe extermination.

"I see you and Angelica are wearing matching capes," I said to Cornelius. "Is that a cape for knights?"

"No, Aub Ehrenfest gives these capes and brooches to all those who enter the Royal Academy, so all those you see wearing them today are its students," he replied.

They were apparently like a school uniform for the Royal Academy. When I asked for more information, I was told that a golden-yellow similar to ocher was the official color of Ehrenfest, and that students from other duchies would be wearing capes that were their own duchy's colors.

“You’re here early, Rozemyne.”

“Good morning, Wilfried.”

Wilfried came to the waiting room, and soon enough, other nobles started to arrive with their children. We were sitting at the far end of the room, while Rihyarda and Oswald handled those coming in. The kids were our age, but we had been instructed not to talk to them; doing so would have political implications due to their parents’ status.

Oh, there’s a girl.

I smiled and waved, but she just returned an uncomfortable look; it would probably be best for me to hold back here. I turned my gaze to outside the window, where I saw the highbeasts of nobles clad in riding gear arriving one by one alongside carriages.

Eight kids came to the waiting room in total. There had been around ten kids on average across the previous years, so this was definitely less than usual.

At third bell, Wilfried stood up and held out a hand toward me like a gentleman, a tense look on his face. “Let’s go, Rozemyne,” he said. It seemed that he would be escorting me to the assembly hall.

He started to lead the way, but his fairly quick pace forced me into a jog. I thought back to the time when he had pulled me along until I fell unconscious, and pulled on his arm a little to try and prevent history from repeating itself.

“Wilfried, please do not walk quite so fast.”

“...If you think this is fast, you need walking practice more than you need harspiel practice,” he remarked.

“You may be right. But either way, it’s too late for that now,” I replied with a shrug. And at those words, Wilfried grinned as though all of his worries had melted away.

When we arrived, the kids all lined up by the doors to the assembly hall. As children of the archduke, Wilfried and I were standing at the very front.

“Once inside, please walk straight until you reach the altar,” Oswald said. Wilfried, the other children, and I all responded with nods, then Oswald and Rihyarda opened the doors to the assembly hall.

“Welcome, new children of Ehrenfest!” Ferdinand declared in a loud, echoing voice.

A larger crowd of nobles than I had ever seen before all turned to look at us, their eyes so full of curiosity and judgment that I faltered for a moment in fear. Judging by his expression, Wilfried seemed to be feeling the same way. I swallowed hard and slightly tightened my grip on his arm, which snapped him back to his senses. He looked my way, and our eyes met.

“Let’s go,” he said. And after exchanging a nod, we both took a step forward.

The Baptism Ceremony and Our Winter Debut

The situation was much like the Starbind Ceremony, except now there were far more judgmental gazes sizing me up as I walked down the middle of the hall. The tempo of the music being played made me feel as though I was being hurried on, and I desperately moved my legs to avoid falling behind Wilfried.

Among the audience I could see some wearing knight uniforms like Karstedt, others in the clothes of scholar-officials like Justus, and still others dressed in the attire of attendants. The rest were adorned in a variety of rich, frilly outfits.

My analysis of what people were wearing led me to believe that one's placement in the hall was dependent on rank; laynobles were positioned closest to the entrance, while those of the highest ranks were by the altar. It seemed that the knights and scholars were together, but they were all accompanied by fancifully dressed women and children wearing their Royal Academy capes or otherwise just their best outfits. In other words, families were sticking together.

...I wonder if my brothers and Mother are together up ahead? I pondered. And it wasn't long before I found Elvira up at the very front row near the center, with Eckhart right behind her. Lamprecht and Cornelius weren't with them since they were on guard duty.

The altar was at the center of a stage, and Ferdinand was standing before it wearing his ritual priest robes. Sylvester and Florencia were to his left, facing the stage along with their guard knights and attendants. I noticed them both looking this way, along with Karstedt, so I gave a smile.

Rosina and the other musicians with their harspiels were to Ferdinand's right, also facing the stage, and beside them were a number of nobles holding magic rings. Cornelius, Angelica, and

Lamprecht were also close by, which told me that the nobles gathering were those related to the kids being baptized.

...Ah, I see. I'm the archduke's daughter now, so Mother and Eckhart don't get to be with my family or retainers.

Instead, they were both with the other regular archnobles. The fact that they weren't able to be included in my family made me feel kind of sad.

...I wonder where Rihyarda and Oswald are? I thought, noticing that they hadn't come in through the entrance door and weren't beside the stage. I searched around for them and eventually saw them come in through another door. The crowd separated for them as they entered, and in no time at all, they were lined up by the stage as well.

When we stopped in front of the stage, Ferdinand gestured for us to climb up to the altar. We promptly obeyed and lined up before it.

Four children were to be baptized, among whom were those who lived so far away from the city of Ehrenfest that they weren't able to invite a priest over during their birth season. While there were several kids, the whole process went just as it had during my own baptism ceremony: Ferdinand recited tales from the bible in his reverberating voice, then called each child by name.

"Philine," he said, and a girl stepped forward. It was the same girl who had given me an uncomfortable look in the waiting room earlier. She gripped the magic stick that he held out—the same mana-sucking tool that I had held during my baptism ceremony—and once it began to shine, the nobles clapped in celebration.

I could guess that if one was so lacking in mana that they couldn't make the tool shine, they wouldn't be accepted as nobles. But babies had their mana measured at birth and throughout their childhood as they grew, so it was exceedingly rare for that to actually happen.

With that done, the magic tool was pressed against a medal to register her mana. A child was recognized as an Ehrenfest noble only once this process was complete.

Philine's father stepped up onto the stage, then gifted his daughter a ring into which she could release her mana. "I bestow this

ring upon Philine, my daughter who has been accepted by the gods and society."

"May Philine be blessed by Geduldh the Goddess of Earth," Ferdinand announced. And when his blessing rained down upon her, she filled the small feystone in her ring with mana and returned the blessing in thanks. A small red light bounced through the air toward Ferdinand, and the nobles clapped once again.

...Wha? Everyone's happy with a blessing that tiny?

It was entirely different from the blessing that my guardian trio—Ferdinand, Sylvester, and Karstedt—had made me give during my own baptism ceremony. There had been two hundred nobles present then, and I had blessed every single one of them.

Well, that explains why the crowd freaked out so much! The blessing I gave was clearly abnormal! Had I known what noble baptism ceremonies usually looked like, I never would have done something so weird!

But no matter how much I regretted it, there was no going back now. Not to mention Ferdinand would have made me do it regardless to further his plot of establishing me as a saint. I couldn't imagine a single reality in which I beat him.

Once the kids had all been baptized, it was time for the debut. This was a celebration for the kids who had been baptized during the year and accepted into the ranks of the nobles, where we would offer up music to the gods and pray that they continued to provide their divine protection. Each child would usually perform a song in honor of the god associated with the season they were born in.

We were moved to the left side of the stage while one of Sylvester's attendants set a chair in the center. Then, Ferdinand called Philine's name, signifying that she was to play first. Considering what Rihyarda had said earlier, this meant she was the lowest in status out of us all.

Philine wore a nervous expression as she sat down in the chair, at which point her music teacher stepped onto the stage with her harspiel. Philine took the instrument, then readied it.

...Wait, what? She's not very good at all.

I had assumed that Philine's poor playing was just a one-off case,

but the next couple of children weren't very good either. By the time we were halfway through the performance, all I could do was tilt my head in confusion. If this was the quality expected during a noble's debut, then why in the world had Wilfried and I worked so hard? The level of artistry demanded from nobles was a lot lower than I had expected.

...Or so I thought. The second half were increasingly better, their talent seemingly proportionate to their status. There was a world of difference between how their harspiels sounded, and I immediately realized what was going on.

This is the difference that having more money to put into education makes.

The pieces had all come together. If the highest-status children performed first, then it would just be sad for the lower-status kids who had to play after them. Nobles were expected to be as good at playing harspiel as both their tutors and the quality of their instruments would allow, and that was why Wilfried and I were expected to play at such a high level; we wouldn't be able to maintain our dignity and social position if we were raised amid the highest quality teachers and instruments, yet still couldn't play better than those of a lower status than us.

The archnoble kids were as good as you would expect. They were slightly better than Wilfried, who had been practically whipped into shape overnight, but the difference wasn't large enough that people would outright look down on him.

"...I bet you're glad you practiced now, aren't you, Wilfried?" I asked, and as he nodded with a stiff expression, Ferdinand called out his name. "Don't worry. You've put a lot of hard work into this."

I gave Wilfried an encouraging pat on the back, inspiring him to step up onto the stage and toward the center. Once he was seated, his music teacher brought him his harspiel. Wilfried took the instrument, readied it, and then began. The fact that he could play so well when it really counted and was able to stay calm despite all the judgmental eyes was probably a sign that Sylvester's blood ran through his veins; he was regally playing the harspiel amid a massive crowd, the very image of an archduke's son.

I glanced to the side and saw Florencia watching Wilfried with a smile, tears forming in her eyes. Her gaze was so full of dazzling motherly love that I couldn't help but remember my own mom, and a pang of jealousy shot through my heart.

Wilfried stumbled a few times, but ultimately kept his cool and finished the song without issue. When he was done, he stepped down from the stage with the satisfied smile of a job well done.

"Rozemyne," Ferdinand announced.

Just as the other kids had, I went to the center of the stage and sat down. From there, it was impossible not to see the huge crowd of nobles lined up in the assembly hall; I had heard that there were a total of eight hundred nobles across Ehrenfest, but it honestly looked like there were a lot more.

I looked around the hall and made eye contact with Elvira and Eckhart in the front row. They were both giving me calm smiles, showing their complete confidence in me. Justus was also there, positioned right beside Eckhart. It was actually Damuel and Brigitte who looked nervous, while Cornelius and Angelica were looking at me with anticipation in their eyes. Rihyarda gave me a smile and a small nod to help me relax.

While I was looking around the hall, Sylvester began explaining to the nobles the circumstances behind my adoption, going on to tell an even more exaggerated account of what had happened during my baptism to fuel the saint legend even further.

Stop it! Don't hype them up! I exclaimed on the inside, all the while maintaining the calm smile of a noble. His embarrassing introduction ended just before the strange looks from the audience made me lose my composure, and Rosina walked up onto the stage with my harspiel.

"With your talents, you will do just fine, Lady Rozemyne," Rosina said with an encouraging smile. "And don't forget to smile and thank the gods," she added in a whisper, before turning around and returning to her position.

As instructed, I forced a smile onto my face while readying my harspiel.

"Now then," Ferdinand announced, "pray to the gods and offer

them a song.”

Since I would be offering a song to the god associated with the season I was born in, I would be playing for Leidenschaft the God of Fire. It was a song that I was very familiar with and used to playing, but the small prank I had played on Ferdinand was backfiring big time.

...I’ve really dug my own grave here. The song he made me practice for this is the anime song I had him arrange! Forgive me, O mighty Leidenschaft! I’ll put as much heart into this as I can!

While apologizing silently, I began playing with all my heart so as to not disrespect the gods, pouring my absolute everything into the singing. But as the song went on, I could feel my mana being sucked into my ring, just as it would be when I said a prayer for a blessing.

Wh-What’s going on?!



The mana swelled as I continued to sing, quickly turning into a full-on blessing. I hurriedly stopped its flow, but it was too late; a blue light shot out of my ring, turning into a blessing above the stage before raining down upon the assembly hall.

Those in the audience all looked my way, wearing expressions of shock, awe, and confusion. I glanced over at Ferdinand for help, and saw that he was rubbing his temples with his eyes tightly shut. Judging by the look on his face, I had just done something that I really shouldn't have.

I wasn't sure whether it would be okay for me to stop playing the song midway through, so I decided to continue. But when I was done, I received barely any applause. Most of the crowd seemed uncertain about how to react at all, and the only ones clapping were those who knew me personally.

AAAH! I'm sorry for making this so awkward! I didn't mean to!

I handed my harspiel to Rosina, then slowly stood up as Ferdinand came striding over. I looked up at him, wondering what he was going to do, only for him to pick me up and hold me high into the air.

"Behold, the Saint of Ehrenfest! May she be blessed for the wealth and glory she brings to our home!" he declared, and at once, the nobles all held their schtappes into the air. The light of blessings swelled above them, and I could see many people in the audience nodding to themselves.

"So she was a saint after all," I heard one person say.

Gaaah! Ferdinand exploited this to spread the legend of me being a saint even quicker!

As I stifled a gasp, Ferdinand ordered me to smile and wave under his breath. I did as he said, forcing the elegant smile that I had been trained to give and waving elegantly, which this time earned me deafening applause.

Ferdinand carried me down from the stage and strode out of the assembly hall, all while I continued to smile and wave. He was walking quickly with long strides, and only once we were in a side room did he finally set me down.

"Rozemyne," he said, picking out the sound-blocking magic tool

from the various tools clinking about on his belt and pushing it into my hands.

I gripped onto it, and once it was activated, we both let out simultaneous heavy sighs of exhaustion. Then, Ferdinand glared at me.

“Rozemyne, explain that blessing,” he demanded.

“I have no idea what happened,” I replied. “My song turned into a blessing on its own.” If anything, I wanted *him* to explain to *me* what had just happened.

Upon hearing my answer, Ferdinand frowned and crossed his arms in thought. “But that never happened when you were practicing, correct? Why would your song turn into a blessing now, of all times?”

“Well, I never actually pray while practicing...” I said, quietly going on to add, “During practice I’m always so focused on moving my fingers and keeping up with the notes that I don’t actually pray.”

Ferdinand started lightly tapping a finger against his temple. “So you believe this happened because you were praying sincerely?”

“Yes. It felt like my ring was sucking up my mana on its own, and while I stopped the flow as soon as I realized, it was a little too late. I think I should play without wearing the ring in the future,” I said. The mana had been sucked out of me because I had the ring on, so taking it off would, in theory, solve everything.

However, Ferdinand shook his head at my suggestion. “It would be unthinkable for a baptized noble to not wear a magic ring. You have two choices: hone your mind such that the mana does not leak out at all, or accept your fate and play the role of a saint.”

“Consciously stopping the mana would be pretty hard; it usually gets sucked out of me so quickly that I don’t even realize what’s happening until it’s too late. And anyway... do we even need to keep up with the saint stuff anymore? I thought that was just to make my adoption go more smoothly,” I said with a pout.

Ferdinand thought for a second, then gave me a quiet look. “It will be useful to have an explanation as to why you are so abnormal. Nobody will ostracize a saint with such an abundance of mana who serves the duchy so well,” he said with lowered eyes, indirectly

implying that unless I proved useful to the duchy, my large amount of mana would most likely lead to me being ostracized or vilified.

The bitter pain evident on his expression left me unable to do anything but bite my lip.

A knock came on the door, and Rihyarda entered soon after. “The assembly hall is buzzing with discussion about the saint. Nobody was in the mood for the Gifting Ceremony, so we’ve moved straight onto lunch for now. Ferdinand, my boy, get changed as soon as you can.”

At that, Rihyarda took me to the dining hall, praising me for a job well done along the way. She even went so far as to casually mention that she had known I was a very special girl after witnessing my baptism ceremony, the Starbind Ceremony, and my involvement in Wilfried’s education.

“There are not many nobles who know you well, milady, so the majority were shocked at your blessing. But we who know you were all unsurprised. You have established yourself as a worthy member of the archduke’s family, so there is no need for you to feel worried about showing off your vast quantity of mana,” Rihyarda said to comfort me.

Her words eased the burden on my shoulders, and I let out a quiet sigh.

We returned to the assembly hall once lunch was over, where the Gifting Ceremony would be performed. It was a simple event during which capes and brooches were given to new students of the Royal Academy. There were fourteen kids that this applied to, which was much larger than my future class of eight.

Once there, we met up with Rosina, who had been eating lunch elsewhere. She was smiling like always, but I couldn’t help but feel that she seemed a little off.

“Did something happen, Rosina?” I asked.

The worry on her face appeared to deepen. “Lady Rozemyne, I was just... I was just spoken to by Lady Christine,” she said.

I blinked in surprise. Christine was the artistic shrine maiden who Rosina had served before me. She had treated Rosina as a friend and provided her a comfortable life immersed in art, which caused

problems with my other attendants when I first brought her into my chambers. For that reason, seeing Rosina so anxious after meeting Christine again filled me with increasing worry.

“Did she say something to you? Something hurtful?” I asked, but Rosina slowly shook her head.

“No. Rather, it seems that she intended to come and retrieve me in the future.”

“...What?” I replied, blinking again in surprise.

Rosina repeated herself, this time failing to fully hide her joy amid the worry. “She said that she had planned to retrieve me after graduating from the Royal Academy and acquiring more freedom. Never did she think that I would have become your personal musician, Lady Rozemyne.”

Her blue eyes wavered with delight, and her pleased expression made my heart twist with worry. Would she feel more fulfilled serving a master dedicated to the arts, just like her?

“...Rosina, do you wish to return to serving Christine?” I asked, my heart pounding in my chest. If she said that she did, then maybe it would be best for me to let her do so.

I looked up at Rosina with my hands gripped in front of my chest, and after blinking a few times, Rosina shook her head. “I am satisfied with my current life, and thus have no intention of returning to her service. However, up until this point, I had thought that she abandoned me in the temple. Knowing that she never forgot about me has brought much peace to my heart.”

“I see. I’m glad.”

I really was glad that her wounded heart had been healed, and that she wasn’t planning to leave me.

As I sighed in relief, Rosina gave a small smile and looked at me with a troubled expression. “You do not need to worry, Lady Rozemyne. I am your personal musician, now and forever,” she said, having clearly figured out that I was worried about her leaving.

I was a bit embarrassed knowing that she had noticed I was a little jealous of Christine, so I averted my eyes and looked for the stage.

“The Gifting Ceremony shall now begin,” a scholar announced.

“All new students of the Royal Academy, step forward!”

The voice gave me a good idea of where the stage was, but I couldn’t actually see it; the guard knights and attendants around me—not to mention Ferdinand and Elvira—were positioned in a way that prevented others from approaching me, which simultaneously blocked my view of the stage. As I peered through the cracks between their clothes to try and watch the ceremony, I wondered whether anyone would be willing to let me sit on their shoulders.

I caught glimpses of Sylvester walking across the stage, giving each student a cape and brooch one by one and encouraging them to study hard. Once he was done, the scholar announced the individual days that they would be leaving for the Royal Academy. Cornelius and Angelica murmured their respective dates under their breath. Each class apparently went at a different time, so they weren’t going on the same day.

“Ferdinand, where is the Royal Academy?” I asked.

“In the Sovereignty—the region at the center of the country that is ruled directly by the king. You may consider the Sovereignty to be similar to Ehrenfest’s Central District, but for the entirety of the country. The students live there during the winter and are transported via a magic circle, designed such that it cannot move large groups of people at once. This is why each class travels separately.”

Once the Gifting Ceremony was over, conversations could be heard all throughout the hall. Nobles began trading information and the like, transforming the ceremony into a social gathering. I wasn’t sure whether I should continue acting as I had been, but before I could even ask, Ferdinand rested a hand on my shoulder.

“Rozemyne, you are looking quite unwell,” he said.

“Oh my, this isn’t good at all. I believe it is time for her to rest,” Elvira agreed, both her and Ferdinand peering closely at my face. I personally felt fine, but I could tell that they were indirectly ordering me to leave before I caused any more problems, so I left the hall with Rihyarda and my guards.

As we went, I could hear a few whispering voices from among the crowd.

“That girl truly does have the mana of a saint,” one woman said. “I would love to get to know her better.”

“My my, it takes more than an excess of mana to be a saint,” replied another.

“That saint is undoubtedly my niece,” began one more.

...Ngh. These piercing gazes are actually starting to hurt.

The nobles weren’t blatantly staring at me, but they were all glancing in my general direction, paying far more attention to me than they had when I first entered. Resisting the urge to look down at my feet or even flee the room entirely, I walked like a noble, with my head held high.

A Class for Kids

During the winter, adults prioritized their social lives above all else. Giebes who owned land near the border brought valuable information about neighboring duchies, while the archduke and his retainers had stories and rumors from the Sovereignty, which they had visited during the Archduke Conference.

Nobles would gather information from the connections they had formed in the Royal Academy, giebes would discuss their harvests and feybeast damages with other giebes, and women would attend all sorts of gatherings, during which rumors would fly. All in all, there was a lot for the adults to do.

In the midst of all that, the baptized kids were gathered together in what was known as the playroom, despite the fact that not much actual playing was ever done there. Since they would be attending the Royal Academy together in the future, this was considered a good opportunity for them to spend time with those who would be their future classmates, juniors, and seniors.

Children would select their ideal academy course based on information from their siblings, then form cliques with the other kids planning to take the same course to get a head start with diplomacy. By cutting their teeth here, they could start learning the ways of society before the time came when they had to participate in adult socializing. They were also expected to fully understand who was above and below them in status, as well as how to behave like a proper noble.

“You will be joining them this year, Lord Wilfried and Lady Rozemyne,” Rihyarda said after breakfast as she explained everything that we would need to do. “The playroom is a place to select and raise your future retainers. Since those who spend time together in the Royal Academy usually come to trust one another and develop feelings of companionship, retainers tend to be selected

from your own age group. Parents will wage what is nothing short of political warfare behind the scenes to secure those retainer seats, so milady, please do not ever forget that the children you are talking to are very much in the shadows of their parents," she added, a severe expression on her face.

I responded with a nod, then got into my highbeast and headed to the room where the kids were to gather. I had my four guard knights with me today; the current students waiting to leave for the Royal Academy were going to be gathered in the same playroom, which meant that we would need a lot of guards with us until they had gone.

On the way to the main building's playroom, we came across a great number of wagons packed with luggage—the belongings of all those who were going to the Royal Academy. I could also see people wearing capes and brooches heading in and out of various buildings.

"All this stuff is being moved around because the oldest students are leaving today, right?" I asked.

"The oldest students are the first ones to leave every year, while the new students leave last," Rihyarda explained.

"Who are the people without capes and brooches?"

"Their retainers. Students may bring one attendant with them to the Royal Academy."

Just as Rihyarda said, students headed to the Royal Academy with an attendant from their home. I would have thought they would need to bring more people than that, but students could apparently hire those taking the attendant course to do attendant work, those taking the knight course to be guard knights, and those taking the scholar course to complete other miscellaneous work. That was why baptized children were so eager to hear about the Royal Academy; the information they received would prove important when it came time for them to decide which course they would choose for themselves.

As we continued heading to the playroom, those leaving for the Royal Academy did double and then triple takes at my Pandabus, but I was so used to the shocked expressions that I marched on without so much as thinking about them. My retainers were used to it

as well, and so also continued like it was nothing.

“Lady Rozemyne, this is the playroom, where children make social connections over the winter. It will most likely be quite cramped until the students have left for the Royal Academy, but I am sure you will manage,” Rihyarda said as she waited for me to put away Lessy. And once I had, she opened the door.

In an instant, everyone who had been casually chatting fell silent, turned our way, and then hurriedly knelt.

Rihyarda beckoned me to follow as she headed to a seat at the far end of the room, treating everyone’s silent kneeling as a matter of course. I sat in the chair once we reached it, and while Rihyarda moved to prepare tea, my guard knights surrounded me in a half-circle.

After that, it was a storm of greetings. The kids lined up and began introducing themselves to me one by one.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I am Hartmut, son of Leberecht. Lady Rozemyne, may I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe?”

“You may.”

“O Ewigeliebe, God of Life, may this new meeting be blessed.”

They were introducing themselves to me in such quick succession that there was zero chance of me remembering every one of their names. The best I could do was listen out for the names of their parents, and then focus on remembering the kids who were related to those marked as needing caution on the former High Bishop’s secret list.

I did my best. Bezewanst’s list came in handy too.

Bit by bit, the line in front of me started to shorten. And when Wilfried arrived, one formed in front of him as well. The kids who had greeted us couldn’t properly speak to us until everyone in these lines had finished their introductions, so they walked off and started asking the Royal Academy students questions. I could see that the students were more than willing to answer, having once been on the asking side themselves.

I was enjoying listening in and hearing their questions. “Why did

you choose that course?" "What were the lectures like?" "What were the professors like?" And so on.

...I know that I've been told not to just casually speak to them, but I want to join those discussions, too.

Once everyone had greeted me, I looked around the room. The only ones near me now were my guard knights.

"Damuel, why did you decide to become a knight?" I asked.

"My older brother is a scholar, so I thought I would be more useful as a knight," he replied.

It made sense that working in different fields would result in more information being collected for the family to use. And since Damuel wasn't as skilled as his older brother at scholar work, there wasn't any particular need for him to walk down the same path.

"What about you, Brigitte?"

"I've been athletic ever since I was a child, and Illgner is teeming with small feybeasts thanks to its mountains and trees, so learning to defeat them earned me the gratitude of all those around me," she explained. Her eagerness to take the lead and fight off any harmful feybeasts for the sake of her home was beyond heroic and, in all honesty, just plain cool.

I gave her an understanding nod, thinking back to how intensely she had fought on the Night of Schutzaria. And with that, I looked Cornelius's way. "Cornelius, why did you decide to be a knight?"

"Father and our brothers are knights, so I never once considered becoming an attendant or scholar," he replied.

That made sense to me. Family tradition carried a lot of influence, so much so that Karstedt had even admitted he had no idea what to do with a daughter like me, since he had spent all his time thinking about training his sons for combat. There was no doubt in my mind that he had been merciless when training them to be knights.

Finally, I looked at Angelica. She was the one I wanted to hear about most. A lithe girl with a small frame, she was the complete opposite of Brigitte. Her light-blue hair and deep-blue eyes gave her a much more fairy-like impression, and she looked more like an attendant than a knight.

I knew that she had a speed-based fighting style due to the work

she had done thus far, and given that she was being trusted to guard the archduke's daughter, I knew that she was strong enough to more than hold her own in a fight. But up until this point, I had never gotten the opportunity to ask why she personally wanted to be a knight.

"Angelica, why did you decide to become a knight?" I asked.

"Because I didn't want to study," she replied on the spot. And upon seeing me blink in surprise, she elaborated with an utterly serious look on her face. "Knights don't have to study as much as those in other jobs."

"I-I see."

"I'm glad that you like to study a lot, Lady Rozemyne. The commander said that the mark of a good master-servant pairing is them making up for each other's weaknesses," she continued, which to me sounded entirely like, "Please use your head so that I don't have to."

I had already guessed that she didn't like studying, since she didn't particularly enjoy reading books, but the thought had never crossed my mind that she decided to become a knight specifically to avoid it. You really could never judge a book by its cover.

"I see you all have your own reasonings. I personally want to be a scholar. And then, a librarian who manages the castle's book room," I announced.

Since I already knew that librarians were selected from a pool of scholars, my plan was to go to the Royal Academy, become a scholar, and then ultimately become a librarian. I was prepared to do whatever it took to make that happen, but sadly, my fantasies of spending all my time in the book room were shattered when Brigitte began to uncomfortably speak.

"Lady Rozemyne, it is law that you shall be attending the archduke candidate course. You are the archduke's daughter, and so this cannot be changed."

"Wha...? But I'm adopted. I won't become the archduke."

"All children of the archduke become archduke candidates. I would imagine that is why you were adopted in the first place," she said.

The reality was that I had been adopted because I needed

enough status to defy Bezewanst (who was backed by Sylvester's mother) and nobles from other duchies, but as far as the public was concerned, Sylvester the archduke had adopted me so that my immense mana could be used for the greater good of the duchy. It was set in stone that my mana would be used for Ehrenfest's sake, and while that was fine with me, I hadn't realized that it meant I would be studying to become an archduke in the Royal Academy at the cost of not becoming a scholar or librarian. My intention had been to support Wilfried once he became archduke, all the while modifying the temple's book room to my liking or potentially serving as the castle's librarian.

"Um... If I can't be a scholar, does that mean I can't be a librarian either?" I asked.

"That is... a good question. I have never heard of an archduke's child becoming a librarian before," Brigitte said, faltering slightly. Daughters of the archduke were expected to support the future archduke and marry nobles from other duchies to strengthen political bonds; they were not expected to stay at home forever and work as librarians.

...This can't be happening! I cried silently. And as complete and utter despair overwhelmed me, my vision went black, and my consciousness faded away.

"Lady Rozemyne?! Stay strong!"

When I awoke, Ferdinand was there. He was looking down at me with his brow deeply furrowed, wearing a thoroughly displeased look.

"Ferdinand! Am I not allowed to become a librarian?!" I cried, leaping out of the bed I was in with teary eyes.

He let out a heavy sigh, not even trying to hide how annoyed he was. "I wondered what had happened when Rihyarda came barging into my meeting with a deathly look on her face, but I see you have worried her over nothing."

"This isn't nothing! It's one of the most important things in my life! Ferdinand, will I not be allowed to become a librarian? That was the very reason I started making books myself—so that I could work in a place filled with books, new and old alike. If you say I'm not allowed

to be a librarian after all that, I'll... I'll...” I trailed off, crying too hard to continue.

Ferdinand looked down at me calmly, tapping a finger against his temple. “Calm down, Rozemyne. It shall be difficult, but it is not entirely impossible for you to become a scholar.”

“Really?!” I exclaimed, looking up at my savior Ferdinand as I immediately clung to the thread of hope he had just offered me.

His lips curled into a thin smile. “You need only take scholar classes alongside all of your archduke candidate classes.”

My jaw dropped. He was essentially telling me to major in two subjects at once, doing twice the work that everyone else would be doing.

“Is that even possible?” I asked.

“There are precedents. It should be within reason for you.”

“‘Precedents'...? Are you talking about yourself, Ferdinand?” He was the only person I knew who would do something as strenuous as taking the scholar course on top of the archduke candidate one. And sure enough, he nodded, as though it was nothing special at all.

“Indeed. I was an archduke candidate as well. I took the course alongside the scholar and knight courses.”

...Just what kind of superhuman is he?!

I had vastly underestimated just how incredible it was that Ferdinand could simultaneously manage scholar work, his responsibilities in the Knight's Order, and assisting the archduke. I cradled my spinning head.

“The majority of students stay in the Royal Academy only during the winter, but if you request it, you are allowed to stay during other seasons as well. I remained in the Academy for the entire year, leaving only when summoned,” he explained.

The teleportation circle meant he could immediately return when needed, and he found the Royal Academy a more comfortable place to be than the castle thanks to the lack of constant criticism from all sides. He used all his free time to its fullest, ultimately conquering all three courses at once.

“Don't expect me to have your inhuman talents, Ferdinand! I'm just a normal, innocent girl.”

“That’s a shame, then. An ordinary person will not be equipped to serve as a librarian. If you are not willing to put in the work, then it is best you give up sooner rather than later,” Ferdinand said bluntly, waving a hand as if signaling that the discussion was over.

But letting this conversation end here meant that my road to becoming a librarian would be closed off forever, and that was something I needed to avoid no matter what. I could never give up on being a librarian, especially before even getting a chance to try it.

I clenched my fists in determination and looked up at Ferdinand. He immediately grinned, as though he had known from the start that I would never give up so easily.

“I will never give up, no matter what,” I declared. “Forget all that about me being a normal girl. I’m going to become the weirdest, strangest girl who ever lived!”

“Hold it. You are already bizarre beyond words. That is the wrong direction to focus your motivation,” he said, extending his hand and waving it in front of my eyes as if to seal away my brimming determination. He then went on to inform me what my path would entail, his voice steeped in exhaustion.

“We shall discuss which classes are best for you to take when the time comes for you to attend the Royal Academy, so take care not to get ahead of yourself and charge forward on your own,” Ferdinand continued. “In your case, you must focus on making your jureve and fixing your weak body before anything else. As you are now, you will barely be able to handle the archduke candidate classes, let alone the scholar course as well.”

“...That’s true.”

In summary, he was telling me to think about Royal Academy stuff when the time came, rather than right now. That was fine with me, as long as the road to becoming a librarian was still open to me. I could relax and put it off until later.

“You are planning to spread karuta and picture books among the children to help fund the printing industry, are you not? Put aside the scholar course for now and focus on that.”

“Okay. I will.”

The day after all the students had left for the Academy—Angelica

and Cornelius included—I headed to the playroom with a deck of karuta, brimming with energy now that I knew hope wasn't dead after all.

"Now that all the students have headed to the Royal Academy, it is this group who will be spending the winter together," I said. "I have brought toys known as karuta here so that we can all play and get to know each other."

At that, I divided the kids by year—from ages seven to nine—and started a karuta tournament. Both Wilfried and I mingled with the nine-year-olds at the start, since we were already experienced, and it was needless to say that we absolutely dominated. Wilfried rejoiced at the victory, but the looks on everyone's faces made it clear they were going easy on us. I was annoyed, but I needed to put on a calm smile and be diplomatic here.

"We shall have the advantage for some time since we already have some experience, but you will need to win at least once by the end of winter," I said. "Otherwise, we could never consider trusting you to be our retainers. Isn't that right, Wilfried?"

Wilfried looked confused, but all of the other kids immediately tensed up. Their parents had no doubt told them to get close to us with the goal of eventually becoming our retainers—that is, our attendants and knights—but I had no intention of simply having them try to butter us up all winter. Rather, I would be training them.

"He and I are striving to be worthy lords, but we need only the most skilled of retainers," I continued.

"Right. Exactly," Wilfried agreed.

Having sufficiently riled them up, we moved on to playing another game, but the difference in experience was still much too great for them to overcome. Once again, we crushed them. It was safe to say that Wilfried had gotten pretty good at the game, so much so that I might have lost to him had I not gone all out. He would probably be able to consistently beat me by next winter.

...I've got no issue finding the relevant picture cards, but I just don't have the arm strength to grab them fast enough.

"I look forward to playing with you all again," I announced. "Starting tomorrow, I shall offer sweets to the best player out of you

all.”

Sweets were usually brought to the playroom already, but those with the highest status ate first and passed their leftovers to the rank below them. This meant that the lower-status kids didn’t get to eat much in comparison. So now that these tasty sweets were essentially up for grabs, the kids were staring at the karuta even more intensely than before.

Since it was only the first day, we had just brought the karuta with us. But from the following day onward, we brought everything else that would be required for the kids’ curriculum.

After breakfast, we had training with the Knight’s Order. And while everyone was running laps, I practiced... walking. Eckhart was following close behind, watching me with eyes like a hawk to make sure I wasn’t about to collapse.

Come third bell, it was study time. We played karuta, read aloud from picture books, and had the kids read and write according to their skill levels. Wilfried now knew the entire alphabet, so his task was to write out the contents of a picture book on another sheet of paper. Such was the skill level of a seven-year-old archnoble, and the equivalent to how much eight-year-old mednobles and laynobles knew, so he was just barely keeping up as the archduke’s son.

Meanwhile, I was reading books from the book room, summarizing the content elsewhere, and starting to write out the text of my next picture book. It really was a blissful time.

As for math, on top of our regular lessons, we played card games involving addition like blackjack. Many of the children weren’t particularly good at math, so it was admittedly fun to see them frowning hard as they tried to play the game. The kids who showed they were good at math earned some sweets after the games.

Everyone then practiced harspiel at the same time. Some kids wouldn’t get better without talented teachers, so having them be educated by the musicians who served the archduke’s family (such as Rosina) was a surefire way to ensure some impressive growth.

I had been given permission from Florencia to boost the base stats of all the noble kids in the duchy over the winter, and the tutors were all being paid for, so they did their work without any complaints

whatsoever.

“I have never seen such an orderly playroom before,” said one attendant, going on to praise both Wilfried’s and my efforts with a smile. He apparently watched over the playroom each year, mentioning that it had previously been a place where archnoble children used their status to bully laynoble kids, forcing the attendants to step in and arbitrate when necessary.

“Now then—once you’ve all finished your writing, let us start reading picture books,” I said. Since I was dealing with kids who weren’t used to studying a lot, I made sure to mix up what we were doing on a regular basis. I roughly approximated this based on when Wilfried started to get bored.

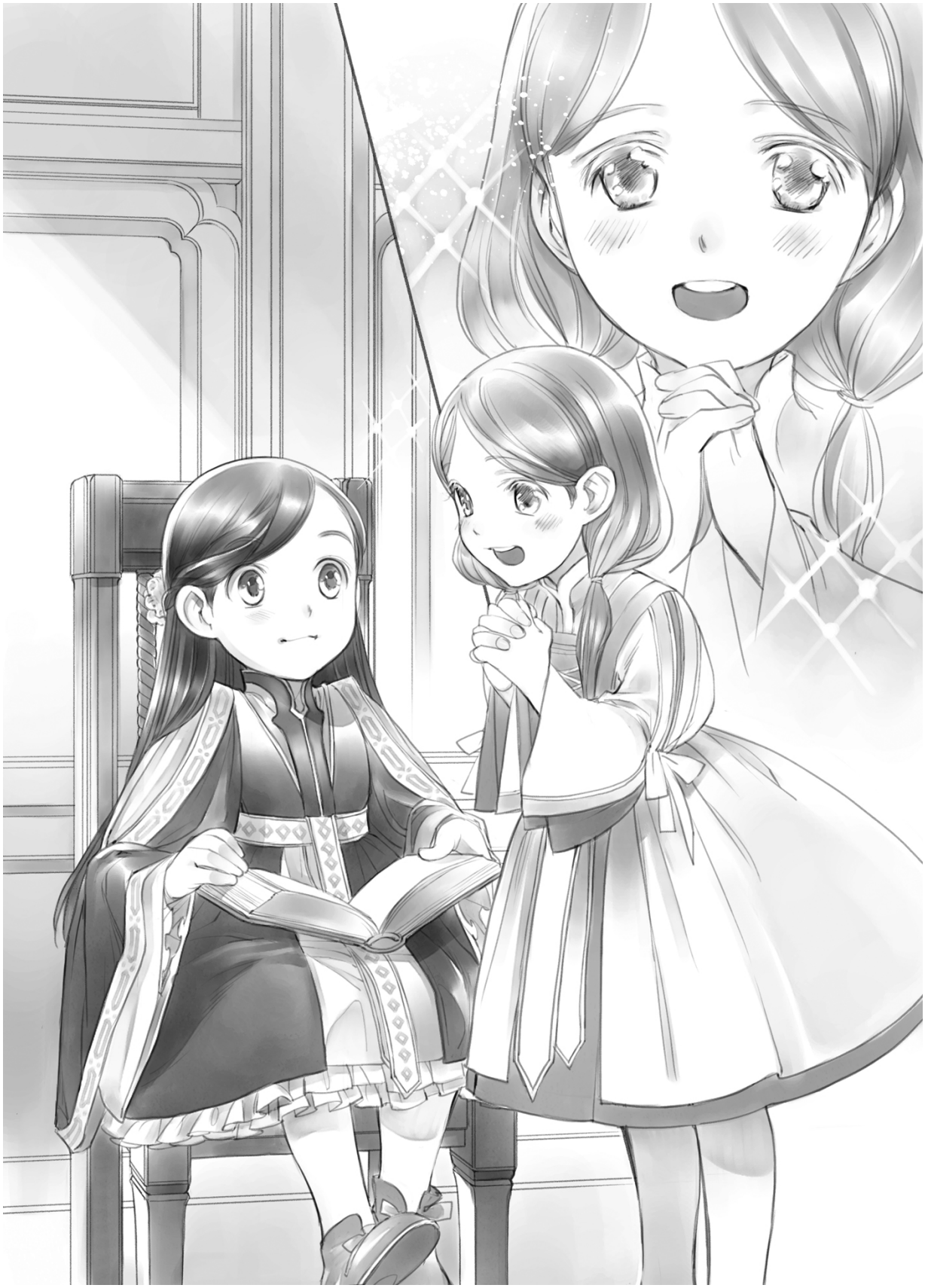
And so, Moritz began reading aloud to everyone from a picture book. The books had large illustrations and weren’t very text-heavy overall, so the kids all listened with shining eyes to the simplified tales of the gods.

Philine in particular looked awestruck, her eyes sparkling brighter than anybody else’s. She was a laynoble who had just been baptized this year, sporting honey-colored hair and grass-green eyes, and despite generally being very passive and quiet, she always sat up front and looked at the picture book intently when it was time to be read to. The way she willingly picked up books during her free time and read them with a smile made me like her quite a lot.

“Y’know, Philine, it was Rozemyne who made these picture books. Impressive, huh?” Wilfried said with his chest proudly puffed out, as though he had been the one to make them.

...Why are you *the one bragging?* I thought, my polite smile not faltering in the slightest.

Philine’s cheeks flushed, and she turned to me with innocent, glittering eyes. “Lady Rozemyne,” she said, clasping her hands in front of her chest and wiggling as if working up the courage to confess her love. Only once her resolve had steeled did she muster the courage to continue, her voice brimming with a mixture of hope and desperation. “I-I want to make picture books, too!”



“What kind of picture books would you like to make, Philine? Do you know any interesting stories?” I asked, more than ready to take under my wing any girl who loved making books.

Shyly placing her hands on her cheeks, Philine lowered her eyes. “I would like to preserve the stories my mother told me in a picture book.”

Her birth mother had apparently passed away, and the new woman whom her father was now married to didn’t know the same stories. Philine wanted to record the stories that her birth mother had told her so that she would never forget them, which reminded me of when I had desperately tried to make a book of the stories my own mom had told me. I had put that project to the side, since nobles wouldn’t understand them, but now I really wanted to make a short story collection to give to Tuuli and Kamil.

“In that case, would you tell me the stories? I know you cannot write on your own yet, but I can write them down for you,” I said.

And so I did. Philine told me the stories that her mother had told her, while I speedily wrote them all down on paper. Her winter homework would be to write copies of all the stories herself.

A Tea Party

Around the time that the kids were getting used to the playroom's schedule, the adults finished the bulk of their initial information gathering. This meant they would now begin to focus on socializing and expanding their friendships. The power balance within the duchy had been dramatically shifted by Sylvester's mother getting arrested, so everyone was looking for new connections, throwing themselves into strengthening their factions and securing their own safety.

"These are the individuals who requested a meeting today," Rihyarda said, bringing me letters to read. I had been doing so daily for the past few days. I glanced through all the requests, but those who wanted to meet Wilfried or me first needed permission from our head attendants and parents. The fact that I was being shown the letters at all was so that Rihyarda could tell me who was connected to whom, which factions to be aware of, and so on.

Since I was being passed off as Rozemary's daughter, it seemed that her family were the ones I needed to be most cautious of at the moment. They had apparently been going all around in winter society declaring that I was their niece. People were suspicious of these claims since their requests to meet me were being repeatedly declined, and Rihyarda had said that we couldn't be sure what methods they might use in the future to try and contact me.

"Is there anyone you would like to meet?" Rihyarda asked.

"I would like to accept Mother's tea party invitation. I have promised to give her a financial report on our earnings from the harspiel concert," I said.

A tea party attended by the faction Elvira was in would include Florencia, which would all but guarantee the permission of my attendance. And naturally, Rihyarda gave no protest over me spending time with my mother.

"Very well. I shall inform Lord Sylvester. Is there anyone else

among those you received letters from who you would like to meet?”

“...Hm. I would like to meet Henrik,” I said, holding up a letter that I had been a little curious about. It contained an apology for last year’s trombe incident, but also expressed his desire to meet me directly, if possible, to thank me for saving Damuel from greater punishment. “He is Damuel’s older brother, no? He said that he would appreciate a chance to apologize and thank me in person.”

I thought for a moment, then continued. “There is one other, too. I would like to meet Brigitte’s older brother. She has mentioned before that Illgner has quite an active lumber industry, so we might be able to work out some arrangements that aid the paper-making industry.”

It was possible that the trees growing in Illgner differed from those around Ehrenfest, and some would ideally be good for making paper with.

While listening to my eager explanation, Rihyarda plucked a letter from the pile and held it up. “Milady. If you meet with him, then you will need to meet with Angelica’s family as well. Otherwise you will be meeting the families of all your guard knights except her.”

I had personal reasons for meeting Elvira, Henrik, and Brigitte’s older brother, but from an outsider perspective, it would appear as though I was meeting the families of all my guard knights. According to Rihyarda, exclusively not meeting with Angelica’s would risk giving birth to rumors that I did not trust her or she had earned my displeasure.

“...In that case, I will meet with Angelica’s family as well,” I said. “It’s just that I know less about her than I do the others, so I think we might need to postpone it for just a bit.”

I couldn’t meet her family until I knew more about them, and Rihyarda nodded in agreement with this sentiment.

“Actually, Rihyarda—will I not need to meet with the families of my attendants, too?”

“The only person in my family who would be eager to meet you is Justus, so no. He is a strange man who cares only for gathering the most bizarre and pointless things,” she said, wrinkling up her nose.

As his mother, it seemed that Rihyarda viewed Justus as a problem child due to his lust for new information and materials. But

in any case, she determined that there would be no particular reason for me to meet the family of my other attendants either, so we settled on just meeting with the guard knights' families.

Naturally, the first thing I was given permission for was Elvira's tea party. But since it was a large-scale tea party with everyone in her faction being invited, it wouldn't be taking place until a long time from now.

A few days later, I was given permission to meet with the families of all my guard knights. The dates were put in order, with Damuel's older brother Henrik being the first person I was due to see. And so, I headed to the main building of the castle with Rihyarda, Damuel, and Brigitte.

Ever since that was decided, Damuel had repeatedly mentioned that the thought of attending a meeting with both myself and his older brother was stressing him out, much like a student attending a parent-teacher conference, but it was necessary that he accompany us; Cornelius and Angelica were both at the Royal Academy, leaving him and Brigitte as my only guards.

Upon entering the room where I was due to meet Henrik, I saw that he was already there kneeling. "Thank you for waiting," I said.

"I am Henrik, Damuel's older brother. Lady Rozemyne, may I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe?"

"You may."

Only once we had finished our greetings did Henrik raise his head. He looked like a calm, honest man of gentle manners, which was exactly what I would expect from a scholar. Aside from his eyes and hair being a darker brown than Damuel's, the two siblings looked just alike in every way.

My assumption had been that he requested this meeting with the goal of establishing a tighter political bond with me, but that ended up not being the case at all. Instead, he truly did focus on apologizing for Damuel's mistakes during the trombe extermination and thanking me for lessening his punishment. It had been highly likely that Damuel would receive the same punishment as Shikza

due to his status, and as a laynoble, Henrik surely would have been executed alongside him.

“I am deeply grateful that you would accept my foolish little brother as your guard knight despite the great burden he placed on you, Lady Rozemyne,” Henrik said.

The fact that he had been punished at all would normally be a permanent stain on his reputation, but since I, as the victim, had stood up for him, the general impression of the event ended up being that he had just gotten wrapped up in Shikza’s wrongdoings. And on top of that, it would usually be unthinkable for a laynoble like Damuel to be assigned to guard a member of the archduke’s family.

“I wished to express just how grateful I am as his brother,” Henrik said, visibly relieved. My meeting with him ended quickly, with his final words being that he prayed my good relationship with Damuel would continue.

“He certainly cares a lot about you, doesn’t he?” I said to Damuel, who simply looked away like a student embarrassed by a teacher talking about their parents.

Two days after my meeting with Henrik, it was time to meet Brigitte’s brother, Viscount Illgner. After entering the room and finishing our lengthy greetings, I cut straight to the point.

“I would like to discuss lumber with you, Giebe Illgner.”

Viscount Illgner had red hair, green eyes, and facial features that closely resembled his sister’s. He seemed to be in his early twenties, and my first impression was that he looked like Brigitte, but just a little bit cooler. There was no doubt in my mind that he could put on a perfect noble facade, since he needed to survive as a land-ruling giebe, but he did have something of a country vibe to him.

“I heard from Brigitte that you have an active lumber industry, but what kind of trees do you harvest there? What kinds do you grow that cannot be found here?”

Viscount Illgner blinked in surprise, but then quickly recovered. “You are interested in trees, Lady Rozemyne?” he asked, offering a small smile. It was the kind of proud look that Brigitte had given when she spoke of her hometown—a sense of pride that one had in

the land they ruled.

“Certainly. The industry I have established involves the creation of paper from trees, so I am always thinking about experimenting with the wood from new trees to make even better paper than before,” I replied. “I would especially like to experiment with rare feyplants, if any are available.”

“Paper made from trees, you say? That is... quite an interesting concept. We certainly do have species of trees not located around the city of Ehrenfest. I am not sure whether they will prove useful, but we also have unique feyplants,” Viscount Illgner said, going on to list off various names, only a few of which I recognized.

The ones I did recognize were sturdy kinds of wood used for furniture and construction, and it seemed that the logs cut in Illgner’s forests were brought to Ehrenfest by boat via a river.

“I don’t recognize many of those species; it seems that you have many types of wood available that are not found in this region. I would like to visit Illgner to have a look at these trees,” I said.

“Milady, you mustn’t make such promises so casually,” Rihyarda interrupted with a stern look. We were in an official meeting here, so I wouldn’t be able to complain if anything I said was taken as a government promise.

“...I shall take care, Rihyarda, but I certainly thought before making that promise. It doesn’t have to be soon, but I absolutely intend to visit a region with a prosperous lumber industry one day.”

“Please select Illgner for that honor when the time comes,” Viscount Illgner said. “We shall welcome you with open arms.”

I was busy enough that there was a chance the visit would not happen until years from now, but I wanted to improve the paper we were making someday, so the meeting ended with a promise for me to visit Illgner at some point in the future.

“I am grateful beyond words that you would expend your precious time meeting with me today, Lady Rozemyne.”

“I could say the same. It was a pleasure speaking to you, Giebe Illg—” I began, only to be interrupted as we were leaving the room.

“Aah! If it isn’t Lady Rozemyne!” came a voice that I didn’t recognize. It seemed they had just been coincidentally walking down

the hall, but upon seeing me, they walked right over. “I heard that you were of poor health, but it seems you have recovered entirely! That is wonderful, but I assure you, there are many nobles you should be building relationships with before dealing with country bumpkins like this.”

I didn’t know who they were, but they were of a higher status than Viscount Illgner. Or so I concluded when the latter took a few steps back so as to not interrupt us.

“I’ve thought this ever since I first saw you on stage, Lady Rozemyne, but you truly do resemble my little sister Rozemary,” the man continued.

Oh, I see. This is one of the annoying family members of my pretend birth mother.

I placed a troubled hand on my cheek and looked toward Rihyarda without replying to the noble, who had addressed me without introducing himself or giving a proper noble greeting.

Rihyarda immediately stepped forward. “Cease this insolence at once.”

“Lady Rihyarda. You call me insolent, but I am Lady Rozemyne’s uncle,” the man said. He then looked my way with greedy, hopeful eyes. “Would you please say a word in defense of your uncle, my dear?”

But unfortunately for him, the only thing I viewed him as was an annoying obstacle to overcome. Not to mention that Ferdinand had been quite strict about me not directly speaking to nobles I didn’t recognize and hadn’t been previously introduced to.

“I quite enjoyed our time together today, Giebe Illgner. I look forward to meeting you again,” I said to the bowing viscount, completely ignoring the unfamiliar noble before turning around. Viscount Illgner wouldn’t be able to leave the hallway until those of a higher status had gone, and while I hadn’t given the most graceful farewell, it would at least allow him to go.

“Lady Rozemyne!” the noble exclaimed as Viscount Illgner walked away and I got into my Pandabus.

But I had no intention of dealing with him. I had been warned that Rozemary’s family were troublemakers like Bezewanst, so in most

cases, I would simply say that I didn't know anything about my birth mother, and that Elvira was my true mother. Though in this case, the noble had spoken to me without a greeting or an introduction, so I wasn't even going to say that much to him.

"...Rihyarda, I mustn't directly speak to nobles whom I do not know, is that correct?"

"That's exactly right, milady. You did well to remember that," Rihyarda said with a smile, sending the noble packing as I began heading back to my room.

We went ahead and had Ottilie report what had happened to Sylvester, Ferdinand, and Karstedt, and the result was all three of them agreeing that I didn't have to deal with the noble. My birth mother's name hadn't been publicly announced at my baptism nor my winter debut, so all I needed to do was maintain the status quo without confirming or denying anything.

I was a little worried whether it would be okay to just leave things as they were, but since all Rozemary's family was doing was sending me letters every day requesting meetings, there wasn't much else to do but ignore them.

Next arrived the day I was scheduled to meet Angelica's family. I entered the meeting room to find a man and woman already kneeling in wait, who I could guess were her parents. That much was normal, but it was when I sat down that things took a strange turn.

"We express our sincerest apologies for what has occurred!" they both exclaimed at once.

"What...?" I replied, blinking in surprise at their sudden apology. I was completely lost.

Rihyarda strode forward as I sat there in a daze. "What exactly are you apologizing for?"

"Erm... Did Angelica not commit some unforgivable mistake?" the man asked. "We couldn't think of any other reason why Lady Rozemyne would summon us for a meeting."

Wow.

From my perspective, I was only meeting with them so they wouldn't feel excluded, but to Angelica's parents, this was a sign that

their daughter must have committed some terrible mistake that would get her entire family punished.

“We were surprised enough when Angelica told us that she wanted to become a knight before entering the Royal Academy, but when we heard that she had been assigned to guard the archduke’s adopted daughter, our vision practically went black,” the man continued. “That daughter of ours could never guard an honorable lady of such high status. We were certain that she would commit a fatal blunder sooner or later, and so when we received this summons, we just assumed it had finally happened.”

Despite being born into a family that was known for producing attendants, Angelica hated studying, and while she would always do as she was told, she never acted unless explicitly instructed to. In other words, she was hardly suited to being an attendant. It seemed that her parents had spent their days in fear of what blunder she would make after being assigned to guard me.

“I heard from Angelica herself that she does not enjoy studying, but it is not like she disobeys orders, and she expresses her desire to be a good servant to me,” I said to console them. Her actual words had been closer to saying that I should do her thinking for her, but her parents were high-strung enough that I decided it would be better not to mention that.

The meeting ended quickly, with me assuring them that Angelica was working hard.

Yet more days passed after meeting Angelica’s parents, and finally, it was time for me to give a report on the harspiel concert. Since men were not allowed at women’s tea parties, only Brigitte was accompanying me today, with Damuel getting the day off. My only attendants were Rihyarda and Ottilie, the latter of whom was carrying a box containing financial reports which would be passed out to everyone in attendance.

I had printed out these reports specifically for this tea party, ultimately going through many failed versions as Ferdinand shot them down one by one. This had proven a little costly but overall not too expensive, since I was using sheets of paper that were only half

as big as usual and had only made enough copies for the faction that Elvira belonged to. It was a small investment to encourage them to continue donating to and supporting the printing industry.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” I began. “I will now report to you all where your funding has gone. Please examine the paper that has been distributed to you; it shows how much money was earned at Ferdinand’s concert, as well as where these earnings went. Thanks to all of your assistance, the children of the orphanage have a place to work, and now have the resources to survive the winter.”

But nobody seemed particularly interested in the report. They were surprised by how much we had earned in total, but it was so rare for people to say how they spent their donations that my detailed report mostly just raised a few eyebrows.

As it turned out, they had gathered here hoping that there would be new illustrations available to buy, not because they cared about where exactly their money had gone. I could even see some women visibly disappointed upon seeing that their reports had nothing but letters and numbers on them, Elvira included.

Once I had gone through the reports and opened the floor to questions, the women began asking me for more beautiful illustrations drawn by Wilma.

“Lady Rozemyne, the portrait of Lord Ferdinand that you sold at the concert was truly splendid. I have looked at mine every day since,” one said.

“I was hoping to buy one for myself today, having missed my opportunity before. When will they be sold again?” asked another.

“Do you have any plans to hold another concert?” a third asked.

...Everyone, I can see the glimmer in your eyes. Do you really want pictures of Ferdinand that badly?

Given how passionate they were about this, I was pretty sure that I would be able to earn ten fortunes from them without much effort. And I absolutely would have, had I been allowed to. But alas, it was hard to imagine Ferdinand ever giving me a second opportunity to profit off his image.

“Unfortunately, the full set of three illustrations ended up in the hands of Aub Ehrenfest, who proceeded to show Lord Ferdinand.

Suffice it to say, he made me swear never to sell such illustrations again," I announced.

The cruel reality that there would be no second printing of the Ferdinand illustrations made the noble wives gasp and groan in horror. Particularly devastated were the weeping younger ladies who had lacked the money on-hand to buy the illustrations during the concert.

"I even attempted to put a small illustration in the corner, but he refused me at every turn. I thought it over for days, days, and days... until eventually, I came up with the report you see before you."

"...Rozemyne, have you hidden something within it?" Florencia asked in amusement, glancing my way.

Elvira leaned forward over the table, her eyes full of anticipation. "I was certain that you would think of something."

At that, everyone's eyes fell on me.

I cleared my throat and picked up one of the financial reports. "I thought it would be a waste of paper to have them serve as a financial report and nothing more. After all, paper and ink are far from inexpensive," I said, cackling a little as I turned the paper around.

At a glance, the report had what seemed to be random lines all over it. I had only shown Ferdinand the cover of my report, and even had he looked at the back, the lines would have simply appeared as accidental smears and smudges.

"A knife please, Rihyarda."

After taking the paper knife from her, I cut the report in half, then began folding the two pieces into an origami shuriken as everyone watched. Once the folds were done, two distinct pictures of Ferdinand could be seen on either side of the shuriken, each wearing different expressions.

"Oh my!" Elvira chirped upon seeing the shuriken. She then let out a heavy sigh as I turned it around to show the front and back in turn.

"How do I do that?!" one noble lady asked frantically.

"Please teach me!" cried another.

The tea party had suddenly turned into an origami classroom.

After teaching everyone how to fold the paper, I looked around at the gathered women. “This secret technique must be known only to those gathered here today. Should Ferdinand discover this as well, he will no doubt forbid me from ever printing anything else ever again.”

“Indeed. This secret will die with us,” Elvira began. “And since we know everyone who has attended this tea party, should the secret ever be leaked, it shall be a simple matter to identify the criminal.”

Thus, the tea party came to an end, the women all wearing such deadly serious expressions that, were Ferdinand to ever learn about the shuriken, I would be more worried about what would happen to the person who sold them out than my own punishment.

The Dedication Ritual (Take Two)

“The Dedication Ritual begins three days from now, so I will be absent from the castle for some time. Please practice karuta such that you can beat me by the time I return,” I said to Wilfried in the playroom, having just beat him at a game of karuta.

At that, Wilfried stopped stamping the ground in a frustrated tantrum and looked my way. “Hm? You’ll be gone...? Everyone, this is our chance! This is our chance to beat Rozemyne!” he exclaimed, his focus suddenly switching from his recent failure to the possibility of a future victory.

It seemed that several other boys were inspired by his motivation, as they clenched their fists and shouted in agreement.

“Alright! Let’s hold a strategy meeting! Rozemyne, you go over there. And don’t listen in!”

Now that Wilfried had rivals to compete against in the playroom, his stubborn personality and hatred of losing was helping him to grow in a good direction. With his goal this winter being to beat me in karuta, he had gathered allies and started holding strategy meetings, which was as heartwarming as any innocent group of elementary schoolers having fun.

“For how long will you be in the temple, Lady Rozemyne?” Philine asked, her grass-green eyes full of worry. But I didn’t have a clear answer; there was a chance that this year’s Dedication Ritual would face a lot of problems with the former High Bishop unable to contribute, plus we needed to consider the chalices that Sylvester had agreed to fill without asking us.

“I’m not certain how long it will take to fill all of the chalices, so I unfortunately have no answer to give. If you have the time though, Philine, you can write out copies of this story while I’m gone,” I said, handing her a written copy of another story her mother had told her. My copy would be set aside to eventually become the base

manuscript for a printed book, but I intended to take the pages that Philine copied and tie them together with string to make a unique booklet just for her.

“Thank you oh so much, Lady Rozemyne,” Philine said, her eyes shining as she took my manuscript. We giggled together, at which point several more girls came running over.

“Lady Rozemyne, Lady Rozemyne! I asked my mother to tell me stories as well,” one said.

“The picture books about the gods are wonderful, but I would like to read one about the knight tales that minstrels sing about,” requested another.

And so I spent the next three days surrounded by cute little girls, writing down the stories that their parents told them one by one while planning out my next book. They were good days indeed.

“Rihyarda, it’s a bit difficult to move in all this,” I said.

On the day I was due to return to the temple, we were beset by a terrible blizzard that made it near impossible to see. The snow was so deep that carriages couldn’t move through it, so we would be traveling by highbeast instead. Rihyarda had consequently layered me with warm clothing out of concern for my health, but it was so tight and heavy that I could barely move.

“What are you saying, milady? Considering your poor health, this isn’t nearly enough to ensure you are safe when riding through a blizzard this intense,” Rihyarda shot back.

“My highbeast has walls and a roof which shall block all the wind and snow, so it won’t be that cold inside,” I tried to explain, but no amount of sound logic could overcome the trauma that Rihyarda had experienced from me falling sick with fevers twice over the winter. I had gone on to tell her that she really didn’t need to worry about it since I usually got badly ill around five times each winter, but that just made her determination to avoid me falling sick burn even brighter.

I headed to the front entrance bundled in all the clothes that Rihyarda forced me into, at which point Norbert instructed me to bring forth my highbeast. I made my Pandabus as instructed, then allowed Ella, Rosina, and Brigitte to climb inside.

Ferdinand and Damuel, who were waiting for me to get my highbeast ready, were clad in full sets of armor, complete with capes. I was sure that wearing metal armor in the middle of a blizzard would just make them even colder, which actually made me curious enough to ask Ferdinand.

“This armor is a magic tool,” he scoffed. “Your worries are unfounded.”

Surprisingly, what looked like a normal suit of metal armor was in fact a magic tool with anti-cold and flame resistance mechanisms built into it. The strength of the armor depended on the quantity and elemental attunement of the mana within the feystones it was made from, as well as the quantity of the wearer’s own mana.

...Doesn’t that mean Damuel will have a much harder time than Ferdinand, who has a ton of mana and all kinds of feystones?

“Would you like to ride the Pandabus as well, Damuel? Ferdinand?”

“No, we are both going to be guarding you, so continue as you are,” Ferdinand explained. “Now, let’s go.”

Apparently, it wasn’t rare for the Knight’s Order to be dispatched to exterminate feybeasts that appeared in blizzards, so neither of them were bothered by the cold at all. It seemed that the Knight’s Order was a much harsher place than I had thought.

When the door opened at Norbert’s signal, Ferdinand and Damuel jumped onto their highbeasts and raced out into the blizzard. I followed close behind in my Pandabus.

“I was worried about traveling in the midst of a blizzard, but this is actually quite pleasant,” Rosina said.

Everyone had to agree. The snow wasn’t reaching us inside, and we safely arrived at the temple without incident. My vision had been entirely blocked by the blizzard, however, and so this was only the case thanks to Ferdinand and Damuel’s guidance; if not for their respective blue and dark-golden capes fluttering in the wind, I never would have found my way back.

Driving on snowy roads was scary enough, but flying through the air without any sense of direction was beyond dangerous and just plain terrifying.

I speedily put away Lessy as soon as we landed, then rushed into the temple with the snow catching my legs. The moment I was inside, Fran and Monika rushed over in a hurry to greet me. Naturally, the blizzard had been too intense for them to see us coming from afar.

“Welcome home, Lady Rozemyne,” they said.

“I have returned, Fran. Monika.”

It was nice to see them again after such a long time, but the casual chatter could wait.

“Rozemyne, once I am changed into my robes, I shall visit your chambers to discuss the Dedication Ritual. You need to get changed yourself and wait for me,” Ferdinand said.

“Understood,” I replied, most of my attention focused on the fact that neither he nor Damuel had snow on them despite having ridden through the blizzard. Meanwhile, Fran and Monika were both having to work together to knock all the snow off my clothes. Knight armor sure was something else.

Damuel went to his own room to change out of his armor, while Brigitte instead stayed behind to guard me. Fran went to bring tea to Damuel, and when Brigitte eventually went to go and get changed, Nicola brought her tea instead.

I had to get changed, too. A decent amount of snow had caught me in the short distance from my highbeast to the temple, so Monika scrubbed it all off my face and hair. She then removed the layers of clothing that Rihyarda had dressed me in, taking them off one by one like she was peeling an onion. Eventually, I was wearing my High Bishop robes, which were much comfier and easy to move around in.

Now that I was changed, I took a breather with some warm tea. It wasn’t long before Ferdinand arrived wearing his priest robes.

“According to my attendants, Kampfer and Frietack have finished preparing for the Dedication Ritual without issue. We shall therefore begin the ritual tomorrow on Earthday, as planned. Spend today resting in preparation.”

“Okay. By the way, do we know how much of an impact Bezewanst’s absence will have? And did Sylvester ever decide on

what to do with the chalices he accepted?” I asked.

We were already suffering a mana shortage due to the lack of blue priests, so what would happen if we took on the additional chalices from Sylvester despite that? Even though we had told him to clean up his own mess—partially to discourage him from doing this again—I knew well enough by now that he would be too busy in noble society as the archduke to come to the temple just for the Dedication Ritual. Ferdinand had previously mentioned he had some kind of plan, but I wasn’t sure whether it had worked out.

“Sylvester and Florencia fulfilled their duty; the chalices won’t be any problem,” Ferdinand said, taking two feystones out of a pouch on his hip. They were a type used for absorbing mana, and I could tell that they were both completely full. It would take someone with a lot of mana to fill up just one of these.

“...Don’t tell me, you had them use their mana for this?!” I exclaimed in surprise.

“Of course not. They are both dedicating their mana to maintaining the duchy; I would never ask them to offer up their mana for something like this.”

“I honestly wouldn’t put it past you to do just that, Ferdinand. I thought you had stolen a bunch of mana from them as a way of making them take responsibility for their own actions,” I said, sighing in relief that my worst fears had been unfounded.

Ferdinand’s lips curled into a smirk as he rolled the feystones in his palm. “This year, we have two criminals at our disposal with much more mana than Bezewanst. In fact, as far as the temple is concerned, we have a larger bounty of mana available to us than last year. Leaving those two alive without executing them shall greatly benefit the duchy.”

Judging by that evil smile, Ferdinand had no doubt forced Sylvester and Florencia into stealing mana from Sylvester’s imprisoned mother and Count Bindewald under the logic that, if they weren’t going to provide it themselves, they would have to get it from somewhere. You could always count on Ferdinand to get things done, namely because he would thoroughly exploit every single tool available to him. And that was precisely why you didn’t want to make

an enemy out of him.

“I will teach the blue priests to use the feystones for the Dedication Ritual, and with this much mana, we should be able to finish much quicker than last year,” Ferdinand continued confidently. “Teaching them may prove rather difficult, since their mana is so comparatively weak that they will not be used to handling this much at once, but it will make our future much easier.

“But in any case, I shall be going to teach Kampfer and Frietack how to use mana. You stay here and contain yourself. Consider yourself forbidden from visiting the orphanage today. Rest well so that you do not collapse.”

Under normal circumstances, I would need to be in the ritual chamber from start to finish as the High Bishop, but we would be prioritizing my health and mana offering over tradition this year. Instead, Ferdinand would be watching over the ritual proceedings as the High Priest.

“I expect that you will be summoned to gather your winter ingredient in the middle of the Dedication Ritual as well, so keep yourself as healthy as possible,” he instructed.

On the first day of the Dedication Ritual, I was bathed early in the morning and changed into my ceremonial robes. Unlike last year, my ceremonial High Bishop robes had a golden cord and a silver sash around my waist. Everything else attached to it was red, and my hair stick was the same one that I had worn during my debut.

Monika and Nicola dressed me under Rosina’s instructions, and I could tell that they were more used to it than they had been before; they dressed me much quicker than they would have in the past.

“All done. How does it look, Rosina?” Monika asked.

“Very good,” Rosina said, giving them passing marks.

All we needed to do now was wait for the Dedication Ritual to start. I received a report from Fran and Monika in the meantime on what had happened while I was gone, and soon enough, Zahm arrived.

“Lady Rozemyne, the ritual chamber is ready,” Zahm said, before guiding me there with Fran.

The High Bishop's chambers were the closest room in the temple to the ritual chambers, so it was a much shorter trip than last year. I watched my feet as I walked, making sure not to step on the hem of my robes, and the gray priests by the doors to the ritual chambers opened them as we approached.

On the other side of the door was an altar just like there had been last year, adorned with the divine instruments and chalices. Fires had also been lit by the walls, both lighting the room and keeping it warm.

"Thank you for waiting," I said, because unlike last year, it wasn't just Ferdinand in the ritual chamber—Kampfer and Frietack were there, too. They were each carrying a mana-packed feystone, waiting with tense looks on their faces.

"...We shall now begin," Ferdinand said, prompting me to step forward before kneeling before the altar himself, both hands pressed against the red cloth. Kampfer and Frietack followed suit, placing their feystones directly onto the cloth before covering them with both their hands.

I walked to Ferdinand's side, then a few paces further before kneeling in front of the three of them. I then looked up at the altar before lowering my head and placing my hands on the cloth.

Last year, I had just needed to repeat the words of prayer as Ferdinand said them, but I would be the one leading the prayer this year. I inhaled deeply, then began.

"I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world."

The three men behind me repeated the prayer, their deep voices reverberating through the hall.

"O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, O Goddess of Water Flutrane, O God of Fire Leidenschaft, O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, O Goddess of Earth Geduldh, O God of Life Ewigeliebe. We honor you who have blessed all beings with life, and pray that we may be blessed further with your divine might," I chanted, feeling the mana being drained from my body as I spoke.

The red carpet sparkled from the absorbed mana, sending it

shooting toward the altar as light. These radiant waves came from behind me as well, which sped up the pace of my mana being drained.

“That should be enough for now,” Ferdinand said.

I raised my head and removed my hands from the red cloth, counting the filled chalices while the waves of light briefly continued to flow. Last year, Ferdinand and I had filled seven or eight a day, but this time we had managed to fill forty chalices in a single go.

“At this rate, we’ll be finished by tomorrow,” I observed.

“We would, if the feystones weren’t almost empty. It should take about three more days for us to finish the Dedication Ritual completely,” Ferdinand said as he took the feystones from Kampfer and Frietack to look them over.

They were both mostly black now, signaling that there wasn’t much mana left inside them.

“Good work, you two. You may return to your chambers and rest,” Ferdinand said.

“You have been a great help this year. Rest for as long as you need,” I added, permitting the two exhausted fellows to leave the room. They had never dealt with that much mana before, and the strain had clearly gotten to them.

They expressed their thanks and exited the room.

“Summon all the other blue priests. We shall finish this all at once,” Ferdinand instructed the gray priests outside the door. They then went off as instructed, their footsteps barely audible.

“This will be a lot easier than last year if we can finish in just three more days,” I said cheerfully. Last year, Ferdinand and I had basically needed to fill every single chalice by ourselves, on top of the chalices from other duchies that Sylvester and Bezewanst had pushed onto us. I had been steeling my resolve to do all that while socializing with the nobles as well, so I couldn’t help but smile at my good fortune.

“Unlike last year, the process will not take over ten days. In fact, at this rate, we will undoubtedly be able to finish the Dedication Ritual before it is time for you to gather your winter ingredient. So long as you feel your mana and stamina recovering after some rest,

we will have nothing to fear," Ferdinand replied.

Filling the ruelle with mana had been pretty intense, and it took quite a lot to dye something like that. Last year, I had needed to force down that disgusting potion to recover my mana during the Dedication Ritual, so I was genuinely glad to have some leeway.

...Though we would have been able to finish even sooner without those extra chalices, I thought, glancing over at the ones that Sylvester had pushed onto us.

"Ferdinand, what duchy do the chalices that Sylvester gave us belong to?" I asked.

"Frenbeltag, the duchy to the west of Ehrenfest."

I mentally envisioned a map of Ehrenfest, thinking back to how I had once heard that the archdukes of Ehrenfest and Frenbeltag got along amicably. "We're on good terms with their archduke, right?"

"We have a good diplomatic relationship with them, yes. The problem is that both Sylvester and Florencia are weak to their requests," Ferdinand replied.

Up until now, Ehrenfest had taken a diplomatic approach with Frenbeltag, requesting favorable terms and refusing them based on the time and situation. But according to Ferdinand, both Sylvester and Florencia would be dominated in future discussions unless he personally accompanied them.

"I can understand Sylvester, but Florencia as well? Really?"

"Frenbeltag's archduke is the older brother of Florencia, and his wife the older sister of Sylvester. As younger siblings, the two find it hard to stand their ground against them."

As Ferdinand explained, Florencia was the younger sister of Frenbeltag's archduke, having married into Ehrenfest herself, while Sylvester's second oldest sister had married into Frenbeltag. What's more, unlike Ehrenfest, Frenbeltag had gotten completely wrapped up in the civil war that had occurred several years ago, which had led to the previous aub getting executed. Florencia's older brother had subsequently inherited the position, and was desperately trying to lead the duchy into a safe recovery.

In other words, they were having a lot more trouble than Ehrenfest, and in more ways than one.

“They are such close siblings that they wish to help them, but it has been up to me to follow up on their concessions. You saved me from repeating that once again this year, Rozemyne.”

“Ferdinand, should I take that to mean you once again intend to use me as a weapon against Sylvester in the future?” I asked, glaring up at him.

He simply raised an eyebrow, completely unfazed. “You are the High Bishop, whereas I am merely a humble High Priest. How could I ever defy you?”

“Ferdinand, I think you should look up the word ‘humble’ in a dictionary; it’s rare for you to misremember something so horribly.”

The blue priests arrived to see Ferdinand and I menacingly chuckling to each other. They froze in the doorway, fear evident on their faces, so Ferdinand gestured for me to leave.

“You may return to your chambers and rest now, High Bishop.”

“And so I shall. I pray the rest of the ritual goes well,” I said, smiling politely at the other blue priests before returning to my chambers.

When I returned, I called Monika and had her change me back into my normal robes.

“Fran, it seems that the Dedication Ritual shall be ending sooner than expected. I will be returning to the castle earlier as well,” I said.

“Do you know when that will be?” he asked.

“Ferdinand mentioned that it would take three more days, but that’s as much as I know. Oh, and he said that I would need to go with him to gather materials next Earthday.”

Fran wrote all that down on his diptych, then placed a hand on his chin thoughtfully. “This will be much less of a burden on you than our initial plan of having you leave the ritual midway through to gather materials, then return and continue your participation. The High Priest had mentioned preparing many potions, but it seems they will go unused,” Fran commented while looking at a box filled with the ultra-nasty potions.

I gave a big nod. “I am also very pleased about that.”

“In which case, Lady Rozemyne, would you care to look over these documents while you are in the temple?” Fran asked, bringing

over the letters and documents that had piled up while I was staying in the castle. It was simple work that mostly just required me to read, so I happily obliged.

Most of the letters were simple, formal messages thanking me for my participation in the Harvest Festival, but there were a few meant for Bezewanst mixed in as well.

"...Is this from his special someone?" I wondered aloud.

One in particular looked like another of his secret love letters. I wasn't confident in my handwriting recognition skills, but it definitely seemed pretty similar. The first line said something along the lines of: "There is something I must ask of you. Please, you are the only one I can count on."

...Well, that's pretty unfortunate for you.

There wasn't any way for her to see Bezewanst now that he was dead. And not only that, but the meeting date that she had requested had long since passed. I crossed my arms in thought, facing the letter with no name or sending address.

"For now, I'll write a response explaining that Bezewanst has passed on, and then ask Ferdinand how to go about identifying the sender so that I know where to send it," I said.

Parchment for a reply had been included alongside the letter, so I wrote down my normal response onto it—the same message I gave to everyone who sent a letter addressed to Bezewanst. After a lengthy introduction, I wrote that the former High Bishop had climbed the towering stairway, then wrote a short conclusion. His secret girlfriend seemed to be a noble, so she would probably understand without issue, unlike Hasse's mayor.

"Okay. That should do it."

For now, I just needed to set aside my pen and wait for the ink to dry. But the second I folded the letter in half and put it into the envelope, mana started flowing into it from my ring.

"Eek?!" I cried out in surprise.

Once the letter and my reply had finished sucking up mana, they turned into birds similar to an ordonnanz and flew off.

"Lady Rozemyne, are you okay?" Brigitte asked.

"Yes. Thank you, Brigitte. I was just surprised. I didn't realize they

were magic tools.”

To think they could be infused with mana like that. If you could send a response back to the sender simply by using mana, then it wouldn’t be necessary to write your name or address at all.

“Please inform Ferdinand when the Dedication Ritual is over. I think I’m going to need to tell him about this,” I continued.

Gathering the Winter Ingredient

I anxiously waited for the Dedication Ritual to end, knowing that I needed to tell Ferdinand what had happened. Up until this point, all of the letters and such addressed to the former High Bishop had been from commoners looking for favors, never nobles. This was probably because every noble in the duchy of Ehrenfest had been immediately informed upon his execution, Bindewald's arrest, and Veronica's imprisonment. But such a huge political shift would no doubt indicate instability, so it was possible that a gag order had been placed on this information so that other duchies wouldn't find out about it. The very thought made the blood drain from my face.

...I might have just done something that I really shouldn't have.

My anxious waiting was eventually interrupted by a white bird flying in. It resembled an ordonnanz, though it was smaller than the ones I was used to. And instead of relaying a verbal message, it turned into two letters before my eyes which fluttered down onto my desk.

I picked them up to find that one was the reply I had written, while the other was the response to my reply. It was a brief, polite letter expressing the writer's regret over Bezewanst's death and thanking me for informing them. I let out a sigh of relief at the fact that they hadn't angrily demanded to know more details about what had happened, and the lack of any paper to write another response led me to conclude that they didn't expect another letter.

"Lady Rozemyne, the Dedication Ritual has concluded for today," Fran said.

I could hear the blue priests walking down the hall. Ferdinand soon came in with some gray priests, all of whom were carrying the chalices that we had filled with mana during today's ritual. Fran opened the door of a cabinet for them, and the multiple gray priests worked together to line the chalices up on a shelf. I used that

opportunity to speak to Ferdinand about the letter.

“Um, Ferdinand... A letter addressed to the former High Bishop arrived, and...”

Ferdinand must have been tired; rather than listening closely as he usually would, he waved his hand dismissively, like the question wasn’t important enough to warrant his attention. “Another one? Just inform them that Bezewanst has passed away, as per usual.”

“I did. They then sent a reply expressing their regrets and thanking me.”

“I see. Then the matter requires no further consideration.” His brow was deeply furrowed, a sure sign that the blue priests who had been on good terms with Bezewanst had given him a hard time during today’s Dedication Ritual.

While it probably would have been wise for me to avoid bothering him too much, I needed to settle this potential emergency now. I sucked in air, then spoke once again. “Ferdinand... There’s one thing I want to double-check.”

“What? You still aren’t satisfied?” Ferdinand asked, now staring daggers at me.

Despite the sudden fear that had washed over me, I nodded. “Has there been a gag order to prevent other duchies from learning of Bezewanst’s death?”

“No. There is a gag order regarding the punishment Veronica has received, as that would indeed be a weakness to exploit, but no such limitation has been placed on news about Bezewanst’s execution. Have you not already been mentioning his death when responding to letters? Why ask this now, after so much time?”

“Oh. Well, I just wanted to be sure. That’s fine, then. Thank you for the answer, especially when you’re already so tired.”

...Whew. Seems like I didn’t make the blunder of the century after all, I thought, sighing in relief at the fact that it was totally okay for me to inform Bezewanst’s possible secret lover of his death. *I’m just glad that Ferdinand was too tired to ask me for all the details.*

Revealing Bezewanst’s pure romance to Ferdinand would have made my heart hurt, like whipping an already dying man to make him suffer even more. Ferdinand always exploited everything he could,

and this would have been no exception; it terrified me just trying to imagine what kind of torture this nameless girlfriend would have potentially been forced to endure.

I had panicked due to the appearance of a magic tool that I had never seen before, but Ferdinand was right in that many letters had already been sent to the High Bishop before that point. The letter magic tool, despite being an outlier, was just one of many correspondences if you looked at the big picture. Thinking about it like that eased the burden on my shoulders.

As Ferdinand had predicted, the Dedication Ritual came to an end three days later. A terrible blizzard raged as we finished pouring mana into the last of the chalices, just like last year.

“Rozemyne, double-check every chalice, then securely lock them within their cabinet. Kampfer and Frietack, have the gray priests remove the altar from the ritual chamber, then observe that the divine instruments are brought back to the chapel.”

“As you wish,” the two men replied.

At that, we all started doing our tasks. The gray priests once again lined up the mana-filled chalices on the shelf within the High Bishop’s chambers. Once I had made sure that they were all accounted for, I had Fran and Monika look over them with me, and then locked the door to the cabinet.

As I gave myself a satisfied nod, acknowledging a job well done, a bell rang from behind the front door. It was the bell that Ferdinand’s attendants used.

“Lady Rozemyne, the High Priest wishes to enter,” Fran informed me. “How shall you reply?”

This formality was probably just to ensure that the chalices were securely locked away before my door was opened again.

Upon giving him permission to enter, Ferdinand strode into the room carrying a spear, which he then held out to me. “Rozemyne, fill this with your mana,” he commanded. “This needs to be done as soon as possible.”

On my second look, I realized that this was a divine instrument that was supposed to be on its way back to the chapel—the spear

representing Leidenschaft, the God of Fire. Stunned, I hurriedly gripped onto the instrument, instantly feeling my mana start being drained into the small feystones dotting its hilt.

“Uh, Ferdinand... Why am I doing this? Why do you need me to fill this spear with my mana?”

During the Dedication Ritual, all of the mana that had previously been offered up to the divine instruments was poured into chalices, so by the time the ritual was over, each instrument was completely devoid of mana. It would consequently take a significant amount to refill the spear, and while I could personally manage that, I didn’t understand why this was something I needed to do at all.

“This spear shall be your weapon, since you do not yet have one of your own, correct? And in order to use this spear, you must first fill it with your mana,” Ferdinand replied, giving a shrug as he removed the gloves that he had put on to stop his own mana from flowing into the spear.

He was making this sound like it was entirely obvious, but we weren’t crossing channels on a fundamental level here. As far as I was concerned, it made no sense whatsoever for me to suddenly start using a divine instrument meant to decorate altars as a personal weapon.

“I’m aware that I don’t have a weapon, but this is a divine instrument, isn’t it?! This is Leidenschaft’s spear! Should I really be using it as my own personal weapon?!” I exclaimed.

“We have no other magic tools capable of serving this purpose. I would have had you use a weapon from the Knight’s Order if possible, but you lack the stamina and strength of a regular person. As such, you will have to make do with the divine spear for your gathering,” Ferdinand explained, going on to note that, since my autumn gathering had ended in failure, he wanted to ensure that my winter one succeeded no matter what. This, of course, meant that I needed a weapon, and the only one that he knew I would be able to use was Leidenschaft’s spear.

“...But this is a divine instrument. Are you sure it’s okay?” I asked, still in disbelief.

“I have the aub’s permission. And what could possibly be wrong

with the High Bishop using something that belongs to the temple? You need a weapon. I provided one. Stop complaining and keep filling it with mana."

Honestly, at that point, I genuinely started to feel that *I* was being the weird one here. I mean, if Sylvester himself was giving his permission as the archduke, then surely this was indeed okay.

Shrugging off my misgivings, I dedicated the next few hours to pouring my mana into Leidenschaft's spear. Though I couldn't help but feel that I was committing a sin of some sort by doing so.

...O mighty Leidenschaft, I'll be borrowing your spear for just a little while. I promise to give it back, so please, don't get mad at me!

Once the divine spear had been filled with mana, I headed to the orphanage. Ferdinand had mentioned that we would be returning to the castle as soon as was feasible once the Dedication Ritual was over, so this was my only opportunity to go.

"Gil, Fritz—how is the winter handiwork going?" I asked.

Once they had both reported on the status of the printed picture books, the karuta, and the playing cards, I went on to tell them about the kids in the playroom. This naturally led to Wilma telling me how the orphans had been doing.

"The karuta and playing cards are starting to become popular with the noble children, and the picture books were positively received as well. They all loved your art, Wilma. The noble women in particular, of course..." I said, trailing off deliberately.

Wilma, my co-conspirator who had proven instrumental to the shuriken illustrations, offered a small smile. "May they go undiscovered this time."

"Ahaha. And, actually, I've thought up a few more tricks."

"Why, Lady Rozemyne, the High Priest won't be at all happy about this," Wilma said teasingly.

I returned a wide grin. "It's okay. I already have strategies to deal with him."

"Oh my!" Wilma exclaimed with excitement. By this point, she had an almost impish look in her eyes, a sign that she had fully embraced our mischief.

While we were talking things over, some nearby girls were busy

knitting cloth. They were being taught by Nora, one of the orphans who had moved here from Hasse, since knitting was a staple of winter handiwork there. Marthe was also a skilled knitter despite her young age, and she was teaching Delia beside her.

Wilma followed my eyes, then smiled warmly. “They are all working hard so that the winter will be a warm one. Nora is much more relaxed, having progressed from needing to be taught everything to being comfortable teaching others.”

From what I had heard, out of the four orphans from Hasse, Marthe was the one who had adjusted to temple life first, most likely due to her young age. Thore and Rick, on the other hand, had gotten better used to things once they started going out to gather and make paper in the workshop.

As it turned out, it was Nora, the eldest, who had struggled the most with adapting to the drastic change in environment; the older someone was, the harder it was to break habits. And on top of everything else, being put in a position where she was being taught by kids far younger than herself day after day had completely destroyed her confidence at first. She couldn’t even spend much time with her brother due to the temple’s communal lifestyle, and Wilma mentioned that she had found the girl sitting alone with a sad look on her face more than a few times.

“She feels a sense of purpose now that she can teach others to knit, and with that, she has finally secured her own place in the orphanage. She smiles a lot more regularly now,” Wilma explained.

“That’s good. I’m glad to hear that everyone’s getting along just fine. And I hope to hear more good news in the future as well.”

“Of course, Lady Rozemyne.”

Leidenschaft’s spear had been filled with mana as instructed, and my visit to the orphanage was complete; everything on my to-do list had been checked off. I informed Ferdinand that I was ready to return to the castle whenever, and while we discussed making the move tomorrow, an ordonnanz flew into the room and landed on the desk.

“Lord Ferdinand, please return at once,” came Karstedt’s voice,

carrying an audible sense of urgency. “The Lord of Winter has appeared. It is a schnesturm this year.”

The ordonnanz repeated the message three times before returning to its feystone form. At that, Ferdinand whipped out his schtappe, tapped the feystone, and chanted the word “*ordonnanz*.”

“I shall leave the organization of the hunt to you. Iron out the preparations. I shall be there soon,” Ferdinand said, before swinging his schtappe and sending the ordonnanz off again. His schtappe then disappeared, and he looked at me with a grim expression. “Rejoice, Rozemyne. You might just be harvesting a feystone of the highest quality here. Prepare at once so that we may return to the castle. Dress as you did when gathering in autumn, and take extra care to wear enough warm layers.”

I raced to my room, paling at the thought that one of the requirements for my winter gathering was to hunt a feybeast. Fran called Ella out of the kitchen and informed her of our upcoming departure, while Rosina also began preparing to leave. My guard knights, who had been with me when I heard the message, were wearing serious expressions as they briskly moved about. Brigitte guarded me as I was changed, while Damuel went to put on his armor.

Monika and Nicola were the ones changing my clothes. I was dressed in several layers of underclothes to stay warm, a coat, and pants similar to the ones I had worn during my autumn gathering. The coat alone was a bit hard to move in, since it was so thick and warm, but I went ahead and put on another layer regardless; I would be going out to gather my ingredient in the middle of a blizzard that, as far as I could tell, was going to continue for days. The more warm clothes I had on, the better.

“...Brigitte, what’s the Lord of Winter?”

“Out of all the feybeasts that appear each winter, the dominant one that grows strongest is called the Lord of Winter. Its mana is remarkably strong and causes blizzards to form all around it. Its presence delays the arrival of spring, so as soon as it appears, almost every knight in the Knight’s Order departs to hunt it, with only a bare minimum of personnel remaining in the castle.”

Apparently, each year, a strong feybeast called the Lord of Winter appeared. There were many potential feybeasts that could become it, and out of them all, the schnesturm was a particularly nasty one. The fact that I needed to gather its feystone probably meant that the knights would have to hunt it with weapons, like they had done during the Night of Schutzaria.

"...Am I also going to be hunting the Lord of Winter?" I asked.

"I believe that we of the Knight's Order shall weaken it first, at which point you are to land the finishing blow and retrieve its feystone. Fear not, Lady Rozemyne. There will be nothing to worry about with all of us there with you," Brigitte said with a smile.

But that didn't make me feel much better. I really couldn't imagine myself successfully fighting like Brigitte and Eckhart had back then.

"All good, Brigitte," Damuel said once he returned, fully clad in his armor. Brigitte then left to prepare as well.

Monika and Nicola did my hair, pulled a fluffy fur hat over my head, and then slid the leather gloves that Ferdinand had lent me onto my hands. They were apprentice gloves from the Knight's Order, designed to allow mana to flow through them, and they morphed to perfectly fit my hands just as the ring magic tools always did.

"What do you think about the Lord of Winter, Damuel?" I asked. "Do you think that I'll be able to hunt it?"

"...Unfortunately, since I was demoted to being an apprentice last year, I have not yet gone on a Lord of Winter hunt. But those who have been assure me that it is quite a fearsome beast."

The Lord of Winter hunt occurred while the apprentices were in the Royal Academy, so only adult knights ever participated. But Damuel had been demoted to the rank of an apprentice last autumn, right before his first winter as a knight, and had consequently spent that time guarding me in the temple instead. For that reason, this would be his first time hunting the Lord of Winter as well.

Everyone finished their preparations quickly, at which point I headed to the exit closest to the Noble's Gate with Leidenschaft's spear in hand. It didn't feel particularly heavy now that I had filled it with my mana and made it my weapon.

There was a bit of extra space inside, right by the door, where Ferdinand had already formed his highbeast. “Fran, Zahm—open the door on my signal,” he instructed. “Rozemyne, bring forth your highbeast and take everyone with you. Brigitte, ride with her.”

Fran and Zahm sped to the door where they awaited his signal, while I made my Pandabus and got inside with Ella, Rosina, and Brigitte.

“Rozemyne, the blizzard will worsen as the Lord of Winter rampages, to the point where it will become nigh impossible to see. I will attempt to fly close to you, but take care not to lose sight of me. Brigitte, do what you can to assist her.”

“Yes, sir!”

Ferdinand spun around, his cape whipping behind him, then jumped onto his highbeast more nimbly than I would ever expect from someone wearing a full set of plate armor. He raised his chin and faced the door, before loudly declaring: “Open it!”

Fran and Zahm put their hands on the doors, pulling them open just a little. Heavy winds and ice immediately burst into the room, blasting the doors all the way open with an enormous cracking sound.

Ferdinand launched his highbeast outside, facing the blizzard head-on, and I quickly followed suit, my eyes locked on his blue cape.

We raced out of the temple, and as soon as we had passed the Noble’s Gate, Damuel sped past Lessy to line up next to Ferdinand. Their respective dark-golden and blue capes flapped in front of me, which I used as markers while driving my Pandabus. White snow whipped down from the heavy-looking gray sky, coming at me from every direction and making it impossible to tell which direction the wind was blowing. I probably would have plummeted right toward the ground had it not been for their capes.

“Lady Rozemyne, please turn slightly to the right. We’re almost at the castle,” Brigitte said, assisting me as navigator from the front seat. Thanks to her help, we arrived safely at the castle without losing sight of our guides.

I saw Ferdinand send off an ordonnanz, and Norbert opened up

the door for us a second later.

“Ella! Rosina! Hurry into the castle at once! We shall be joining with the Knight’s Order,” Brigitte instructed, and the two women hurried inside through the door that Norbert had opened.

Once the door had closed behind them, Ferdinand signaled to Brigitte by moving his left arm up and down. We then got back on the move.

“It seems that the knights have already arrived, so we shall be heading straight to the primary training grounds,” Brigitte said, following Ferdinand’s signals. There were many training grounds being used by the Knight’s Order and each one was sizable, which made sense given that they had to practice fighting on highbeasts. It was impossible for me to distinguish them from one another, however, since they were all as white as the snow blasting through the air.

Ferdinand descended down onto one of the training grounds. Damuel was waiting by the door on his highbeast like a landmark, so we went inside first.

“I have arrived,” Ferdinand announced, at which point everyone inside knelt.

I stepped out of Lessy and stood next to Ferdinand. The claim that the Lord of Winter was dangerous enough to require practically all of the knights in the duchy except the bare minimum left behind for guard duty had apparently been no exaggeration; the training grounds were already packed with rows upon rows of knights. I had heard that there were fifty stationed within the city of Ehrenfest at any given time, but since we had sent a duchy-wide message, there were now about *two hundred* and fifty gathered here.

“The Lord of Winter has appeared once again. Archknights, focus all of your energy on severing its limbs. Medknights, eradicate its servants. Layknights, take formation around Rozemyne’s highbeast and dispose of any stragglers.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Brigitte, ride with Rozemyne. Once she is in position, join with the medknights. Damuel, operate with the layknights.”

“Yes, sir!” Damuel replied, immediately racing to join the lined-up

knights.

Ferdinand, watching him go out of the corner of his eye, looked down at me. “Rozemyne, stand by on your highbeast until I come to summon you. Under no circumstances are you to move from your position.”

“Understood. Um, Ferdinand. May I pray for their success in battle?” I asked. There wasn’t a whole lot that I could do to help, plus it would be easier for me to pray here while it was calm than on a chaotic battlefield.

Ferdinand looked at the knights with a frown, then gave a slow nod. “I would rather you preserve as much of your mana as possible, but since we are going to be taking the feystone for ourselves this year and depriving them of resources, I suppose it would only be fair.”

After confirming that I had permission, I poured mana into my ring and prayed that the knights would succeed in defeating the massive feybeast—a creature so strong that the entire Knight’s Order had to join together to fight it.

“O God of War Angriff, of the God of Fire Leidenschaft’s exalted twelve, I pray that you grant them your divine protection.”

Blue light soared up into the air from my ring before raining down upon all the knights. It used more mana than I had expected, since there were simply so many present.

“All knights, prepare!” Ferdinand declared.

The kneeling knights stood up sharply and began readying their highbeasts, and as I moved to get into mine, Ferdinand called out to me.

“Rozemyne, that prayer required a considerable amount of mana, did it not? Drink this before the battle begins. Furthermore, keep your highbeast small to preserve your mana.”

I shrunk Lessy so that he was just big enough for Brigitte and myself, climbed inside, and then looked at the potion that Ferdinand had given me. Mana was absolutely essential for hunting feybeasts, and so he had given me the awful-tasting one that had sacrificed taste for maximum effectiveness.

I gulped the potion down, holding back tears all the while. In an

instant, my exhaustion faded and my mana recovered. The taste was unbearably bitter, but preparing my body for the hunt was much more important.

“Now, move out!” Ferdinand declared.

Karstedt and the archknights were the first to leave, with Ferdinand taking the lead as their vanguard. The medknights followed close behind, while I joined them in the middle.

The knights of the Order could sense powerful mana radiating from the north, and thus approached it together. We were racing our highbeasts toward the source, pushing forward as if taking on the violent blizzard itself. At times, I could hear the clatter of armor as nearby knights turned to look my way; I could guess that they were just trying to get a peek at Lessy, but the noise that their helmets made spooked me every time.

The closer we got to the powerful mana, the stronger the blizzard became. Eventually, a massive shadow could be seen in the midst of the swirling snow, at which point Ferdinand immediately ordered me to stop.

“Rozemyne, stay here. Grip your spear and be prepared to jump out at any moment,” Ferdinand said.

Upon hearing that, Brigitte leapt out of my Pandabus and formed her own highbeast in midair, nimbly landing upon it. As she flew to join the other medknights, Ferdinand whipped his blue cape and joined the line of archknights, while the layknights gathered around me.

Fighting the Schnesturm

The wall of layknights guarded me from all sides as I stayed high up in the air, sheltering inside Lessy. I squinted and tried looking up amid the storm, but the pure-white snow was beating against my Pandabus and making it impossible to see. It was so bad that even the dark-golden capes of nearby knights were nearly entirely obscured from my vision.

Through the snow, one of the knights approached on their highbeast. “Lady Rozemyne. It’s me, Damuel. I have orders from Lord Ferdinand. May I come inside?”

I made a door appear on Lessy’s passenger side for Damuel to climb through. He walked along his own highbeast’s wing and into my Pandabus, sat down, and then returned his highbeast to its stone form.

“What did Ferdinand say?” I asked.

While averting his gaze, Damuel informed me that Ferdinand had instructed him to stick with me, since he was uneasy leaving me on my own. Damuel was being rather roundabout, but I could imagine exactly what Ferdinand had told him. It was probably something like: “Do not let Rozemyne do anything until I arrive to get her. Keep a close eye on her, so that she does not cause any problems whatsoever.”

It seemed that he didn’t trust me in the least.

“In particular, he instructed me to do whatever it takes to preserve your mana,” Damuel said. “He mentioned that you have a tendency to prioritize emotions and pray without thinking when problems arise, which... *ahem*... won’t be acceptable here.”

“Guh...” I groaned. Ferdinand could read me like a book now. I couldn’t even argue with that assessment since he was completely right.

As I grumbled to myself, Damuel furrowed his brow and gave me

an almost pitiable look. “I’ve finally been promoted back up to knighthood, so please refrain from doing anything that would get me punished,” he pleaded, tears forming in his eyes.

Damuel had worked hard for the past year as an apprentice, so I had no choice but to nod back at him. But even then, I couldn’t make any hard promises.

“...So this is your highbeast, then. Appearances aside, the interior is really quite something,” Damuel said, letting out surprised and impressed noises as he felt around the Pandabus from the passenger seat.

“Eheheh. Pretty comfy, isn’t it?”

“Very. It’s exactly as Brigitte said.”

I could tell that Brigitte liked Lessy from how relaxed she always seemed in the passenger seat. She was a woman of very few words who rarely expressed her emotions, but I had occasionally happened to catch her ever-so-slight smiles every now and again.

“What did Brigitte say?” I asked excitedly.

Damuel closed his eyes as if digging through his memories. “She said that your highbeast is very comfortable to ride in, but that she would rather ride *on* a highbeast when in battle so that she would have room to swing her weapon.”

“That’s true. Knights do need to fight, and Lessy doesn’t really accommodate that. But still... why not just reshape the highbeast based on your needs? You could have one form for battle, and another for travel,” I suggested.

But according to Damuel, the fact that one needed training and a precise mental image to instantly produce a highbeast meant that knights would much rather focus on speed than attempting to balance multiple forms.

“You can freely change the size of your highbeast, Lady Rozemyne, but that is not such a simple matter for most,” Damuel said.

I didn’t really get what he meant. Whenever I summoned Lessy, I was always just imagining an automobile. It was more or less the same image no matter the size, so shrinking him into a single-seater or making him as large as a minibus didn’t cause me any problems.

“Oh, it’s begun,” Damuel said. “Take a look. Lord Ferdinand and the commander are in battle.”

I followed his pointing finger to see two bright lights, one on either side of the blizzard’s center. But no matter how hard I squinted, I couldn’t see either Ferdinand or Karstedt; all I could see were two lights of equal sizes.

“It’s hard to tell from this far away, but that’s the same attack that Lord Ferdinand used to defeat the goltze back during the Night of Schutzaria,” Damuel explained.

“Wait, the attack that killed the goltze in a single hit?” I asked.

“Steel yourself, Lady Rozemyne! A powerful shockwave is coming this way!” Damuel yelled sharply, as the two lights raced in unison toward the whirlwind at the center of the blizzard. Light also trailed behind them as they arced through the air before suddenly slamming into the whirlwind, resulting in a roaring boom so loud that I instinctively covered my ears.

The whirlwind faltered for a moment, during which I could see the two knights with their greatswords swung downward. Since Ferdinand’s attack had managed to kill the goltze in a single blow, in that moment, I foolishly convinced myself that it was probably already over. But an instant later, the knights closest to the vortex were knocked away one by one. A wave-like disturbance was rushing outward from the center, made visible only by those who were being thrown back.

...Here it comes! I thought, and just as I braced myself, the shockwave hit us. I gripped Lessy’s steering wheel as tightly as I could, pouring more mana into him to keep us in place. The knights around us faltered slightly, but I could see them managing to hold on to their own highbeasts as well. We were this far away from the source, and yet it was still enough to nearly knock us out of the air. Just how strong had the blast been at the very center?

Once the shockwave had passed, I looked around. Everything had gone silent. The only thing unchanged was the ever-present whirlwind of the blizzard.

“...Did we win?” I asked.

“No, the schnesturm is not that easy of an opponent,” Damuel

replied, staring into the distance.

I heard an earth-shaking roar, and the blizzard instantly became more intense. The whirlwind at the center grew to a massive size, turning from a violent vortex to an enormous tornado of destruction.

...Can we even beat this thing? I wondered, my breath catching in my throat.

Snow quickly accumulated into clumps inside the tornado, before suddenly being flung out. They appeared to be no larger than regular snowballs from this distance, but in reality, they were just a little bigger than the knights and their highbeasts. I squinted to try and get a better view, and on closer examination realized that the white clumps had taken animal forms, which immediately started attacking the knights. Some looked like tigers, others like wolves, and still others like rabbits. They were of various sizes, but they all attacked the knights, who responded in turn.

“What are those things?” I asked.

“The Lord of Winter’s servants, formed from his mana,” Damuel replied tersely as he continued to eye them carefully.

Since the white animals were all being created from the schnesturm’s mana, the tornado was beginning to weaken as more and more were made, slowly revealing the massive feybeast at its center.

“So that’s the schnesturm...” I murmured.

Once the tornado had thinned enough for me to see through it, a feybeast even larger than the gigantic goltze I had seen on the Night of Schutzaria came into view. The schnesturm looked entirely like a white tiger made of snow. There were black stripes running down the white fur on its massive body, and sharp fangs jutted out of its mouth like spears. Its eyes were like huge rolling orbs that gleamed with a sharp red light, which might have just been a trait shared by all feybeasts.

From this distance, it looked like a mountain, with Ferdinand and Karstedt on their highbeasts being the equivalent of mosquitoes flying around a cat. The size difference truly couldn’t be overstated.

The schnesturm turned its head, trying to get all of the knights flying around it into its vision. Its movements were much quicker than

one would expect of something its size, and when the knights closed in to attack, it swung its paw with impressive speed. With each swipe, a blizzard erupted. And when it roared, more servants were born from the swirling snow.

“Can we actually win this...?” I asked.

As far as I could see, Ferdinand and Karstedt’s combination attack hadn’t even made a scratch on the schnesturm. And if that really was the case, then what hope did we have of winning? It seemed to me that nothing we could do would be enough.

I looked at Damuel with unease, and saw that he was looking at the schnesturm with a severe expression as well. “I believe it will be a lengthy battle of attrition,” he said intensely.

And his assessment proved to be right. The schnesturm’s roars caused even more blizzards to form, creating all sorts of white feybeasts from the snow. They must not have been very strong, judging by how easily the knights were taking them down, but when destroyed, the feybeasts returned to the schnesturm in the form of snow.

“There are more coming,” Damuel observed.

Fewer feybeast servants meant a stronger blizzard surrounding the schnesturm. But before the blizzard could completely obscure it, the beast would let out another earth-shaking roar that echoed out all around it. This roar made more servants appear from the blizzard, immediately lunging at the medknights before being promptly defeated.

But it was a never-ending battle. And while we had at first appeared to have the advantage, as the fight went on, our lead seemed less and less certain. Eventually, it started to look as though the knights were barely winning at all.

“So they’re struggling this much, even with your blessing...” Damuel murmured.

I had given the knights the divine protection of Angriff the God of War on the Night of Schutzaria as well, which had completely turned the tide of the battle. And yet, here they were struggling even with it.

“Grr... This is bad!” Damuel exclaimed, gritting his teeth and clenching his gauntleted fists. He looked almost desperate to run into

battle to help. There were now too many feybeast servants for the medknights to handle, forcing the layknights to desperately finish off the ones that were slipping through and heading toward us.

I could understand how Damuel felt. As a knight, he believed that it was his duty to join the fight, but he had been ordered to protect me. I wanted to say that he could go off and join his fellow knights, but that would be seen as him abandoning his duty.

“If only there was something I could do...” I murmured in thought, my brow deeply furrowed.

“You’ve already blessed us with Angriff’s protection, and Ferdinand has strictly ordered you to preserve your mana. Don’t forget that,” Damuel said, warning me not to use any more mana than was necessary as he watched his comrades struggle.

I hadn’t forgotten Ferdinand’s order, but it pained me to just watch them without doing anything myself. Anxious feelings were burning in my chest, and the fact that it looked as though they were losing made it even worse.

“The Knight’s Order battles the Lord of Winter every year. Schnesturms are particularly fearsome Lords, but we have never failed to defeat one,” Damuel explained.

Of course the fight would be a long one; it was like we were fighting winter itself. And given that this happened every year, rushing out in a panic would just make me look like an idiot.

“The archknights are fighting as well. Your duty is to stay here and preserve your mana, Lady Rozemyne.”

My eyes had been instinctively drawn to the knights fighting closer to us, but while the medknights and layknights were fighting the endlessly spawning snow servants, the archknights were launching direct attacks on the snow tiger. I could see several highbeasts facing the massive schnesturm, small lights flashing here and there before racing toward the beast.

They didn’t seem as powerful as the ones from Ferdinand and Karstedt, but it was probably the same attack. The only problem was that no matter how many times the lights flashed, the schnesturm didn’t falter in the slightest, seeming entirely undamaged and unfazed.

The stalemate continued for some time. More and more servants were defeated, only to be reborn. The knights desperately continued to slay them, but the battle only got harder, and I kept thinking that we were going to be overwhelmed. But that never happened. One by one, the knights downed the potions that they had prepared ahead of time, restoring their stamina and allowing them to continue the fight.

Damuel had been right—it was a long war of attrition, and one that the knights were all very well prepared for.

I sighed. "...I kind of wish they would drink the potions before the battle took such a toll on them."

"Since they don't know how long the fight is going to last, they're trying to preserve as many potions as they can," Damuel explained.

Personally, I had no idea how much time had actually passed. The endless cycle of servants being killed and reborn continued, but the blizzard surrounding the schnesturm now seemed less intense, and fewer servants were being created at once.

"The schnesturm seems to be somewhat weakened," Damuel observed.

And a second later, two bright lights began to shine to the left and right of the snow tiger—lights that were just as bright as the initial attack.

Damuel's eyes glistened with hope, and he leaned forward slightly as he watched the schnesturm. "It's Lord Ferdinand and the commander!"

I gripped the steering wheel of my Pandabus and leaned forward as well, squinting to see what might be the final moments of the battle. The two lights launched forward, both aimed toward the schnesturm's right foreleg. They intersected in the air before exploding on impact, though the shockwave didn't seem to reach us, perhaps due to the attacks having first pierced into the snow tiger's body.

And the two of them must have poured their all into the attacks, as the schnesturm's leg was torn apart and quickly fell to the ground.

The surrounding archknights began launching attacks on the other front leg without delay. The focused swarm of blows seemed to be effective, and the schnesturm let out a deafening roar. It was

different from the roar that had given birth to the endless stream of servants, and the snow tiger now appeared to be rampaging while howling with pain and anger. The blizzard around the beast disappeared instantly, as did all of the servants that the knights had been fighting.

“Did we win...?” I asked.

“I don’t know. But the blizzard is clearing— No! It’s healing!”

I thought we had finally won, but that was a mistake; the schnesturm was simply using the power it had used to summon blizzards to heal its injuries instead. The wounds left from the archknights’ focused attacks on its front left leg started closing up before our eyes. All things considered, it wasn’t happening quickly, but at this rate, it wouldn’t be long before the leg they had finally chopped off regenerated completely.

I watched the schnesturm with wide eyes, when I noticed a highbeast racing toward us at incredible speed.

“Lady Rozemyne, that’s Lord Ferdinand!” Damuel yelled, climbing out of Lessy and bringing his highbeast back out so that he wouldn’t be in our way.

I immediately gripped onto Leidenschaft’s spear as tightly as I could, watching Ferdinand approach.

“Come, Rozemyne!” he declared, holding a hand out toward my Pandabus. But Lessy was still in the air. I didn’t know what he wanted me to do after opening the door, so I just stood there with the spear, uncertain.

After a pause, Ferdinand clicked his tongue and whipped out his schtappe. He swung it through the air, causing bands of light to shoot out and wrap around me. As I blinked in surprise, trying to process what was going on, I was pulled toward him like a fish on a hook. I bounced through the air, and before I knew it, I was on Ferdinand’s highbeast.

“Must you always make things difficult?” he sighed.

“...M-My apologies.”

I turned Lessy back into a feystone, then rode on Ferdinand’s highbeast. The lack of a Pandabus windshield meant that the freezing air stabbed into my skin as we flew, and it hurt to keep my

eyes open while moving so fast.

“Our chance at victory is now, while the schnesturm is focused on healing itself,” Ferdinand explained. “Do *not* allow this opportunity to escape.”

“...Right.”

“Grip the spear firmly with both hands, and pour as much mana into it as you can,” Ferdinand instructed, wrapping his left arm around me to make sure I didn’t fall.

And so, I did as Ferdinand said. The feystones on it were all lit up, which I had assumed meant it was full of mana, but nothing stopped me from pouring even more into it.

The clear sky clouded over, and snow began to fall again. The schnesturm’s front left leg had completely recovered, and it was once again using it to swipe through the air. Its right leg seemed to be about halfway regenerated.

“Not yet,” Ferdinand said, his head above mine.

I kept pouring mana into the spear as we approached the schnesturm. Ferdinand pulled his highbeast back to face the sky, so that we began climbing upward.

“That is not enough,” he later repeated. But I was trying as hard as I could.

Eventually, it began to spark with mana, its spearhead glowing bright blue—it must have finally become truly full.

“Hold it with your right hand such that you can throw it at any time,” Ferdinand said.

I gave a nod and readied the spear as instructed. Ferdinand then told me to tighten my grip, holding my wrist with his right hand while taking care not to touch the spear directly. His left arm was still around my stomach, serving as a safety bar while he kept the reins of his highbeast steady.

“Now!” Ferdinand declared, plunging his highbeast downward.

Our descent was rapid and only getting faster, so much so that it was honestly scarier than a freefall. All I could hear was the wind beating against his cape. The wind struck my cheeks like tiny bolts of electricity and my stomach churned, hitting me with a wave of nausea and making tears form in my eyes. I screamed silently, the

both of us plummeting right toward the schnesturm.

“Throw it!” Ferdinand roared, using his right hand to guide my own through a throwing motion. All I needed to do was let go of the shining blue spear at the right time. It left my hand like a shooting star made of pure light, racing directly down toward the beast.



I watched it fall, but Ferdinand wasted no time before pulling his highbeast back. I was immediately hit with the impact of our sudden change in direction, forcing a grunt out of my body.

An instant later, the earth exploded, and an enormous shockwave hit us from below. But thanks to Ferdinand having turned his highbeast around, we rode the shockwave high into the sky before eventually coming to a stop. I was clinging to Ferdinand's left arm as tightly as I could, while he, on the other hand, just casually leaned to the side and looked down.

"Mission complete. It is now time to retrieve the feystone," Ferdinand said dryly, like he was giving a simple instruction, before lowering his highbeast to where the schnesturm had been. "Get a hold of yourself, Rozemyne. You must be the one to collect the feystone. If you intend to pass out or collapse, do so later on, not now."

Don't be so unreasonable, I wanted to say. But instead, I just let out a loud huff.

The schnesturm's body had already vanished, and at the bottom of an immense crater in the ground was Leidenschaft's spear and a feystone. The spear was drained of mana but completely without a scratch, its tip piercing the snow tiger's feystone. As instructed, I removed the feystone, which was white and mostly filled with my faint yellow mana.

"It seems to need a bit more. Finish dyeing it with your mana, Rozemyne," Ferdinand said. "If you do not have enough left, you can put it in your pouch for the time being and spend tomorrow filling it, but I would rather not risk it being dyed by any other sources of mana."

I could empathize with that. A high-quality ingredient was right in front of me, and I wanted it to be as good as it could be.

"I'll do it," I replied, starting to dye the feystone with my mana. Meanwhile, the knights spent time healing each other and preparing to go home.

Karstedt came over, a wide grin spread across his face, and plopped a hand on my head. "This year's hunt ended earlier than expected. It's all thanks to you, Rozemyne."

To me, it had seemed as though the battle was a hard one, but it had apparently been way worse in the years prior. The God of War's blessing and the fact that I had successfully landed the final blow had greatly reduced the time spent fighting and led to the hunt ending much earlier than planned, according to Karstedt.

"I see the dyeing is complete," Ferdinand observed.

I took a good look at the feystone, now dyed with my mana. This was my first time successfully gathering an ingredient. I let out a loud sigh of relief, putting the feystone into my gathering pouch.

The blizzard cleared, and the next day was a sunny one. The kids in the castle apparently cheered at the long-awaited change in weather, and I heard that they all raced outside to play, apparently doing something that sounded similar to ice skating and sledding. I could guess that the kids in the orphanage were going to go and gather parues as well, since the sun was out.

Why am I speaking as though I wasn't there? Well, because *I* was stuck in bed with a fever.

"Siiigh... I want to eat some parue cakes..." I murmured. But the only one who nodded in firm agreement was Damuel.

To the End of Winter

Sunny days became more frequent after the Lord of Winter had been slain. There were, of course, still snowy days, and the cold continued to be harsh, but the increasing number of students coming home showed just how late into the season we were. The early returners were those who had completed their lessons and work sooner than their schedules had accounted for.

The apprentice knights participated in the Order's training regimens and showed up at Order gatherings, while apprentice scholars helped with government work and attended scholar gatherings. When they did not have plans, they would show up at the playroom, meaning that we sometimes had older kids joining the fun.

Wilfried and the others were currently engaged in a game of karuta with some academy students, all of whom had turned a sickly pale color as their younger siblings, who supposedly had no previous reading experience, completely dominated them.

"Alright! I win again!" Wilfried exclaimed.

"Indeed, Lord Wilfried! I beat my older brother, too!" another kid chimed in.

The students looked shocked, having casually accepted the challenge to play only to lose most of the art cards. Some were even cradling their heads, devastated that they had been smashed to pieces by their younger brothers and sisters. There really wasn't anything that newbies could do against experienced players.

"See, everyone? You have all developed so much that you can even beat your older siblings," I said.

I, personally, was still unrivaled when it came to karuta, and my winning streak was unbroken. Wilfried, on the other hand, had started to deteriorate, believing that he could never beat me no matter how hard he tried. That was why I had set up this game with the older kids, hoping that he would regain some of his confidence.

“Since the older siblings already know how to read, they will almost certainly start winning once they have memorized the art cards,” I continued. “That almost certainly won’t happen this winter, but I wish you luck.”

It was one thing to lose to Wilfried, but losing to their younger siblings was a matter of pride for the older brothers and sisters. They wore surprisingly serious expressions as they started lining up the karuta again.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Cornelius said. He always addressed me as “Lady” here, since the playroom was a public area.

I turned to him and tilted my head slightly. “Yes?”

“I see there are multiple karuta decks. Did you purchase them from somewhere? I’ve never seen one before.”

“Oh? Have you really never had the opportunity to see one? They’re study materials that I made myself and brought to the castle last autumn to help teach Wilfried to read.”

It turned out that, since Cornelius could not enter Wilfried’s room while serving as my guard knight, he had been forced to wait outside and thus had never seen the karuta himself.

“You say they are for learning letters, but it seems to me that the children are learning the names of the gods as well.”

“Of course. They learn the names of the gods at the same time, and I believe the children now know which god is subordinate to which and what they govern as well.” At that, I showed him the karuta and explained what everyone had been doing over the winter.

“Lady Rozemyne, this is all content that I’m supposed to be learning next year at the Royal Academy...” Cornelius said, his voice slowly trailing off.

As I scanned the room, I noticed a number of students slumping their shoulders dejectedly as they looked at the karuta. I could guess that these were the ones who had spent this year at the Royal Academy learning about the gods, yet were struggling to memorize what the kids here already knew.

“I suppose the children who played karuta this year are going to end up as honor students, then. My plan was to sell them here at the end of winter, but perhaps I should speed things up a bit and sell

them to academy students as well. After all, they won't improve without people to compete against."

Cornelius gave a firm nod, his fists clenched with the resolve to make next year easier for himself. It was heartwarming to see, but I also felt a sudden tinge of concern for Angelica, who had become a knight specifically because she hated studying.

And so, I had Rihyarda request a meeting with Sylvester, hoping to get his permission to sell my study materials. The meeting was quickly granted, since he too had something that he wanted to discuss with me.

"There you are, Rozemyne. Good to see you," Sylvester said.

It had been a long time since we had last seen each other. Sylvester had been busy holding both lunch and dinner meetings with other nobles throughout the winter, plus he had received invitations to various feasts, so there had been barely any opportunities for us to see one another.

Karstedt, Ferdinand, and Eckhart were also in attendance, with Karstedt standing behind Sylvester and Eckhart behind Ferdinand. In fact, this was my first time seeing Eckhart serving as Ferdinand's guard while in the castle. Damuel was also present as my guard, since our discussion here would be deep and secretive.

"I hear that you were quite helpful during the Lord of Winter hunt," Sylvester said. "Karstedt told me all about it."

"All I really did was fill the divine instrument with mana. Ferdinand and the Order did everything else."

I had pretty much just waited inside Lessy while the knights protected me, then landed the final blow on the weakened feybeast to get the feystone, since I needed it for my own purposes. And since even that had required Ferdinand's assistance, I could hardly puff out my chest with pride and brag about my contribution.

"Far from it," Karstedt said with a hearty laugh. "You gave everyone Angriff's blessing and finished off a Lord, which is no small feat. The hunt this year ended with minimal casualties, and we used up far fewer resources than usual."

Ferdinand gave a satisfied nod. "Obtaining the highest quality winter ingredient possible was well worth losing all the other

materials.”

Apparently, under normal circumstances, everyone would work together to weaken the Lord of Winter over a much longer period. Then, once it was on the verge of death, they would start dissecting it to gather materials. They would strip off everything of use, from fur to meat to bones, taking extra care not to touch the feystone since its body would melt away once it was removed.

But this year, since they had prioritized getting a pure feystone for use in my potion, nothing else had been gathered from the beast. The Order had thus lost a valuable source of income for the year, which I would be covering myself. I didn’t mind, though, since I was basically paying for the feystone and their guard duty.

“Now, what was it you wanted to talk about, Rozemyne?” Sylvester asked. “You want to sell your picture books and teaching materials?”

“That’s right. As I’ve mentioned in my reports, the kids too young for the academy have spent this winter studying a similar curriculum to Wilfried, playing with the karuta, cards, and reading picture books.”

My intention here had been to raise the basic knowledge level of every noble child in the duchy, and Sylvester leaned forward eagerly to hear how it had gone.

“As a result, every single child—including the laynobles—can now read and write the entire alphabet,” I continued. “They know the names of the gods and their subordinates thanks to the karuta, and they are also capable of doing single-digit addition and subtraction. In terms of harspiel practice, the laynobles who had been required to study under their parents due to not having the funds to pay for good teachers have also improved considerably.”

The laynoble children knew that this winter was their only opportunity to learn under a proper teacher, so they had thrown themselves into their harspiel practice. This had also made the mednobles and archnobles study even harder, since they didn’t want to lose to the laynobles. The result was everyone getting a lot better.

“I heard from Cornelius that there is a class in the Royal Academy dedicated to teaching students the names of the gods,” I said.

“There sure is. The names are a pain to learn, and most of them barely ever get used, so it’s real easy to just forget all the ones that don’t have much to do with your life,” Sylvester replied with a shrug. I could guess that this meant the class tended to involve hardcore memorization, and the similar smiles that Karstedt and Eckhart were wearing hinted that they had gone through the same thing themselves.

“Wilfried is currently more familiar with the gods than any of the students who took that course,” I revealed.

Sylvester opened his eyes wide with shock. “Say what...? Wilfried is?”

Nobody could blame him for being surprised; Wilfried had barely been able to write out basic letters at the start of autumn, but now he knew even more about the gods than Royal Academy students. Who could believe that?

“The students who have returned from the Royal Academy are working hard to beat him and the others in karuta, desperate to not keep losing to their younger siblings. This kind of competitiveness is the best way to encourage learning, so I would like to sell the karuta and picture books now rather than later. May I have your permission to sell them in the castle?”

I had only brought three sets of karuta for the kids to play with, but competition was so fierce now that everyone wanted to play with them. And naturally, when it came to fighting over who got to use them next, the older brothers and sisters always won.

“Alright. You have my permission. You’ll be selling the teaching materials in the playroom, correct?”

“Yes. But as it would not be my place to directly sell them to the nobles, I would like your permission to invite the Gilberta Company as my representative merchants.”

My attendants had taken up the roles of salespeople during the harspiel concert, but that was not what attendants were supposed to do. Plus, winter was too busy of a time due to all the visitors for me to be giving them so much extra work. All in all, there were just too many kids to potentially sell things to.

“The Gilberta Company, huh...? Eh, sure. Discuss the time and

other such arrangements with the person responsible for the playroom, and send word with the details once you have it settled. All the nobles will need to know about this in advance if you want to boost your sales, right?"

"I'll keep you updated, Sylvester, but not everyone needs to know. Sales are going to be limited to just nobles with children for now, so I think relying on the kids telling their parents should be enough," I said, earning me confused looks from Ferdinand, Karstedt, and of course Sylvester.

"But... why? Don't you want to sell them to everyone, like those pictures from before?" Sylvester asked.

"The more sales, the better, to be sure. But the fact that these products are being handmade means we only have so many of them, and being swarmed by nobles seeking to earn my favor would be overwhelming to say the least."

We had made enough for each kid and then some, but not enough for every single noble in Ehrenfest. Plus, there would be no point in selling them if people seeking my favor bought them all and left none for the children who actually needed them.

"Alright. You've proven yourself with how well you taught the kids over the winter, so if you think that'll be for the best, then go ahead. Do what you want."

"Thank you, Sylvester."

Now that I had permission to sell my teaching materials, I would need to return to the temple so that I could bring them all to the castle. While I was there, I would also need to contact the Gilberta Company.

I looked up at Sylvester while writing the last few notes into my diptych. "That's all I wanted to talk about, so we can move on now. What is it that you wanted to discuss?"

"Right, right. Your recipes have been pretty popular over here, so..."

"Ah, surprising the nobles with the new food went well, then?"

Wilfried and I could only accept visits from a select few nobles under strict conditions, which meant that we never attended lunch meetings with others. I'd consequently had no idea how my recipes

were being received, but those trying them had apparently all been exceedingly impressed. More nobles than ever were seeking invitations to lunch and dinner meetings from Sylvester, both to discuss his mother's fall from grace and to enjoy the new food.

"I've been asked for the recipes more times than I can count," Sylvester continued, "so I'd like for you to think up a convenient way to teach them to people." I could imagine that he had been using them as a powerful bargaining chip in all sorts of deals.

"Delicious food is the foundation of any life, after all. Maybe I should make an entire recipe book...? I could charge two large golds for it, and it would contain the same recipes taught to both Father's and your chefs."

"Rozemyne, that's cheaper than what we had to pay. How's that fair?" Sylvester asked, raising an eyebrow at me. He had paid three large golds for those thirty recipes.

"Well, of course it's cheaper. Information is more valuable when fewer people know it, and this would be spreading it far and wide. Plus, I'll only be selling the recipes; it's not as though I'll be sending my chefs to teach people the methods."

But Sylvester didn't look convinced.

"My recipes use abnormal cooking methods and require a tedious amount of preparation work, so it's hard to imagine that anyone will end up creating identical meals, even when they're following the same instructions," I continued. "Your expertly trained chefs will earn you years' worth of envy and praise following the book's publication, and if you ever think that admiration is starting to wane, I can simply sell you more new recipes."

"So you're gonna squeeze more money outta me?" Sylvester asked, raising his eyebrow even further. And he was right—that was exactly what I was going to do. I wasn't someone who worked for free, and I needed to raise enough money to pay the Knight's Order for the feystone.

"Either way, this isn't something that's going to happen any time soon. I'll be making and selling the recipe books next winter at the earliest, so if you want to use them as a bargaining chip, it might be wise for us to price gouge as much as possible. What do you think

about limiting production to a hundred copies and raising the price dramatically higher than just two large golds?" I asked. Doing this would give the books a nice premium feeling, and the fact that everyone else would have to suffer until next year would probably allow me to raise the price even more.

As I fell into thought over just how much I should be selling the recipe books for, Sylvester glared at Ferdinand. "...Ferdinand, did you teach her to be like this?"

Ferdinand narrowed his eyes and gave a dismissive laugh. "No, I imagine the Gilberta Company is responsible. Business is outside of my purview. Do not make me out to be the source of all evil."

"My bad, my bad," Sylvester said, looking away and waving his hand in a manner that made it clear he didn't actually feel bad at all. Then, out of nowhere, he shot me a deadly serious look. "Rozemyne, there's one more thing we must talk about—Hasse. I've been kept up to date by Ferdinand, but I would like to hear what you personally intend to do there."

I straightened my back, glanced at Ferdinand, then looked Sylvester straight in the eyes. "What is most important right now is waiting to see what conclusion Hasse comes to, but I intend to have the mayor's faction take responsibility for the attack on the monastery and use them as an example to teach the others how to treat nobles. To this end, I am presently using the Gilberta Company to spread rumors and advice regarding the proper way to behave."

"Hm. Should I take that to mean you plan to settle the monastery attack with a single, one-off punishment?" Sylvester asked, keeping his gaze focused on me. "Hasse's farmers will of course suffer if we don't send priests to them during Spring Prayer, but a single year of reduced harvest won't leave a lasting impression. It's far too small of a punishment for the crime of attacking a member of the archduke's family."

I swallowed hard, feeling the same intense pressure and anxiety I felt when I was forced to come up with a punishment for Delia. Attacking the archduke's family was indeed a serious crime. I needed to think up a punishment that would both convey its seriousness to everyone in the city and satisfy Sylvester, so I

desperately racked my brain for ideas.

"...I-In that case, might I suggest raising their tax rate for the next ten years?" I suggested. "Farmers are essential for producing the taxes we collect, so while it would be easy for you to crush a city like Hasse, would it not be more worthwhile to slowly wring out more money from them over the coming years?" As far as I was concerned, financial penalties were a much, *much* better way of resolving things than mass executions.

I thought that was a pretty modest punishment, but it was enough for Sylvester to subtly flinch. "I can't tell if you're soft or just cruel. Don't you realize that it would be much kinder to kill them outright than to starve them slowly? That'll give us less problems in the future, too."

I shook my head hard in response. It was probably normal for a noble to lean toward mass executions to avoid leaving any loose ends, but death was a permanent solution to temporary problems.

"Meh. Fine. I'll settle on a decade of raised taxes and the execution of the mayor's faction."

"Should we send priests to Hasse during Spring Prayer, then?" I asked. "The increased tax rate won't be of much benefit to us next year if their harvest is poor."

"No, we won't be sending any priests there this year. That's set in stone," Sylvester said, his dark-green eyes gleaming in a way that made it clear there was no room for debate.

I had no choice but to assent. It was beyond me to overrule the word of the archduke, and it was hard to imagine that I would be able to lighten Hasse's punishment any further than I already had.

"I will send you to Hasse so that you may publicize the punishment. Make it clear that their lives were only saved thanks to the Saint of Ehrenfest's grace. But if the citizens still do not understand the weight of their crime, well... you know what I'll have to do."

Sylvester was no doubt insinuating that the city would be burned to the ground. I could also tell that my having to make the announcement while calling myself a compassionate saint was his way of punishing me for being so soft on Hasse. Ferdinand was

looking down at me with a pleased sneer, clearly looking forward to it.

“One more thing—turns out the land you blessed directly brought in a much better harvest than the land that only received chalices,” Sylvester said, lining up several boards in front of me. These were apparently documents from the tax officials listing how big each province’s harvests had been and how much tax had been collected.

I looked over the boards, but despite what Sylvester had said, there didn’t seem to be much of a difference between them at all. “It seems to me that both the provinces and the Central District yielded an equally large harvest.”

“Exactly. For the past few years, the lack of priests and shrine maidens has resulted in the Central District yielding much less than the other provinces. But this year, our harvest was just as large as theirs.”

Sylvester went on to explain that, to ensure a bountiful harvest, the giebes usually poured their own mana into their land as well as the mana from the chalices. This, coupled with the blue priest shortage, had resulted in the provinces bringing in far greater yields than the Central District over the past few years.

“Rozemyne. I hate to ask this, but... I want you to directly bless Ehrenfest’s land again during this Spring Prayer,” Sylvester forced out after a pause, clearly uncomfortable. It must have really pained him to ask for my help despite my recent complaints about being too busy.

I was able to refuse his attempts to work Ferdinand to the bone in the castle, since that wasn’t something the High Priest should be doing in the first place. But if the archduke had determined that a job was necessary for the good of the duchy, as the High Bishop I couldn’t simply decline. A wave of dread washed over me as I thought about how many weeks I would need to spend chugging those disgusting potions, but I had no choice but to accept.

“If you believe that is for the best, then...” I began, but Ferdinand protectively stood in front of me before I could finish.

“Sylvester,” he said with a sigh, “Rozemyne will only bless land in the Central District. The other blue priests shall be entrusted with

taking the chalices to the provinces; otherwise, we would be stealing their work and introducing problems that will impede the spring gathering."

"Sure, that's good enough. Make it happen," Sylvester said with a nod. "That's everything I have to say."

Ferdinand began tapping a finger against his temple, presumably already planning out Spring Prayer. Both he and Sylvester looked as though they had more that they wanted to discuss with one another, and after a pause, Sylvester spoke again.

"You can leave now, Rozemyne."

"In that case, once the Gilberta Company is ready to sell our goods, I shall return with the additional chalices I have been oh-so-kindly entrusted with," I said, before making my exit and heading back to the playroom in Lessy.

"Everyone, Aub Ehrenfest has given me permission to sell the karuta, picture books, and playing cards here. Those who would like to purchase their own, please discuss payment with your parents," I announced upon my return.

The children raced over to me, positively glowing with excitement. "So, if we buy karuta of our own, we can play them back at our summer estates?" one asked.

"That's right. Do your best and practice for next winter."

The little boy was joyfully beaming over having beaten his older brother at something for the first time. The brother in question was also wearing a grin, saying that he would win as soon as he had gotten some more practice at home.

"Lady Rozemyne, will you be selling copies of each picture book as well?" one girl asked.

"Of course."

Spreading the picture books was my number one goal here, and I was even eager to sell my new ones, if possible. The text was already done, and Wilma had completed most of the art the last time I checked, so if we hurried, there was a chance that we would be able to start selling the new volume just in time.

...Maybe I should push back the day we sell our teaching materials and make just enough copies for the number of children

here? I pondered, at which point a girl about as old as Cornelius came over to hesitantly ask a question.

“Lady Rozemyne, I would like to learn about the gods before next year’s classes. Do you have any picture books for the autumn and winter subordinate gods?”

“...Not yet, unfortunately. My workshop might have the autumn picture books ready before you all go home if they work extra hard, but the winter ones will have to wait until next year.”

I had no idea whether there would be enough time for an entirely new picture book and didn’t want to make promises that I wasn’t certain I could keep. I would need to ask Lutz and Gil whether printing them earlier would be feasible, just to be sure.

“Aw. They are such wonderfully made picture books. I would have loved there to be more...”

“I am glad that you enjoy them so much. Let me see... I believe they will be ready by the next Starbind Ceremony, so I shall ask Aub Ehrenfest whether I may sell them to the nobles who come to the castle then. That way, they will be ready before you go to the Royal Academy next winter.”

The Starbind Ceremony itself was for those who had come of age, but there was nothing stopping me from scheduling to sell the new picture books then and having the students fly over on their highbeasts.

“I shall be looking forward to it,” the girl responded, offering me a graceful smile before stepping away. And moments later, I heard another noble girl enthusiastically say that she would ask her parents to buy every single book.

From there, everyone started to discuss which of the books and toys they would purchase. I watched them eagerly talk among themselves out of the corner of my eye while speaking to the attendants in charge of the playroom. But while we were trying to work out the best day on which to sell my teaching materials, for a brief moment, something caught my attention. Amid all the excited chatter, Philine was sadly looking down at the floor.

Selling the Materials

I asked Gil to contact Benno upon my return to the temple, and he took a letter to the Gilberta Company on the next sunny day. It seemed that Benno did not have as much work in the winter, so I got a nigh immediate response stating that he would be ready to meet with me that same afternoon.

“In that case, I shall prepare the orphanage director’s chambers for his visit. Please inform Lutz of this.”

“As you wish,” Gil replied.

Lutz went back for lunch with my reply, and at fifth bell, the Gilberta Company arrived. Benno, Mark, and Lutz were all in attendance. We headed straight into my hidden room, at which point I leapt onto Lutz, having barely seen him over the winter. Then, while my internal batteries recharged, I mentioned to Benno that I wanted him to sell my teaching materials in the castle.

“Sorry, what? You want to sell them *in* the castle?! Hold on a moment!”

“But we don’t have a moment to spare! They need to go on sale as soon as possible.”

“Quit thinking so literally! What I was going to say was, my current employees aren’t well-trained enough to go to the castle right now.”

The Gilberta Company was primarily doing business with laynobles, while slowly spreading out to mednobles and archnobles. My connections had already secured them one high-ranking customer in the form of Elvira, but as one could guess from the fact that only Benno and Mark ever brought goods to her, they barely had any employees who were capable enough to visit the castle. Even those who had manners hurriedly beaten into them in preparation for serving in the Italian restaurant weren’t completely ready.

“...Employees, hm? What if you were to bring some of my attendants and gray priests dressed as servants, then? We’re just

selling products here, not taking orders, so anyone who can do math should be just fine."

When doing business with nobles, it was standard for everything to be made to order. Outside of consumable goods like plant paper, one would never just bring and sell premade products. Even the rinsham was being specifically catered to the archnobles using it; Benno would bring them various samples made from seasonal ingredients and scrubs, then take orders based on their preferred combinations. I personally just purchased the samples, but to maintain my archnoble pretenses, I filled out the order form and pretended they were being tailor-made for me.

"You're just gonna outright sell what you've been making as winter handiwork? You're not gonna take custom orders from the nobles in the castle?" Benno asked, his eyes wide.

I nodded. "Yes, we're just going to sell them as is. But we need to act quickly. You and Mark can handle the orders from nobles who want more customized products, but we'll sell the books outright to those who'd rather have them right away. For that, any gray priests who are good with math will be acceptable."

"...Alright. On our end, we've got Mark, Leon, and me. We'll need you to choose two adult gray priests to help out, though, and you'll want clothes prepared for them before taking them to the castle, right?"

We naturally couldn't take the gray priests to the castle in their robes; instead, we would need proper sets of clothing for them to wear so that they would blend right in with the Gilberta Company.

"Gil, who do you think would be good for this job? Fran is already going to be carrying the chalices, so we'd only need one more person."

"Fritz once served a blue priest, so he should do just fine."

"In that case, I shall ask Fran and Fritz for their help."

Having settled on our new salesmen, it was time to determine the price and quantity of our products.

"I think we can price the picture books at one small gold each, the karuta sets at five large silvers, the black-and-white playing cards at three large silvers, and the colored playing cards at one small gold," I

suggested.

Given that we had successfully lowered the cost of plant paper and ink since selling the initial picture books aimed at rich people, we could reduce the price of our new books without issue. The karuta sets used mimeograph printing, as Wilma naturally could not draw them all herself, and as these were made from wood, they were cheaper to produce than books. As for the decks of playing cards, these had even fewer components than the karuta, which was why the black-and-white variant was our cheapest product. The ones that were in color, however, while very pretty, were a lot more costly due to the rarity of the ink. For this reason, they were targeted toward archnobles who wanted to make their high status clear.

“For now, let us prepare a hundred of each. That should be enough, considering how many kids there are.”

“Got it. I’ll load wooden crates with a hundred of each.”

With that matter sorted, we started discussing the best way to go about selling our goods. The biggest problem was that we were dealing with nobles here, which meant the sales methods used on commoners might not work. Mark left partway through to begin preparations early, and once we were done, Benno got Fran’s and Fritz’s measurements for their clothes and started showing them the ropes. Meanwhile, Gil and Lutz went to the workshop to check the products and start boxing them up.

As this went on, I noticed that Damuel was wearing a tight frown, looking down a little in silence as the Gilberta Company busily moved about. It was the same depressed expression that I had seen on Philine’s face back in the playroom.

“What’s wrong, Damuel?” I asked. “If you have noticed something important, please feel free to tell me. It is possible that you know things that none of us do.”

There was still a lot about this world’s culture that I did not know, and while Benno was doing business with nobles, the fact that he was a commoner meant that this would be his first time entering the castle. Assuming that Damuel had picked up on an issue that only nobles would notice, it was possible that we would end up making a huge mistake while doing business unless he said something here.

“Well, what I noticed is that... while your picture books are quite lovely, Lady Rozemyne, and cheaper than other books, they are still too expensive for a laynoble family to comfortably afford. I am just worried that there are going to be many children who feel frustrated and inferior to the others. I say this as someone who personally comes from a noble family on the poorer side.”

It was common knowledge here that poor laynobles generally had even less money than rich commoners, and I bit my lip in frustration at having not remembered such a simple fact. The picture books made learning easy, but the kids who needed them most were those who were too poor to hire skilled teachers. Even here, the amount of money that one’s family had would have a huge impact.

“I understand that not all of the nobles are going to be able to buy the books, but we cannot lower the price any further than we already have,” I said politely, noticing Benno shoot me a glare mid-sentence. He would never approve of reducing prices for nobles, and considering our future business plan, it would not be wise for us to sell them at a loss from the very start.

“It is true that the price is already much lower than it could be,” I mused, “but I think it would be smart to think up a way for everyone who wants a book to be able to get one. Lutz, do you have ideas?”

“I think the only solution is to lend books to those who can’t buy them.”

Books were expensive—so expensive that just owning them was a sign of one’s wealth. For that reason, both buying and borrowing them was no simple matter. The temple’s book room was made such that only members of the temple could enter, and one not only had to be a blue priest or a blue shrine maiden to borrow from it, but they also needed the High Bishop’s or High Priest’s permission.

To enter the castle’s book room, one first needed to provide evidence that they were of a high enough status. Those who wanted to borrow a book would then need to pay a large deposit, which would be used as collateral to cover the costs of any damages such as the pages being torn or dirtied. Earth’s ideal of a library lending books out for free was just unthinkable here.

“Right now, borrowing books isn’t easy. But what if we thought

about this as a challenge to change that culture and make the process more accessible?" Lutz suggested.

I paused in thought for a moment. "...If the problem is the collateral being too high, perhaps we could just lower it."

We could make the rental fees cheap and have the parents agree to pay money in the event of damage. This would be somewhat of an abuse of authority, but I could imagine that the parents would ensure the books were treated well, since they were borrowing them from me, the archduke's adopted daughter. This would also guarantee that they paid up in the case that any books unfortunately did get damaged.

"Perhaps we could make the rental fee a small sum and the exchange of a new story?" I added, thinking back to the tales that Philine and the other girls had told me. Were I to pay for the stories, it would probably allow even those too poor to buy the books to rent them instead.

"I think you should consider the length of the story here, too. Some might be a lot longer than others."

"True. I'll consider that when purchasing them," I said. By calculating the payments based on the length of each manuscript and having the kids write them out, everything would hopefully work out; I would get new stories, and the kids with poor handwriting skills would get an opportunity to practice and earn money. I was killing three birds with one incredibly clever stone.

But just as I was starting to pump myself up, I noticed Benno's mouth twitching. "Lady Rozemyne, we are dealing with considerable sums of money here; I do not believe it is wise to change established practices based on sudden whims. Please settle on an idea only after discussing it with the High Priest and making the proper preparations," he said, his dark-red eyes brimming with an anger that seemed to say, *"Don't give me extra work when I'm already so busy I could die."*

I had more than enough experience by now to know that I was about five seconds away from being on the receiving end of some miraculous indoor thunder—thunder that no doubt would have already been unleashed had I not been the oh-so-noble adopted

daughter of the archduke.

“I suppose I should give the idea of paying for manuscripts some more thought before implementing it. For now, we can simply lower rental fees. Ohohoho,” I said to avoid Benno’s anger, writing all that down into the diptych in my heart. I would consider renting the materials to laynobles as the foundation for a future book rental business or my private library.

The day that we were due to sell our products came in what felt like the blink of an eye. I formed my Pandabus at the temple’s front entrance and watched as everyone piled luggage into it, and soon enough, it was packed full of wooden crates containing a hundred each of the karuta sets, picture books, and playing card decks.

Since Fran and Fritz were going to be accompanying us as merchants from the Gilberta Company, Benno had given them clothes similar to what Mark and Leon had on. But while Fran was used to wearing normal clothes when visiting the lower city, Fritz looked uneasy and uncomfortable in them.

“Rozemyne, do you truly intend to have those of the Gilberta Company ride in this?” Ferdinand asked, frowning as he looked at my dear, sweet Lessy.

“Well, it’s snowing outside. The carriages might get stuck along the way if we send them out, don’t you think?” I said, pointing at the thick layer of snow covering the ground.

Ferdinand crossed his arms and looked between the snow and the merchants. “Your argument is a sound one, but no other noble in Ehrenfest would allow merchants and their products to ride on their highbeast.”

“That’s okay. I’m fully prepared to become a trailblazer in everything I do, remembered in history forevermore as the source of all trends.”

“No future nobles are going to follow your example; you shall stand alone in history,” he shot back with a sigh, before looking over to the others. “Fran, Fritz—I imagine it is not easy being forced to accommodate the whims of your master, but I trust you both to do your best. As for you, Benno, I understand the stress you feel better

than anyone. But to walk with Rozemyne is to deal with the countless ideas she spouts forth from seemingly nowhere. This is a fate you chose yourself, and you must resign yourself to it."

At that, everyone glanced my way, then gave solemn, defeated nods.

...Should I be concerned about how easily everyone just accepted that? I mean, you're all sticking with me because you want to, not because you're resigned to your fates or whatever... right?

I puffed out my cheeks in a pout, but nevertheless opened the doors of my Pandabus for them. "If you've all finished with your preparations, please feel free to enter."

Fran climbed in first since he was already used to doing so, followed by Benno, who was wearing the grimace of someone who had just seen something downright creepy. Mark had his usual smile on his face, while Leon started touching Lessy all over and making surprised noises as soon as he was inside. Fritz, in contrast, looked extremely fearful as he got in, even yelping in surprise when I shut the door.

"Everyone, please fasten your seatbelts. Fran, teach them how to."

"As you wish," Fran replied. And while he showed them, Brigitte climbed into the front passenger seat. It was apparently essential that I bring a guard with me, since I was traveling with merchants.

Once we were soaring through the sky in Lessy, the back seats got noisy. It made sense, given that it was normally unthinkable that a commoner would ever have the opportunity to fly, but most of them were saying things like "I feel sick" or "I'm getting dizzy." Based on how overjoyed Gil and Nicola had been when they rode in my Pandabus, it was safe to say that the negative reaction was due to today's riders mostly being hardheaded older men.

"Welcome home, Lady Rozemyne," Norbert began upon our arrival, only to stop and widen his eyes when he saw just how many people were coming out of my highbeast. As expected, to a regular noble, the idea of my highbeast being full of commoners was genuinely shocking. He watched them unloading the crates, closed his eyes, and then took a very deep breath. "Lady Rozemyne, are

these the men from the Gilberta Company?”

“That’s right. This is the permit given to me by Aub Ehrenfest. Norbert, we shall be heading straight to the playroom. Please guide us there, if you would.”

Norbert paused for a split second, then smiled. “As you wish. Please follow me.”

Ferdinand, having just finished putting away his highbeast, massaged his temples and let out a heavy sigh. “Rozemyne, this is not the door for commoners. There is a separate entrance for merchants and the like.”

Ah. Of course commoners wouldn’t use the same entrance as members of the archduke’s family, I thought, dejectedly hanging my head. That was something I should have known by now. I used a different gate than the merchants when entering the Noble’s Quarter, so it only made sense that I would also use a different one to enter the castle. Merchants were supposed to enter through the commoner door that was used by servants and such.

“Um... Sorry? I, ah...” I trailed off, not even knowing what to say.

Ferdinand shook his head. “Apologies, Norbert. I did not realize that Rozemyne intended to fly the merchants here in her highbeast until I saw her preparing to do just that moments prior. It was too late to arrange for carriages, and now, here we are. Rozemyne, you can be forgiven this time, but take care not to repeat this mistake in the future. My apologies again, Norbert, but I ask that you take them through this door just this once.”

“As you wish, Lord Ferdinand.”

I got into my one-person Pandabus and followed Norbert and Ferdinand. The members of the Gilberta Companies were close behind me, carrying the crates of merchandise.

“Good morning, Lady Rozemyne,” the kids all said once I arrived.

“Good morning, everyone. It will take some time for us to prepare, so you are welcome to play among yourselves until we are ready.”

The kids were looking at me with the same hopeful eyes as always, and I could see that there were many parents here as well. They had probably considered this a perfect opportunity to establish connections with me.

“You’re late, Rozemyne,” Wilfried said with his arms crossed and head held high. I had asked him to help me with selling the goods today, and since it was his first time being entrusted with work, he was getting a little *too* excited about it.

“Wilfried, please play karuta with the others as a demonstration for the adults. This is a very important job, since they are more likely to buy something when they understand how to use it.”

“That makes sense to me. Let’s play, then!” Wilfried exclaimed to his followers, who all energetically agreed and started lining up the karuta.

The nobles gathered around and watched the boys’ karuta demonstration with great interest. This meant that the girls were being left with nothing to do, however, so I called out to them.

“May I ask you all to read the picture books aloud to your fathers and mothers?” I asked. “That way, they will see just how much your reading skills have developed.”

“As you wish, Lady Rozemyne!”

The girls, chattering with gleeful voices, raced over to their parents with the picture books hugged to their chests. Then, they started to read aloud. I could hear the tension creeping into their voices as they began, since they were used to being read to rather than the other way around.

“And Cornelius, please play a game of cards with your friends,” I said, handing him a pack.

“But I am your guard,” he said, looking at them unhappily. Unfortunately for him, though, out of all my retainers present, he was the only one able to mingle with the students.

“Since Angelica is not here today, you are the only student I have. I’m counting on you here.”

“...Okay, I understand. I suppose I am the only person for the job, then. I shall do as you wish.”

Angelica had yet to return from the Royal Academy, so I had nobody else to ask. Cornelius did as instructed, pulling aside some students and starting a game of blackjack with slightly modified rules, at which point the nearby adult nobles gathered around to watch.

While they were focused on the demonstrations, I shifted my attention to the Gilberta Company and signaled for them to begin preparations. I could see that stands had been set up in one corner as we had requested, so I took the opportunity to thank the attendants in charge of the playroom.

"I see the stands are all prepared. Thank you. Now, Benno—line up the products, if you would be so kind."

"As you wish, Lady Rozemyne."

Benno lined up the products on the stands as we had previously discussed, then readied enough change to make the payment process easier. There were two chairs and a table by the stands, which was where Wilfried and I would be sitting to speak to the nobles who wanted to buy the teaching materials.

At the far end of the room was a chair for Ferdinand, placed so that he could see the entirety of the room and observe the sales process. He would be watching all of us like a hawk, keeping track of the nobles' behavior, whether the Gilberta Company was good enough to return to the castle at a future date, and whether I was about to make a foolish mistake. While we were in the preparation phase, he walked around and observed each demonstration with great interest.

Leon was standing at the playing cards stand, Fran at the picture books stand, and Fritz at the karuta stand, while Benno and Mark stood behind my table, ready to speak to any nobles who wanted to engage in more detailed business discussions.

"Lady Rozemyne, everything is ready," Benno said.

I nodded, waited for Wilfried to win his current game, and then addressed the room. "Thank you for your patience, everyone. The Gilberta Company will now begin selling the teaching materials."

At that, Wilfried pushed the responsibility of clearing up the karuta onto the kid beside him, raced over, and sat in the chair beside me.

"Those of you interested in making a purchase, please come right over," I continued with a smile. "As we are selling teaching materials here, we shall prioritize customers who have children with them."

It wasn't long before the nobles started to approach our stand, naturally coming forth in order of their status. The first kid walked

over with her father; then they both kneeled. The children had all introduced themselves to me previously, but the parents had not, so they all needed to open with the appropriate long greetings. These greetings were so long that I would not be able to handle them all myself, which was why I had asked Wilfried to help out.

It became evident rather quickly that there were more boys with their parents lining up in front of Wilfried, while more girls were queuing in front of me. They had probably figured that this gave them the best chance of eventually becoming our retainers.

Once the first long introduction was over, I instructed the father and daughter to stand, then held out an order slip. “What would you like to buy today, Giebe Groschel?”

“My daughter assures me that your picture books are beyond lovely, Lady Rozemyne, and she believes her little sister would be interested in the karuta and cards as well. Who am I to deny my beloved daughters what they so desire? I shall buy them all,” he said, taking a pen and smiling as he looked down at his daughter, who was poring over the order slip.

The girl gave a proud grin, her distinctive crimson hair bobbing up and down slightly as she giggled in satisfaction. “Lady Rozemyne, your picture books are very easy to read. You may read them as well, Father.”

I smiled broadly at her for praising the books, checked the form, and then handed it to Benno.

“Here are your goods,” Benno said, handing Count Groschel’s attendants the ordered products in exchange for the required amount of money. And that was that.

“I pray that they will assist you in your learning.”

“Thank you, Lady Rozemyne.”

Once Count Groschel had left, the next noble stepped forward. I glanced to the side as I listened to another greeting to see Wilfried handling the noble before him with a confident attitude. He took the order slip and gave it to Mark.

“Giebe Kirnberger, everything being sold here is perfect for studying. Thanks to these materials, I learned all my letters *and* the names of the gods. Keep your kids focused and they’ll learn too.”

“Thank you for your advice, Lord Wilfried.”

Gradually, the long lines waiting to be served by Wilfried and me started to go down. As expected, only the archnobles with their riches could afford to buy all the teaching materials. When we reached the mednobles, most seemed to be primarily interested in the karuta and cards, because all their children could play together with them. Fewer of them purchased the picture books, given how expensive each volume was, instead prioritizing the karuta as a cheaper option for learning about the gods. Then, when it came time for the laynobles, most only purchased one product, seemingly having struggled to afford even that. It all appeared to be worthwhile, though; the kids were burning with motivation as they clutched their karuta or playing cards, determined to win next year.

But then there were the several children who had nothing at all, forced to enviously watch the kids who had been bought teaching materials by their parents. It seemed that those who knew from the start that they would not be able to afford anything had not wasted time asking their parents at all.

Among the sad-looking kids was Philine.

“Philine, did your parents not come today?” I asked.

“...No. They were busy today, it seems,” she said with a forced smile. The nearby kids without parents all looked away, not wanting to admit the same.

“I see. Well, at the end of winter we shall be loaning out the picture books and karuta presently in use, so now is the time to discuss borrowing them with your parents.”

“Lady Rozemyne, I appreciate the thought, but...” Philine trailed off, her lips trembling a little as she struggled to say that she did not even have the money for that.

“Just so you know, you won’t need money to borrow teaching materials from me.”

“What?” everyone asked, looking up with surprised expressions.

I smiled a little at their expected reaction, then put a hand over my mouth and lowered my voice to make it sound like I was sharing a secret. “What I want are stories that I don’t already know. Please gather all kinds for me.”

“Um... Would... Would stories like the ones my mother told me count?”

“Yes, Philine. You have already taught me three stories. Thus, I shall lend you three picture books.”

First Philine, then all the other laynoble children, lit up with joy.

“Lady Rozemyne, will you lend me a karuta set as well in exchange for some stories I know?”

“Of course. As long as I don’t already know the story, consider the karuta set yours. But take care not to get the materials dirty or break them; you will be charged if something happens to them.”

“Okay!”

I would have the parents sign an agreement saying that they would treat the goods well and pay for any damages. And in return for being told new stories, I would lend them the teaching materials from spring until next winter.

Angelica and the Coming of Spring

Selling the teaching materials went well. Elvira arrived as we were finishing and bought one of everything for Cornelius. Then, with a smile, she obliquely informed Benno that she was running low on rinsham and wanted him to visit again so that she could order more. Of course, an archnoble such as her doing direct business with the Gilberta Company drew a lot of attention.

Benno returned the smile and nodded, but his eyes seemed to be wavering a little. He was in the castle with dozens of nobles paying close attention to him; there was certainly an immense amount of pressure on him right now. I knew exactly how he felt, since the same thing had happened to me during my baptism ceremony and winter debut.

G-Good luck, Benno!

Once we were done selling the teaching materials, several married women came forward also hoping to purchase rinsham, so Benno and Mark started doing business with them as best they could.

“Ferdinand, I would like to visit Aub Ehrenfest to inform him that sales have finished, and to bring him what we previously discussed.”

“I shall handle that. You stay here,” Ferdinand replied, looking at Benno and Mark. He then had an attendant pick up the box of chalices and follow him to Sylvester’s office.

Meanwhile, Fran, Fritz, and Leon were cleaning up the remaining products and handling the money we had earned.

Once the last of the sales had been made and business discussions were over, I took the Gilberta Company back to the temple, along with Fran and Fritz. I stayed there for just one night, then immediately returned to the castle. I would be given a report on the sales later.

The next day, in the playroom, I told the kids to write their names

on the teaching materials they had bought so that they wouldn't lose them. Since they had identical copies of the same products, labeling them to distinguish who owned what was pretty basic stuff.

"Please write your name or family name here for the playing cards, here for the karuta, and here for the picture books. As the products are made to look the same, steps must be taken to avoid mistaking someone else's belongings for your own."

Some kids worked together with their siblings to write their family name, while the archnoble children who had bought everything sighed at the monotonous task ahead. I quickly picked up on this, and they were all very visibly relieved when I said they could just write their names on what they were using at the moment, leaving the rest for their family to help with when they returned home later in the day.

"As we will only be using the picture books today, you need only write your names in the books you have."

I kept an eye on the playroom while listening to the laynoble children and writing down the stories they told me. Up until now, I had only heard tales from the girls, so this was my first time hearing anything from the boys. It was pretty funny how they would often pause in confusion mid-sentence, and then hurriedly make up the next development on the spot. Some of the things they came up with were genuinely hilarious.

Spring was getting ever closer, and even with the flurries of snow, there were far more sunny days than before. This naturally meant there were more days where the kids went to play outside. I joined them as well, hoping to increase my stamina. The snow had been packed down in the spots where nobles typically landed their highbeasts, and these areas were now surrounded by large mounds that were perfect for sledding down. My plan was to join in with that and the snowball fights.

"Let's go, Lady Rozemyne!" the kids would exclaim. And while I did my best to race after them, I always ended up falling flat on my face after just a few steps through the snow. I eventually resigned myself to walking instead, but even then, it wasn't long before I was

back on the ground, with the kids getting farther and farther away.

Despite my many valiant attempts, I did not reach the top even once. I was so exhausted that I had to give up on sledding, but when I bent over to make a snowball, I was immediately sniped in the head with a preemptive strike that knocked me unconscious and caused a fever. That was the end of my first snowball fight—that is, assuming you were generous enough to call it one.

That said, I do feel stronger now... Like a foot soldier forced to march through the snow. Yeah.

Such was how I spent my days as the end of winter approached. Since the coming of age ceremony and the Royal Academy's graduation ceremony were coming up, the archduke and archduchess, the students who had finished their lessons early, and the parents of the graduating students all went to the Royal Academy. They would come back together once the ceremony was over, at which point the nobles would collectively hold a large feast celebrating the return of spring and marking the end of winter socializing. The land-owning nobles would then all be returning to the provinces they ruled.

Prior to the feast, while the students were returning from the Royal Academy one by one, I received a humble, deferential letter from Angelica's parents requesting to meet in person. I was surprised to see them ask so directly, given how much they had groveled before, but despite my confusion, I accepted and arranged a date.

On the day of, I entered to find Angelica kneeling with her parents. She was in between them, with her head facing the ground.

No sooner had I stepped inside and Rihyarda shut the door behind me than her parents let out desperate cries of remorse. "We express our sincerest apologies for what has occurred!"

"Um... Wh-What might you be referring to?"

"Our ineptitude at parenting has once again placed a burden upon you!" they apologized, sounding so much more desperate than last time that I couldn't help but blink in surprise. I had absolutely no idea what they were talking about.

They clasped their stomachs and, with deathly pale looks on their

faces, began to explain. To sum things up, Angelica had failed to pass this year's courses at the Royal Academy, which meant she would need to take supplementary lessons during the spring and would not be able to guard me for an additional season.

They pleaded for me to remove Angelica from her position as my guard knight, trembling as they did so, desperate to remove her from my sight before she committed some other grave error. But I knew enough about noble society to guess that doing this would have an enormous impact on her future. Being assigned to guard the archduke's adopted daughter was a great honor, but being relieved from one's duty as the result of poor grades would be a permanent stain on a noble's reputation.

"Rihyarda, what would you suggest I do in this situation? I will be largely absent from the castle in the coming season due to Spring Prayer, so having Angelica finish her supplementary lessons during that time won't be an issue. But is there something more important about this that I need to know?"

"I believe that you can simply do as you like here, milady. It is up to you whether you wish to deem her a failure and have her removed from your service, or keep her in hope that she will improve."

It seemed that, as Angelica's mistress, I could make decisions such as this at my own leisure.

"What would you like me to do, Angelica?" I asked.

"...You wouldn't mind me continuing to serve you?" she asked, looking surprised.

I nodded. "If you work hard and return successful at the end of spring, I would like to keep you in my service."

My words prompted Angelica's parents to look at each other with worry. "Lady Rozemyne, we are aware that you are a deeply compassionate woman, but it will not benefit you to keep our daughter by your side. You do not need a retainer who only damages your reputation. Please, rethink this decision."

That was probably the right thing for the family of an attendant serving the archduke's adopted daughter to say; it was very noble-like to remove those who were deemed incompetent in the interest of expanding your family's influence. But I did not like that mindset. My

family had cared for me no matter how weak and useless I was, so seeing this kind of reaction from the nobles actually made me a little upset.

I appreciated that Angelica's parents were thinking about what was best for me, but I wanted them to think about what was best for their daughter, too. This was probably just me being selfish and refusing to adapt to noble principles, but still, those were my feelings. Wilfried's attendants and guard knights had been as bad as could be, yet I had still given them an opportunity to redeem themselves; I wanted to give Angelica that same chance.

"I shall take your words to heart, but I would like to see how Angelica is doing at the end of spring before making my decision," I replied, shaking my head as I shot down their pleas.

They looked between Angelica and me with openly defeated expressions, then bowed their heads in respect. "As you wish."

"The children in the playroom were able to memorize the names of the gods over the winter, so I am sure that Angelica will do just fine," I said, standing up and gesturing for her parents to leave.

Once they were gone, I immediately established the first ever Raise Angelica's Grades Squadron, which consisted of all my guard knights, whether they liked it or not. We would be discussing what classes she was going to take, what problems she had encountered, and what she was struggling to understand. There weren't any attendants or scholars in the squadron, since they would not have a proper grasp of what knights needed to learn, and since men could not enter my room, our first strategy meeting would be held in the meeting room.

"Angelica, what classes are you struggling with?" I asked.

Students in the Royal Academy were told their grades directly rather than receiving report cards or the like, so asking her was the only way to find out what she needed help with. My plan was to start by focusing on her weakest points.

Angelica's dark-blue eyes gleamed. "Pretty much all the written lessons," she answered eagerly.

A feeling of mutual despair instantly crashed down upon everyone in the room. Brigitte tightly closed her eyes, and Damuel dropped his

jaw.

“Angelica, that’s just...” Brigitte began, before trailing off uncomfortably.

“The written lessons aren’t that hard though, are they?” Damuel asked. He had decided to become a knight since his older brother was already a scholar, but academics still seemed to be his strong point. As a laynoble without much mana, he instead struggled more with the hands-on practical lessons than the written ones.

“Um, Angelica... What classes are you taking?”

“I’m... not sure,” Angelica replied, cocking her head to the side.

Cornelius’s eyebrows shot up in anger. “Someone your age should be memorizing the names of the gods and studying the fundamentals of warfare! Are you even attending lessons?!”



Angelica was a third-year student at the Royal Academy. And yet, out of everyone here, she knew the least about her own classes. Even Cornelius knew more than she did, and that was only because he had looked into what he would be learning next year. I felt a profound bond with Ferdinand, as I was overwhelmed with the sudden urge to rub my temples.

“Damuel, Brigitte, Cornelius—would you be so kind as to give an exact description of what her classes cover?” I asked, sensing that it would be pointless to ask Angelica anything else. Brigitte’s and Damuel’s memories, alongside Cornelius’s research, would be a lot more reliable than anything she had to say.

“Of course, milady,” they all replied, going on to tell me exactly what I wanted to know.

“Okay, so, to sum everything up: All third-years need to memorize the names and domains of the gods, then acquire the divine protection of the ones most compatible with them. As a knight, she also needs to learn the fundamentals of warfare, as well as the different types of weapons and how to use them. Correct?”

“There is much more to learn if you look at the individual classes in more detail, but as long as you focus on these areas, there is nothing to worry about. I truly don’t understand how she could fail,” Damuel said, shaking his head in confusion. While he had struggled with the practical lessons, he had passed all the written ones with flying colors.

Brigitte nodded in agreement. She was more of an average student, being reasonably proficient in both written and practical lessons, so she hadn’t really struggled with anything in the academy.

Cornelius was probably the closest to Angelica; he was so reliant on his mana and getting good grades in practical lessons that he struggled comparatively more with the written ones. But even so, as an archnoble, he made sure to maintain grades that would not bring shame to his family.

“Given that there are grades, can I assume there are tests?” I asked.

“Yes. Students are given an explanation of what each class is about, then a test. Those who fail must take the class, and then a

final exam," Damuel explained, earning him a glare from Brigitte.

"And yet you never attended one of those final exams, did you?" she asked, placing her hands on her hips.

I tilted my head in confusion. "What do you mean, Brigitte?"

"If you have mastered what the class is about, you can schedule a meeting with the professor during their office hours and take the final exam early. I used all my spare time practicing the practical lessons, but even after finishing the written ones sooner than expected, I still could not leave the Royal Academy before the end of winter."

It seemed that those who had older brothers and sisters, willing seniors in the Royal Academy dorms, or just great confidence in themselves, could study outside of classes to finish them early. That explained why some students returned to the castle significantly sooner than the others.

"If you manage to secure some free time, you can spend it strengthening your weapon, learning to make magic tools, or taking other classes that you are interested in," Damuel continued. "Some take this opportunity to deepen their relationships with other duchies."

I could guess that Ferdinand had blasted through his classes with godlike momentum. It was easy to imagine him taking a bunch of tests at once, passing them all, and then being heralded as a genius by everyone. He wouldn't acknowledge this praise, of course, since he would be entirely focused on his next classes.

"...So she just needs to attend the classes and pass the next exam, right? In that case, Angelica, please study alongside Cornelius. This way, he should also have no trouble passing when he takes the test next year."

"I don't mind, but..." Cornelius looked at Angelica with concern. "Lady Rozemyne, will you be using those karuta of yours to teach her the names of the gods?"

"That's right. Cornelius, would you please bring a set for me?"

"As you wish."

My guard knights had watched the game in the playroom but hadn't played themselves, so I made them try a round with the set

that Cornelius owned. They were, of course, all complete beginners, and in the end, Damuel won. Cornelius looked frustrated at having lost, but Angelica did not seem to care in the slightest. She would never improve unless she had the ambition to.

"...It seems that I will need to attach some kind of reward to this, just as I did with the children. Angelica, is there anything that you would like?" I asked.

Angelica's eyes widened, then she started pondering the question, wearing a more serious expression than I had ever seen on her before. At times she would furrow her brow, touching the hilt of the sword on her hip.

"I am willing to grant the requests of everyone else here as well," I said, looking over all those participating in the Raise Angelica's Grades Squadron for me. "This isn't supposed to be the work of a guard knight, so you may ask for a monetary bonus, or anything else, really."

"In that case, I will ask for the bonus," Damuel said with a casual smile. But Brigitte put a hand on her cheek and fell into deep thought.

"I would like something to help Illgner, but nothing in particular comes to mind. I cannot even assist my province with a political marriage due to the rumors of my canceled engagement, but I would at least like to help my brother," she eventually said. The look of resignation on her face made me purse my lips in frustration; she was a genuinely good person, and I wanted her to have as happy of a marriage as possible.

...Though before I start butting into her life like that, I'll need better connections and communication skills.

Cornelius clenched his fists and asked for new sweets or recipes. He apparently wanted to bring them to his gatherings with the other knights and with students from his class so that he could start new food trends as Karstedt's son. I wasn't sure whether I should laugh at him for being such a classic archnoble or for being such a hungry boy.

"Very well. I shall offer Damuel a bonus of five large silvers, Cornelius a sweet that nobody has eaten before, and Brigitte... I will

need to think of something of equal value for you."

"We are honored."

Even then, neither Damuel nor Cornelius seemed to be any more motivated than they had been previously; the former was wearing a slight smile, while the latter simply murmured, "Yes, that should be worth it." Maybe I would need to increase the reward for success a bit more.

"That is my compensation if Angelica fails. However, if she passes thanks to the squadron's assistance... I shall award Damuel one small gold, Cornelius a never-before-seen recipe that has no precedence in the culinary world, and Brigitte... I will... make your reward comparatively more valuable as well."

Damuel and Cornelius looked visibly surprised, then gazed at Angelica with the hungry eyes of carnivores that had just spotted their prey. Brigitte, on the other hand, seemed largely unfazed, though I hadn't exactly given her a concrete reward to look forward to.

"Angelica, have you decided what you would like?" I asked, turning to look at her.

She knelt before me, stroked the hilt of her short sword, and then hesitantly began to speak. "Lady Rozemyne, can I truly ask for anything?"

"So long as it is within my power, I will do whatever I can."

Angelica lowered her gaze, then looked back up at me with her eyes full of resolve. "I would like your mana, Lady Rozemyne."

"My... mana?" I asked in confusion.

She looked toward the short sword that she had been touching this whole time. "I'm in the middle of growing this sword right now, so I would appreciate your mana, Lady Rozemyne."

"...I'm sorry, Angelica. I don't think I'm following you here."

The two of us tilted our heads in unison as we looked at one another, a deadly combination of Angelica being bad at explaining things and me not being very well informed about weapons, mana, and such. We might have stayed like that forever had there not been outside intervention.

"Lady Rozemyne, may I explain?" Brigitte asked, identifying the

problem and quickly inserting herself between us. “The weapon that Angelica wields is a manablade—a sword that grows from mana. They develop a variety of attributes based on the source of said mana, be it from its owner or from others. In this regard, Angelica wishes to use yours.”

It seemed that one needed to pour their own mana, the mana gathered from hunted feybeasts, and the mana from others they had negotiated with into a manablade to make it grow. I gave an understanding nod, fairly interested, at which Angelica’s eyes widened in realization.

“Um, Lady Rozemyne... My fighting style prioritizes speed, which means I spend most of my mana enhancing my own physical strength during combat,” she said, trying to elaborate. But perhaps due to her usually being a woman of few words, I still did not understand.

Damuel had to step in to translate. “Remember when you observed the Knight’s Order in battle, Lady Rozemyne? Many knights transform their schtappes to fight, but maintaining its new form requires mana. Since Angelica needs her mana to enhance her physical strength, she uses a manablade, which can have mana stored inside it in advance outside of combat. Growing her manablade is thus essential for maximizing her potential in battle.”

“Why not just have everyone in the Knight’s Order help?” I asked. That would probably get the job done in a nanosecond.

Damuel shook his head. “Nobody gives their mana to others so easily.”

Mana was essential for responding to emergency summons, making feystones dyed with one’s own mana, and creating recovery potions. Damuel had a relatively small amount of mana due to being a laynoble, but not even someone like Brigitte would consider giving it away so frivolously. After all, mana was very valuable.

“I don’t mind giving her some of mine, but is there anything important that I need to know or look out for when doing so?”

“Everything should be okay as long as the amount of mana you pour into the sword does not exceed the total amount that Angelica has put in herself, but... wait, are you serious about this?!” Damuel

exclaimed in shock.

“Yes. But remember, this reward requires Angelica to have passed all of her written tests before summer.”

The disinterest had now completely vanished from Angelica’s face, and her deep-blue eyes were brimming with enthusiasm. She looked at me with firm resolve, tightening her grip on the hilt. “I’ll pass my tests and get your mana no matter what, Lady Rozemyne. For the sake of both me and my sword.”

“With this newfound motivation, Angelica, things should go just fine.”

Damuel ended up creating a fast-paced, highly concentrated curriculum for Angelica, designed to help her pass the written classes as quickly as possible. She would learn the names of the gods and their domains through karuta, study the fundamentals of warfare using a book that Damuel’s older brother Henrik had transcribed, and learn to play a chess-like board game called gewinnen that required mana to play.

“There will be study sessions every Earthday when the Royal Academy closes,” Damuel said, visibly driven. It seemed that the offer of a small gold really was appealing to him. “Understood, everyone?”

Cornelius appeared just as eager. “I’ll lend you my karuta, Angelica, so study like your life depends on it.”

“Thank you, Cornelius. Damuel.”

And so, the battle of the Raise Angelica’s Grades Squadron commenced for real.

Upcoming Spring Prayer

Thus began Angelica's first study group run by my guard knights. She would need to return to the Royal Academy for classes once the feast celebrating spring was over, so she had been engaging in fervent games of karuta in the knight dorms with the other apprentices while she still had the chance. Cornelius taught her how to move her hands to grab the cards she recognized as quickly as possible.

As for studying the fundamentals of warfare, we focused on a book that Lamprecht had brought me back when I passed out after my baptism ceremony. I hadn't really understood it at the time, since it focused on the use of mana, but with Damuel moving the gewinnen pieces as he explained the passages, I started to feel like I was really grasping it. Gewinnen, incidentally, was a chess-like game where moving the pieces took mana.

"Okay, Damuel. In this case, should I move this piece here?" I asked.

"Correct, Lady Rozemyne. Another established tactic is to move this other piece here."

Having the strategies explained with visual demonstration appeared to help Angelica a lot, and she even seemed moved by the fact that she was actually understanding things. "So *that's* what the text meant there. If only they'd use gewinnen pieces during class..." she murmured.

Both she and Cornelius were now more interested in battle tactics than ever before, since during class, they only ever moved as their teachers instructed, without ever thinking more deeply about what they were doing. Now they were playing with the gewinnen pieces while carefully cross-referencing with their books.

Brigitte glanced toward Damuel. "Is this how you learned about tactics?" she asked.

“My older brother taught me himself, so most of my knowledge on strategy comes from gewinnen.”

Gewinnen was played quite frequently in the Knight’s Order, but since it required mana to play, it was mostly mednobles and archnobles who participated. It seemed that Brigitte had found it somewhat strange that a laynoble like Damuel both owned a set and was using the pieces so casually.

“There was a huge gewinnen boom in the Royal Academy dorms back when my older brother lived there. I have heard that Lord Ferdinand used the pieces to craft strategic theories for the Interduchy Championship’s feybeast hunts and ditter games, which he then explained to others. It ended up being the case that everyone understood the strategies without even needing to attend the lectures,” Damuel explained, making me realize that he probably admired and respected Ferdinand so much in part due to how much his older brother must have spoken about him.

...But seriously, the more I learn about Ferdinand, the more confident I become that he really can do anything.

“I imagine that, by the time Lady Rozemyne goes to the Royal Academy, everyone will already be using karuta and picture books. They are simply that effective,” Brigitte said. “If you ask me, you should raise the price even higher when selling them to other duchies. Establishing such large-scale trends will strengthen Ehrenfest’s position in the country.”

“I haven’t learned much about the country we’re in. Is Ehrenfest a comparatively weak duchy?”

“At the moment, I would say that we are right in the middle of the hierarchy, largely due to having maintained a neutral position during the civil war.”

Ehrenfest was currently higher up in the hierarchy thanks to not having been too disadvantaged by the civil war, but prior to that, had you ranked the twenty-five duchies that existed at the time by power, it would have been significantly closer to the bottom.

“That said, Ehrenfest has risen in the hierarchy exclusively because the duchies that lost the civil war now have less political influence,” Brigitte continued. “In other words, its position does not

mean it has any real influence itself."

"I see. In that case, I think we should keep the teaching materials as hidden as we can from the other duchies and make it our goal to boost Ehrenfest's educational standards as much as we can."

I later told Sylvester and Ferdinand about Brigitte's assertion that the teaching materials could strengthen Ehrenfest's political influence. To Sylvester, this was like a dream come true, especially considering how unstable the current balance of power was. At the feast celebrating the return of spring, he gave a strict order to all Ehrenfest nobles not to discuss their children's better learning standards, how much they had developed over the winter, or that the Gilberta Company was selling them materials. He also made it clear that those bringing the materials to the Royal Academy were not to take them out of their dorm rooms under any circumstances.

Once the feast was over, the kids got together for one last gathering as they sadly prepared to leave. I had the laynoble parents sign an agreement to treat the materials well, but seeing the children's smiles as they hugged the borrowed picture books and toys to their chests immediately eased any lingering concerns.

"Lady Rozemyne, I will have prepared many more stories for you by next winter. I promise!"

"Please do, Philine. I, myself, am quite looking forward to the new picture books. Do your best to write and learn as much as you can."

At that, the giebes and the nobles living on giebe land all departed for their respective provinces. Angelica, meanwhile, would instead be returning to the Royal Academy. She had shown clear signs of development over the past few days, so all I wanted was for her to keep doing her best.

"I will return every Earthday," she said.

"Do listen to your lectures and please practice with the karuta and gewinnen."

And so, Angelica headed back to the Royal Academy with the karuta, picture books, and gewinnen set that her parents had bought for her. They had almost been moved to tears when their daughter unexpectedly asked for something to help in her studies, so much so that they quickly bought every kind of material available.

As the number of nobles steadily decreased, Ferdinand and I returned to the temple to perform the winter coming of age ceremony and the spring baptism ceremony. On the day after that, there was a meeting with the blue priests to decide who would be going where during Spring Prayer, with Ferdinand posting his planned routes for all to see. He and I would be splitting up and covering the Central District by ourselves.

Once the meeting was over, Ferdinand needed to discuss the more precise details of Spring Prayer and the gathering with me. I was resting in my room in the meantime.

As I sipped the tea that Nicola had prepared, she placed a plate of sweets in front of me. “You have been ever so busy lately, Lady Rozemyne. How is your health?”

“As of right now, I’m doing okay. But all of you are going to be accompanying me during Spring Prayer, and there will be many busy days of traveling via carriage. It will no doubt be tough, though I hope not *too* tough.”

“Of course, milady!”

A bell rang then from the other side of the door. Ferdinand promptly entered alongside Zahm, who was carrying a bundle of documents.

“Fran, Zahm—spread out this map. We shall be traveling by highbeast just as we did last year, visiting winter mansions in the morning and afternoon. The fact that we are staying within the Central District this time should give us more leeway.”

Once Fran and Zahm had prepared the map of the duchy, Ferdinand started shooting out instructions about Spring Prayer. During the meeting, he had made it sound as though the two of us would be dividing the land evenly between ourselves, but his current explanation involved me going across the entirety of the Central District.

“Um, Ferdinand... I’d assumed that you would be handling these areas yourself, and that I consequently wouldn’t need to visit them all,” I said, confused.

Ferdinand looked at me with exasperation. “We shall be traveling together, so of course you will need to. You should be able to piece

that much together yourself. Furthermore, you were asked directly by the archduke to travel across the entire region. Had you forgotten that?"

"No, I remember, but the prayer only requires that we offer up a bunch of mana. Can't you do that alone? I think splitting the work between us would make things go a lot easier."

We had traveled together during last year's Spring Prayer, and the journey had proven so brutal that I was forced to repeatedly use potions to recover my energy and mana. And yet, Ferdinand shot down my suggestion with a single dismissive laugh.

"This is work that you were asked to do and agreed to. Therefore, it is yours and yours alone. I shall follow merely to ensure that you do not cause problems. Furthermore, the current plan is for you to gather your spring ingredient along the way, but it is more than possible that unexpected problems will arise, as they did last autumn. It will be less of a headache for me to accompany you from the beginning rather than having to anxiously await an update or an ordonnanz summoning me out of nowhere."

"Eep. Um, thank you for all your help back there, and, ah... Please do accompany me during Spring Prayer as well," I said, remembering the disaster that had happened on the Night of Schutzaria. With Ferdinand there, disaster would be a lot, lot less likely.

"Incidentally, Rozemyne... Eckhart has said that he would like to accompany us during Spring Prayer. Your thoughts?"

"Eckhart is your guard knight, so he would be accompanying us anyway, wouldn't he?"

"You misunderstand. Since I will be traveling as a priest, I am not permitted to bring a guard knight with me. He would officially be accompanying us as your guard knight rather than mine."

The cover story would be that Karstedt, worried about his sweet little daughter leaving the Noble's Quarter to travel the duchy, had used his authority as the Order's commander to give me an additional guard.

"I see. Well, if we have to go through another battle for the spring ingredient, we'll want as many fighters as we can get."

“Precisely. Thus, I would like to bring Eckhart with us, assuming this would not bother you. We will also need to bring a scholar with us to observe the state of Hasse, but I imagine you would have no issue with Justus,” Ferdinand said. But despite having suggested Justus himself, the name was accompanied by a very displeased grimace.

“I would be relieved to work alongside someone I know, but why are you making a face like that, Ferdinand?”

“Because nothing good ever happens when Justus gets eager.”

The discussion ended with a sigh from Ferdinand, and with that, the party we were taking with us on Spring Prayer was decided.

“You have a meeting with the Gilberta Company today, and I must say, you certainly invited quite a few people,” Fran said as we walked toward my orphanage director’s chambers.

“It simply had to be done. There is much we need to discuss and settle all at once,” I replied with a smile. Today I had invited Corinna and Tuuli, as well as the usual Benno, Mark, and Lutz.

By the time we arrived at my chambers, the Gilberta Company was already there. Benno greeted me as their representative, and once he was done, I turned my gaze to Corinna and Tuuli.

“Corinna, I wish for you to sew an outfit, due by the next Starbind Ceremony.”

“...But you have not yet come of age, Lady Rozemyne. What is it you desire?” Corinna asked, blinking in surprise.

I grinned. “The clothes are not for me, but my guard knight, Brigitte,” I said, gesturing for her to come over.

“F-For me?”

“I shall purchase an outfit that makes you look more beautiful than ever. That is my payment to you.”

At that, I guided the faltering Brigitte to my hidden room. She nervously entered, having never been inside before. I also invited Corinna to accompany us, and Tuuli as her helper.

“Fran, please discuss the priests heading to Hasse with Benno.”

“As you wish.”

After leaving the rest to Fran, I brought Monika into my hidden

room with the others.

“When I saw what you were wearing at last year’s Starbind Ceremony, Brigitte, it occurred to me that it was not bringing out your beauty as much as it should have. Thus, I set out to create my masterpiece: an outfit that would suit a tall woman such as yourself.”

I took the design illustrations that Monika had been carrying for me and spread them out on the table for Brigitte to see.

“This is known as a (halter dress), recognizable by the diagonal cuts that come down from the neck and leave the wearer’s shoulders exposed. I intend to have ribbon or some other kind of material wrapped around the arms, serving as decorative sleeves separate to the main gown.”

As far as halter dresses went, this was a more formal style, not held up by cloth or straps; it looked the same on the back as it did on the front, which ensured that the wearer wasn’t too exposed.

“It clings to the body all the way down to the hips. The skirt then uses a lot of extra cloth to make it all fluttery, which should give the outfit all the fanciness it needs.”

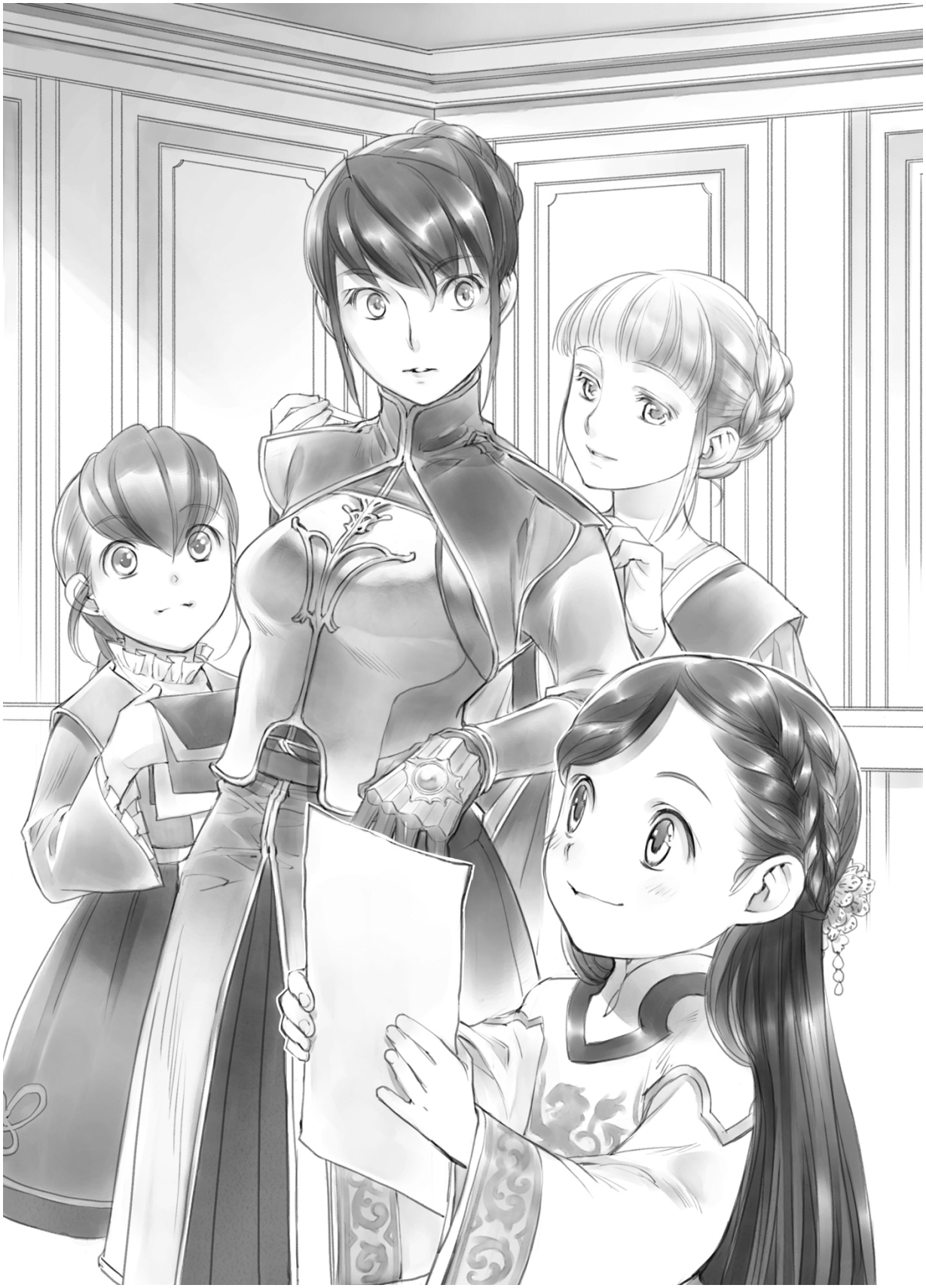
As much as I would have preferred to put her in a simple fishtail dress to emphasize her good figure, noble outfits were required to use an excessive amount of cloth. This dress was thus closely fitted at the torso to emphasize Brigitte’s sizable bust and toned back, but also deliberately excessive below the waist. After all, it was best to avoid taboos when designing clothes for noble women.

“This is certainly a unique design,” Corinna observed.

“The current trend in noble fashion is for shoulders to be adorned with fluff, spreading the dress out horizontally, correct? While that may make slender girls on the smaller side look cuter, vertical lines would complement tall women like Brigitte much better. So? What do you think, Brigitte? If you don’t like the dress, we don’t have to make it.”

As I glanced Brigitte’s way, she returned a gentle smile. “No, I like it. You thought up this design for my sake, Lady Rozemyne, and I knew more than anyone that the current trends did not suit me or other female knights. We put on clothes that do not look particularly good on us because we have no choice but to follow noble trends,

but since this is a dress designed by the archduke’s adopted daughter, it will no doubt become a trend in itself,” she replied, accepting my suggestion not only for herself, but for all the other female knights who shared her build.



“Corinna, Tuuli—I ask that you work with Brigitte to pick the colors and cloth. Brigitte, I shall put five large silvers of my money toward this. Should Angelica pass her exams, then I will offer one small gold. Please consider this while budgeting for the clothes.”

I placed ink and paper in front of Corinna, saying that she could use it as she liked, and then handed Monika a magic tool resembling a gavel.

“Monika, once the measuring and discussion are both complete, please strike here with this; it will make the feystone outside the door shine. Meanwhile, I will be discussing other matters with Benno.”

“As you wish.”

Leaving those matters to Corinna and Tuuli, I exited the hidden room. The financial report on the teaching materials had already concluded outside, and it seemed they were almost done deciding on the means by which to take the priests to Hasse. The discussion had overall gone smoothly, since the journey back and forth had been made so many times already.

“Lady Rozemyne. I recently visited Hasse to see the current state of affairs...” Mark began. According to his explanation, following lengthy discussions that had taken place throughout the winter, the mayor’s faction had ended up isolated. “To farmers, the Spring Prayer not being performed is the same as being abandoned by the archduke. Anyone who hears that his wrath is only being contained by the new High Bishop, his own daughter, would naturally shift to supporting her over the mayor.”

The farmers around Hasse cursed the mayor’s thoughtlessness and collectively decided that it was better to rely on the archduke’s adopted daughter, the new High Bishop. The citizens in the enclosed winter mansion had all descended into a massive panic upon being informed that the former High Bishop was dead, that Kantna was no longer overseeing the town, and that the attack on the monastery was being viewed as an attack on the archduke’s family.

“It seems that the citizens had considered the monastery to be something built without permission by the new High Bishop, not realizing that such ivory buildings are constructed by the archduke’s family. They all said that they had no intention of attacking the

archduke and had simply been following the mayor's orders. Speaking of which—since we spread the rumor that someone would need to take responsibility, the mayor has been living quietly and in fear all winter."

It was apparently common knowledge in the city of Ehrenfest that nobles lived in ivory buildings, which were never to be touched under any circumstances. I hadn't known this, since I never went outside, but everyone else was supposedly aware.

"Thank you for looking into all this, Mark."

"It is my honor to be of use to you. I took it upon myself to preemptively spread the rumor that the archduke would be sending knights and scholars come spring to arrest those responsible, so I imagine that they are currently experiencing stress and agony beyond words," Mark said with a dark smile.

Strong loyalty sure can make people do scary things, huh? I thought, averting my gaze and instead glancing toward Fran. He had on a cold smile himself.

"I would like to once again ask the city guards to accompany the priests to Hasse, for safety's sake. Lutz, please deliver this to the commander of the east gate," I said, handing Lutz a letter detailing my request. I had considered giving it to Tuuli, but to the public, it would be pretty bizarre for me to give such a letter to a seamstress's apprentice.

"As you wish."

It was then that the feystone on the hidden room's door lit up, indicating that Brigitte's measurements had been taken. I opened the entrance for them, and the four stepped out.

As Brigitte informed me what kinds of cloth and colors she had ordered, I glanced at Tuuli. We exchanged a smile upon making eye contact, but there was no reason for me to speak to her here. I desperately worked my head to come up with some excuse.

"...And that concludes the order," Brigitte said.

"I see. I'm glad to hear that you liked it. Now then, Corinna—I imagine it will be quite the task to put together such a unique outfit, but I trust your abilities. And Tuuli..."

Tuuli shot her head up with a beaming smile.

“Please design a hairpin to match Brigitte’s hair and her dress. I will summon you two again when Spring Prayer is over,” I said, wanting to have a more relaxed conversation with her when we weren’t so busy with the upcoming Spring Prayer.

Tuuli grinned, guessing my intentions, and then took out a box. “Lady Rozemyne, would you like a spring hair stick? I made one during the winter for you to wear during Spring Prayer.”

“But of course,” I replied. *How could I ever refuse?*

The hair stick that she took out was primarily adorned with blooming renfruhl flowers, which were like white crocuses that announced the coming of spring. It was also decorated with a bunch of leaves, the colors of which ranged from yellow to dark green.

Once Tuuli had put the hair stick in for me, I shook my head a little, causing the vine-like string of decorative leaves to sway through the air.

“It looks wonderful on you,” Tuuli said with a smile.

I loved that smile just as much as I loved my new hair stick.

Hasse's Punishment

Before we left for Spring Prayer, the priests headed to Hasse in carriages that were provided by the Gilberta Company and guarded by soldiers. This time all the soldiers were lined up at the temple's back entrance (which was the front entrance from the lower city's perspective), because they heard rumors that Dad was being assigned to every one of these trips because he had taken it upon himself to travel all the way to the temple to greet priests.

"Gunther, I ask for your assistance once again," I said with a broad smile as Dad knelt before me, a serious expression on his face.

"You may count on me. I will ensure that everyone arrives safely."

"You have my trust. May we meet again in Hasse."

While I was speaking to the soldiers, Marthe and Delia were saying their tearful goodbyes, having gotten very close over the winter. Thore and Rick, on the other hand, looked beyond excited to be returning to Hasse, while the priests newly assigned to the monastery looked nervous to be leaving Ehrenfest for the first time.

In the morning a couple days later, carriages transporting Ferdinand's and my attendants and chefs headed to Hasse as well. The two-day gap was to account for a letter that Benno was delivering to Hasse's mayor, outlining the date on which we would be arriving to punish those guilty of treason. We did not need to wait for a response, since it was an official decree with the archduke's seal.

I would be heading to Hasse by highbeast come fifth bell, and by that time, the letter would likely have already arrived. The citizens were probably too scared and anxious to even think about eating lunch right now, and in all honesty, I didn't feel so great either; I was being forced to announce the city's crimes and condemn the mayor.

Still thinking about Hasse's future, I set down my pen and passed a stack of writing-covered paper to Fritz. "This is the text for the

winter picture book. Please deliver it to Wilma and request that she finish the illustrations while I am performing Spring Prayer."

I had already asked Fritz and Gil to finish the autumn and winter picture books by the Starbind Ceremony, which took place halfway through summer. The autumn volume's illustrations were mostly completed, with only the printing needing to be done now, but I had only just written the text for the winter volume.

With most of my attendants having been sent out early in the morning, the only ones left in my chambers were Fritz, who would be managing the workshop, and Fran, who would be riding with me on my highbeast. There were also several of the gray priests who normally worked in the workshop with us, all of whom had experience serving blue priests. This wasn't coincidental, but was rather the result of a deliberate effort since Ferdinand would be eating lunch here, having sent his attendants and chefs to Hasse already.

"So, Fran—how is the food coming along?" I asked. "I'm sure Hugo is doing just fine, but I wanted to make sure."

Since Ella had departed for Spring Prayer, today's lunch was being prepared by Hugo and another helper, with Freida and the guildmaster's permission. He had now finished training his replacement for the Italian restaurant, and so had jumped at the opportunity to help out here and strengthen his relationship with the archduke's adopted daughter.

"It is an unfamiliar kitchen to him, but since it is not too dissimilar from the one in the orphanage director's chambers, he is doing just fine. The High Priest will certainly be satisfied as well."

"Eckhart and Justus, too, I would imagine."

It hadn't been necessary for me to invite Eckhart and Justus to eat, since we would be leaving at fifth bell after a post-lunch break, but they had already sent me an ordonnanz expressing how much they were looking forward to enjoying the food here, so declining hadn't really been an option.

"More importantly, Lady Rozemyne, you will want to write the other letter soon if you wish to finish before the High Priest arrives," Fran observed. And he was right.

I got to writing the letter that I wanted Hugo to deliver to Freida. In it, I thanked her for lending us the two chefs and added a seasonal menu for the Italian restaurant, noting that I would be coming to eat there once Spring Prayer was over. Once I was done, I sealed the letter and gave it to Fritz.

"Give this to Hugo when paying him for his work, if you would. Tell him that I wish for him to deliver it to Freida."

A small ringing came from beyond the door, indicating the arrival of a visitor. It was the bell for Ferdinand. Fran opened the door, and in he came with Zahm, Eckhart, and Justus.

"My apologies for pushing lunch preparations onto you, Rozemyne."

"It's okay. You are allowing me to travel to Hasse by highbeast despite it being selfish to do so. You have my gratitude, Ferdinand."

Eckhart followed in behind Ferdinand with a broad grin. "And sorry for having you prepare extra for us."

Is it mean of me to wish that he looked at least a little *guilty about this? He's as big of an eater as Karstedt.*

After finishing a meal made by Hugo for the first time in ages, it was time to drink tea prepared by Fran and discuss the upcoming visit to Hasse. We needed to get Eckhart and Justus up to date on the situation, so once I had made sure that everyone was touching the sound-blocking magic tools provided by Ferdinand, I started to explain. After all, the root cause of our problems had been my enthusiasm to spread printing via monasteries with orphanages and workshops that would be easy for me to visit.

"I was a fool," I began.

At the time, I had only just been baptized and knew very little about how noble society functioned. I was so ignorant that I assumed we were going to hire construction workers from the lower city to build the orphanage and workshop from the ground up, and maybe we would have, had those been the only things I asked for. But no. I asked for a miniaturized temple. And since that meant blue-robed priests with noble blood would be visiting it, noble customs demanded that the monastery be constructed as an ivory building.

"Had I known more about nobles, I wouldn't have asked for a

monastery. I wouldn't have made such a request during a meal that I had invited others to."

Ferdinand nodded. "I imagine that Sylvester would not have acted so hastily either, had he not been so satisfied with the food. I should have given your limited familiarity with noble culture more consideration."

It was normally his job to put a stop to Sylvester and me when we got ahead of ourselves, but at the time, he assumed that I had placated both Sylvester and him with food to make my demands from a position with more leverage. On the inside, he had even been happy to see me acting more like a noble, making use of plots and manipulation. Truly, incredible misunderstandings could occur when two people considered a situation from their own unique perspectives.

"As a result, a monastery was constructed in Hasse the very same day."

Eckhart widened his eyes in surprise at the deep lore behind the monastery, while Justus leaned forward with excitement. "Oho. The truth is always full of surprises, huh? That's why gathering information never gets old. So, what problems did this bring about? Tell me everything."

Craftsmen from the lower city had worked together to furnish Hasse's monastery and make it livable for the priests. I had tried taking the orphans inside as well, thinking that doing so would save them from brutal mistreatment while also lessening Hasse's burdens.

"We did save two girls and their brothers who were about to be sold to nobles, but my actions put Hasse in an extremely dangerous position. I didn't even know until people from the Gilberta Company told me that Hasse's orphans were considered the shared property of everyone in the city."

"Who could blame you for not knowing how orphans are treated there? Here in Ehrenfest, children orphaned after their baptism are looked after by their workplace," Justus said, earning him a surprised look from Eckhart. It seemed that it wasn't normal for nobles to know how commoner orphans were treated elsewhere.

"Unfortunately, Hasse's mayor believed that he could do anything

with the former High Bishop's support. He mistakenly assumed that he had a powerful backer, and thus attacked the monastery in order to retrieve the girls."

"Unbelievable! But the monastery is an ivory building that was constructed by Lord Ferdinand himself!" Eckhart exclaimed, his voice cracking a little in shock.

I nodded. Ivory buildings for nobles to live in could only be made by members of the archduke's family who had his explicit permission, and so attacking one was treated the same as attacking the archduke's family. I hadn't known that either, but ignorance of the law was no excuse.

"No one was harmed thanks to the monastery's protection magic, but nevertheless, Hasse had committed treason."

"Then they must be destroyed at once!" Eckhart exclaimed again, whipping out his schtappe and rising from his seat. But Ferdinand stopped him with a sigh.

"Calm yourself, Eckhart. I am using Hasse as a learning experience for Rozemyne. Do not destroy it before she has gotten as much as she can out of this opportunity."

"You are using it as a learning experience...?"

"Indeed. Now that Hasse has committed treason, it is a city with no future; it matters not whether it is destroyed or saved," Ferdinand said with a laugh. "This makes it the perfect opportunity for Rozemyne to learn how to use her human resources, maneuver matters to reach her desired goal, punish criminals, and understand the consequences that her actions have.

"I gave her a task. If she does not wish to see Hasse destroyed, then it is up to her to engineer the development of a faction that opposes the mayor and isolates him as a traitor. What we will be doing here is executing the mayor and his faction; you need not destroy them yourself."

Eckhart frowned in confusion and looked at me. "But commoners who would attack an ivory building are a plague to society. They do nothing but harm. Is removing them from this world not the just thing to do? Rozemyne, what in the world are you protecting them for?"

As one could probably tell from Eckhart's words, my perspective

on the world was entirely different from that of a noble. I tilted my head in thought and tried to explain the reasoning behind my actions, even though I did not expect him to empathize with them.

“I was raised to believe that rulers existed to protect their citizens. I do not understand what line of thinking leads you to so readily want to destroy an entire city of people you are supposed to be protecting. Once you kill someone, they are gone forever. Is it not better to let them live and repent for their mistakes?”

“Let them live? To what end?” Eckhart asked, furrowing his brow in confusion. He sincerely did not seem to understand what I was talking about.

“Commoners pay taxes to nobles, do they not? You can thus benefit from keeping them alive. The punishment I suggested to Sylvester was raising their taxes for ten years.”

“Hm... It seems that commoners and nobles are just fundamentally different,” Eckhart replied, stroking his chin in thought. He knew that I had been raised as the daughter of a soldier, so it seemed that he was chalking this up to our distinct backgrounds. “You are correct that the archduke protects his citizens; he gives them somewhere to live and ensures that the land is filled with mana. However, while commoners are accepted as citizens and allowed to stay here in return for paying taxes, what matters most is their obedience. There is no need to keep traitors alive who do not pay the archduke the respect and gratitude that he is owed.”

The archduke used his mana to revitalize the earth, both making and securing land for people to live on. It was apparently normal for those in a duchy who rose up against nobles despite being kept alive by their grace and mana to be executed on the spot.

“There are over a thousand people who live in and around Hasse, and even if you exclude the farmers who weren’t directly involved in the attack, that still leaves more than two hundred people,” I responded. “Were Hasse to be destroyed, would you not receive less taxes? Would it not ultimately disadvantage both the archduke and the nobles?”

Trying to convince a noble on moral grounds wouldn’t work, nor would trying to explain that commoners followed different values.

Thus, I launched an attack on the basis of material losses—taxes. But, sadly, even that had no effect whatsoever.

“It would not disadvantage us at the moment,” Ferdinand replied instantly.

“It really wouldn’t be a problem at all,” Justus added.

They had both replied so quickly that, for a second, I could only blink in response.

Ferdinand furrowed his brow in displeasure, then continued. “We presently lack nobles and priests, and we do not have enough mana to fully vitalize the earth. We are being forced to spread our mana as thin as possible to preserve the lives of our citizens. We may have a bit more leeway with mana now that you have entered the temple and are performing Spring Prayer, but there are still more commoners exhausting mana than there are nobles providing it. In this regard, losing a single city would not pose any problems whatsoever. In fact, it would be beneficial to us.”

“H-Hold on a second!” I exclaimed, reflexively standing up in sheer disbelief at what I had just heard.

“Do not stand so abruptly. It is unsightly,” Ferdinand scolded, glaring at me before continuing. “I have listened to your point of view, and out of respect, I did not execute that rude, foolish mayor on the spot. Is this not to your benefit, allowing you to save the rest of the city as you so please?”

My first thought was to call Ferdinand cruel or even monstrous, but the reality was that he was being the most considerate of all the nobles here; he had listened to my opinion and was doing all he could to accommodate it. But Eckhart did not seem to be too fond of seeing Ferdinand restrained in this way, and was glaring at me with dissatisfaction.

“Rozemyne, the world will be better off without fools who bear weapons against the archduke’s family—the same people who keep them alive. There is no need to burden yourself with saving them. It would be better to wash your hands of the matter and get rid of them entirely.”

“Nah, Eckhart,” Justus chimed in, “I think milady’s got the right idea squeezing them dry over the next decade. It takes a lotta years

before commoners are old enough to pay taxes, so we really don't wanna lose too many of 'em. You know how quickly commoners die when even a minor disease starts to spread. We gotta plan for that kinda thing." For a tax official, his answer was very much in character.

I slumped my shoulders over sadly; it seemed impossible for me to ever get used to how nobles thought about things.

"I believe it is about time for us to leave for Hasse. We shall execute the mayor's faction as traitors and, in the process, see how many people that plot of yours has moved, Rozemyne. I can only hope that the anti-mayor faction has significantly grown in numbers," Ferdinand said with a sneer. It was like a vise was squeezing my head.

We brought out our highbeasts at the temple's front gate. Fran and Zahm would be sitting in the back seats of my Pandabus, while Brigitte would be in the front with me. At this point, it was as though Lessy's passenger seat existed basically just for her.

"Milady, mind me loading this stuff into your highbeast?" Justus asked, having a gray priest carry over a large box that had a very intense-looking lock on it. It was big enough for an adult man to just barely be able to carry, which made it both too bulky to put on a traditional highbeast and the perfect size for me to sit on.

"Certainly, go ahead. I don't mind."

Fran and Zahm put the box into Lessy for me, but when I went to get in myself, Justus came over with a broad smile on his face. "Please allow me to ride in your fine highbeast as well, milady."

"Justus!" Ferdinand shouted, his voice striking Justus like thunder. The exact same thing had happened during the Harvest Festival.

Does Justus seriously never learn? I wondered to myself. But upon seeing me hang my head, he simply broadened his smile.

"This box has been entrusted to me, and I cannot leave it unattended. You know how valuable it is, don't you, Lord Ferdinand? Do you really think it would be acceptable not having a scholar on standby?" Justus asked, puffing out his chest as if proud of the plot he had concocted.

At that, Ferdinand's expression darkened as though he was

holding back the urge to let out a tremendous roar. Both he and Justus glared at each other for about ten seconds, then Ferdinand finally turned his gaze to me.

“Rozemyne, pay no mind to Justus during the journey. If you allow him to distract you then you will all surely fall from the sky.”

“And that means I’ve got Lord Ferdinand’s permission. Let me in, milady.”

“Wha? What? That was him giving his permission...?”

I looked between Ferdinand, who had now turned around to his own highbeast, and Justus, who was urging me on. Having no other choice, I opened a door into Lessy.

“Fran, please teach him how to fasten his seatbelt.”

“As you wish.”

Once the excited Justus had leapt into my highbeast, we departed. But he was asking so many questions about the interior that it was honestly kind of annoying. I politely answered his questions at first, but Ferdinand’s warning that we would fall from the sky was starting to feel increasingly legitimate.

“Justus, you are distracting me. Please be silent.”

“In that case, milady, this is my last question: By what means did you create a highbeast like this?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that. I just envisioned it and then made it.”

“That’s a shame. I wanted one for myself, if possible...”

Our journey to Hasse didn’t take much time at all, and we arrived in the blink of an eye. As we landed on the plaza, like we had done during the Harvest Festival, the people spread out to make space for us. But unlike before, they all knelt once they had stepped back, and the brief glimpses that I caught of their faces revealed nothing but grim expressions. The children appeared to have caught on to the heavy atmosphere as well, since they weren’t chattering among themselves as usual, instead clinging to their parents anxiously or kneeling like the adults.

I pressed my lips together tightly at the looming sense of dread; it was clear that everyone understood the situation. Would it really be possible to finish matters here with only the mayor’s death? I

glanced up at Ferdinand as he walked slightly ahead of me, but I couldn't glean his intentions.

"...We have been waiting since receiving the letter from the Gilberta Company," Richt said.

He was kneeling atop the stage, in between several others who were likely the chiefs of the neighboring farming towns. I could guess that Richt had managed the winter mansion in the mayor's place due to his punishment, so it made sense that he would be the one greeting us as well.

"Honorable High Bishop and High Priest, welcome to the city of Hasse," Richt continued. "I thank Flutrane the Goddess of Water for this meeting from the bottom of my heart."

We returned slight nods upon receiving his polite greeting for nobles.

Richt looked up and, given my height, we made direct eye contact. "High Bishop, I... that is, Hasse..."

"You have my sympathy, Richt, but as the letter said, Hasse must be punished. No matter what I might say to the archduke, that fact will not change," I said.

At that, I turned to face the gathered commoners, holding a voice-amplifying magic tool much like the one that had been used during the harspiel recital.

"Attention, people of Hasse. Attacking the monastery has been deemed an act of treason against the archduke's family. I asked for my adoptive father to spare you, but the fact remains that a crime has been committed—a crime so severe that even a noble would be punished for it. In this case, the mayor led the attack with the assistance of many citizens. Under normal circumstances, the entire city would be viewed as a hive of dangerous rebels and subsequently destroyed in its entirety."

The crowd began to stir. I heard some curse the mayor, others exclaim they had nothing to do with him, and still others grumble that it wasn't fair to punish them as well.

"However, I know that Hasse supports many farmers who merely live in neighboring farming towns. I imagine that some of you were blackmailed or deceived by the mayor. I pleaded with the archduke

not to destroy the entire city for the crimes of a few, and he ultimately agreed to rethink the punishment," I announced.

I heard a few shocked murmurs, then the pale expressions in the crowd quickly started to give way to smiles. I hurriedly continued before their hopes swelled too much.

"He rethought the punishment, but that is all; Hasse will not escape unscathed. Your punishment shall be ten years of increased taxes, and no priests will be sent here for Spring Prayer this year. I have saved your lives, but the punishment is by no means a light one. Forgive me for being incapable of doing more."

Cheers spread through the crowd. I saw some people sighing in relief, and others joyously hugging each other.

"Not getting wrapped up in something we didn't do is all that matters. Thank you very much, High Bishop," Richt said.

But as the crowd grew excited, Ferdinand calmly stepped forward and took the voice-amplifying magic tool away from me. He then spoke into it with his cold, cold voice. "Deliver the traitors to us. They shall be executed."

In an instant, silence fell over the crowd. It was so quiet that it felt as though I could even hear the sounds of people swallowing nervously.

Richt shut his eyes tightly, then nodded. "As you wish."

The Door of Judgment

Richt excused himself, leaving to fetch the mayor.

A short while passed before he returned. When he did, the mayor was brought onto the stage by two men who were holding him by the arms. He looked thin and somewhat pitiful wearing his ragged clothes, but this was actually pretty standard for commoners. And while he was unsteady on his feet, I didn't see any signs that he had been beaten over the winter. In fact, it did not seem as though he had been treated that poorly at all.

The mayor knelt before me, raising his head to meet my gaze before quickly lowering it again. While I only saw his narrowed eyes for a second, there was a nasty gleam in them. I could feel the distinct air of arrogant condescension, his transient expression making it clear that he intended to exploit me to escape his punishment, since I was just a compassionate little girl.

...If the me from a year ago was up here, I never would have noticed that look.

I had now spent a year getting knocked about in noble society, having to carefully observe Ferdinand's stony expression and Florencia's calm smile to catch even a glimpse of the true emotions hidden beneath their facades. It seemed that all this practice had made me a little more attentive to things like this, and while I wasn't particularly happy about the method, it had at least helped me to avoid getting exploited.

"High Bishop, I simply did not understand my actions," the mayor began in a pained voice, keeping his head lowered as he defended himself.

He went on to speak at length about how he hadn't realized that attacking the monastery would be considered treason, but that was a lie; when Fran had told Richt about the monastery attack during the Harvest Festival, the blood had drained from his face, and there was

no chance that the mayor's assistant would know something that the mayor himself did not. The truth was that he had just intended to smooth over his crime using the former High Bishop's influence. He knew that it was a grave offense, which was why he had waited until Richt was away from the city to order the attack.

As I listened, feelings of complete disgust slowly started to build up in my chest. Ferdinand was standing one step behind me, and I could only imagine the blood-chilling expression on his face. Just the thought was enough to make a shudder run down my spine.

"Enough. Since when were you under the impression that ignorance would excuse your crime?" Ferdinand asked, cutting down the mayor's defense in one fell swoop.

The mayor looked up at Ferdinand in surprise, failing to find any words. He then locked his eyes on me, having no doubt concluded that I would be easier to convince, and resumed his defense.

"O benevolent High Bishop who saved Hasse from destruction! Everything I did was to protect my humble city. It is only now that I understand the severity of my ignorance, and I ask for your mercy so that I might live with virtue to atone for my sin."

His grandiloquence was about what you would expect from someone who was in a position of leadership; he knew how to pick his words, speaking in a manner that quickly persuaded those listening to sympathize with his situation. Several people in the crowd had even started to speak up asking for my mercy.

This isn't good...

An uncomfortable chill washed over me. My goal here was to save as many people in Hasse as possible by sacrificing their mayor, but there was a chance that those who tried to defend his actions would end up getting executed as well.

"Are you not a saint who shows mercy even to orphans, High Bishop?" the mayor asked confidently, elaborating on what I had done for Hasse's orphans and openly praying that I show him the same consideration.

Richt looked sick to his stomach, his face making it clear that he wanted to tell the mayor to shut up already. He edged slightly toward him, but then immediately stopped in place, having turned

completely pale. I could guess that he had intended to stop the mayor from continuing his act, only to be glared at by Ferdinand.

A moment later, I felt a tap on my back. I gracefully turned and looked up to see Ferdinand, whose gaze was so intensely cold that it actually made me flinch. He was still forcing his lips into a calm smile, but there was not an ounce of warmth to his expression as he silently pressured me to finish this already.

Well then... what should I do now?

I needed to think up a way to lead this safely into the mayor's execution while preserving my saintly image. After watching the mayor for a second, who was now waving his arms around as he expounded on his pleas, I lowered my gaze.

"Mayor, you speak of mercy, but do you not beat Hasse's orphans each and every day? Both Thore and Rick were covered in bruises when I took them from you," I began. Nora and Marthe had both been reasonably well-fed, no doubt because he was going to sell them, but Thore and Rick had been malnourished and were clearly the victims of regular physical abuse. "I do not see the need to show compassion to one who exploits their power to abuse the weak."

I could see the panic in the mayor's eyes, and he quickly began to ramble in a desperate attempt to smooth things over and get some sort of compromise from me. "That is— *Ahem*. That was simply punishment. I would not have harmed them in such a way had they not committed such immoral acts. Is it not normal to punish those who deserve it?"

"I don't quite understand what immoral act would need to have taken place to warrant violence. Say Thore or Rick had attacked your family—would that be enough to warrant such a punishment?" I asked, placing a hand on my cheek and innocently tilting my head, playing the part of a sheltered child ignorant of the world.

The mayor nodded over and over, eagerly rubbing his hands together. The carnivorous glint in his eyes as he tried his best to sway me was actually kind of scary.

"That is clearly an immoral act," the mayor agreed. "Were the orphans to attack my family, I would be furious, and of course punish them with violence. Nobody would fault me for that, since the

orphans must understand that they are only being kept alive through my goodwill."

Richt, now kneeling behind the mayor, closed his eyes tightly and hung his head. The town chiefs kneeling around him were also wincing at the irony.

I looked at the mayor head-on, then asked my final question. "Had the orphans not understood that they were attacking your family—would you say the same even then?"

"It would be unthinkable for the orphans to not recognize my family. Their lies would not excuse their crime."

I let out a sigh and whispered, "Too bad," before turning to look up at Ferdinand. "The mayor has made his position clear."

Ferdinand's cold eyes narrowed further, and his lips curved into a slightly broader grin. "I see. He certainly has made his position clear," he said, taking a step forward.

I, in turn, took a step back, granting Ferdinand the right to speak.

"You maintain that one who attacks a building constructed by the archduke for his daughter should inarguably be punished. Nobles live in ivory buildings, which are constructed using the archduke's power. This is a fact known by all."

"Erm... No, I truly was not aware..." the mayor trailed off, faltering again now that he had to deal with Ferdinand. His face began to pale, and his grandiloquence from before vanished in an instant. He looked my way, desperately seeking my help, but I refused to acknowledge him.

Ferdinand took another step forward, cornering the mayor even more. "Mayors must deal with nobles, and it would be unthinkable for you to not know something so basic. You made your citizens attack the monastery, knowing the gravity of your crime. What you did not know was that the former High Bishop had died before he could disguise it and provide his protection."

The mayor widened his eyes in shock. "That is simply not..." he began, desperately trying to find an escape. But the people in the crowd who had moments before supported him were now regarding him with dispassionate eyes. I could guess that he had spent the winter convincing them that he hadn't known what he was doing.

“But regardless, it would not matter even if you truly had not known. The actions taken by the people of Hasse are nothing less than an attack on the archduke’s family, and that is treason. Treason must be punished, and none can fault the archduke for ordering said punishment. Commoners must have it drilled into them that they are kept alive only by the grace of the nobility—this is the position that you yourself just espoused.”

“But—”

“I tire of your dishonest excuses. Speak no further,” Ferdinand said flatly, silencing the mayor’s protests. He then returned to my side, where he looked down at me with the same harsh expression that he had given the mayor. “Rozemyne.”

I instinctively straightened my back, sensing that he was going to lecture me. Seeing that, Ferdinand let out an exaggerated sigh, then spoke in a chilly voice with an intentionally villainous look.

“You pleaded for the archduke to lighten his sentence on the basis that the people of Hasse understood the gravity of their crime and were deeply remorseful. It seems to me, however, that they do not understand at all,” Ferdinand said, looking from the mayor to the gathered crowd. Everyone tensed up as his eyes scanned them, and silence fell over the plaza. “Rozemyne. You are known as the Saint of Ehrenfest. Do you still believe that Hasse deserves your mercy?”

The atmosphere froze over as the citizens realized that the lightened punishment I had spoken of could be taken back with a single word. A silence so heavy that people were afraid to move at all blanketed the plaza as they waited to hear what Ferdinand would say next. But amid the crushing pressure so intense that one might even hesitate to breathe, Richt slowly looked up, as if pushing up against weights holding him down.

“O honorable High Priest. O honorable High Bishop. I ask for permission to speak,” he said in a trembling voice. He was so nervous that he had started to sweat, making his pale face glisten slightly and his hair stick to his forehead.

“You may speak,” Ferdinand said.

Richt expressed his utmost gratitude, then continued. “High Priest. We, the people of Hasse, truly understand the gravity of the

crime that the mayor ordered us to commit. Under normal circumstances, our entire city would have already been destroyed, and we cannot thank the saint enough for granting us her mercy and sparing our lives. The mayor is the only one who does not understand. We are not like him, I can assure you," he said, quivering under Ferdinand's pressure as he desperately tried to protect his fellow citizens.

His courage touched my heart. That was when I felt a tap on my back from Ferdinand, who was still strictly glaring down at Richt. I looked up, and he shot me a look that seemed to say, *"What is your role here, again?"*

...Right. I'm supposed to be a saint.

As moved as I was, now wasn't the time for me to stand around. I stepped in front of Richt and spun around, spreading my arms wide as if to protect him from Ferdinand. "High Priest, I believe Richt's words. The people understand the gravity of their crime. I know it."

"...High Bishop," came incredibly moved voices from both Richt and the town chiefs.

The admiration and gratitude in their eyes made me feel so guilty that I could barely stand it; I just wanted to scream, *"I can't be a saint! This is all too much!"* and run off the stage. But I was facing Ferdinand as he played the part of an evil final boss, merciless expression and all. I couldn't just run away. This, too, was part of the assignment that he had given me so long ago.

Ferdinand shook his head while deliberately facing me. "Rozemyne, kindness at times does more harm than good. You must pluck the seeds of rebellion before they grow into carnage."

"High Priest, the people of Hasse are planning no rebellion. There is nothing to fear. Isn't that right, everyone?" I asked, turning around to face Richt, the town chiefs, and the crowd.

Richt immediately said, "Of course," and loud cries of agreement came from all over the plaza.

"You can hear them for yourself, High Priest. So please..."

But just as I thought I had settled the matter, Ferdinand suddenly raised his right hand to shoulder height. "Then I shall have them prove it."

“Huh...?”

...Sorry, but I have no *idea what’s happening right now. Are you expecting me to do something? At least give me a sign!*

As I panicked on the inside, not knowing what to do, Ferdinand whipped out his schtappe. “I shall thoroughly pluck the seeds of rebellion,” he announced, then muttered “*geteilt*” and swung his schtappe. A translucent amber barrier appeared beneath the stage, a little way into the plaza.

Schutzaria’s shield...?

It had the same decorative patterns, but while the shield I made when praying to Schutzaria was round, the one that Ferdinand had produced was a thin rectangle that resembled a door, wide enough for two adults to walk through while standing beside one another.

“They shall attempt to pass through this Door of Judgment. Those who truly regret what has occurred shall be able to pass through without issue.”

Richt gazed at me with worry, but I knew how these things worked; a shield of Schutzaria would let anyone through who did not harbor malice or the intent to harm others. I looked him in the eyes and gave a reassuring nod.

“Richt, I am sure you will pass through without issue,” I said.

Determination filled Richt’s eyes and he stepped forward, climbing down the stairs and standing in front of the amber rectangle. As those in the crowd all held their breaths, waiting to see what would happen, he walked toward the shield... and passed through with ease, despite looking a little scared at the very last moment.

“It is as you see, High Priest. He is a good man.”

“Hm. It appears that Richt is trustworthy, but what about this one?” Ferdinand mused, unsympathetically looking down at the mayor.

At that, Richt, as well as several of the town chiefs, grabbed the mayor and brought him down the stairs. Then, they pushed him toward the Door of Judgment.

“Nguh!”

As I expected, the mayor was knocked back by a strong wind,

making him unable to pass through. Bands of light instantly shot from Eckhart's schtappe and bound him.

"Lord Ferdinand, I have detained the rebel."

"Good work."

Richt had passed through the Door of Judgment, but the mayor had not. I heard a simultaneous gasp from everyone in the plaza as fear crept onto their faces; those who had attacked the monastery no doubt realized that the same power had knocked them away in the past. Some even looked visibly sick.

"Richt, have all the citizens of Hasse pass through the door," Ferdinand ordered. "All those deemed a threat shall be executed."

"High Priest," I said, pulling on his sleeve to try and signal that this was unnecessary. But he was gazing between the gathered citizens and the bound, prone mayor with a harsh look in his eyes.

"Any number of these people could harbor the same ill intentions as this fool. Judgment shall be necessary if you do not wish for us to execute the entirety of the city. Do you not agree?"

"I-I believe in the people of Hasse. Surely judgment is not—"

But before I could say "necessary," Ferdinand grinned. "If those in Hasse are as virtuous as you believe, then this judgment will pose no threat to them."

Unable to argue with this logic, I had no choice but to concede. "Then I suppose it must be done. Do you agree, Richt?" I asked, not knowing what else to do but throw the ball in his court.

He did not oppose the judgment, but instead accepted it with a smile. "Yes, High Bishop. There is no problem with that at all. In the event that there are others who fail, I would rather they be removed than risk leading Hasse into another crisis. We cannot allow ourselves to fall any further out of the archduke's favor than we already have."

Richt showed no hesitation in supporting the judgment and execution of any dangerous individuals who might commit further treason; his goal above all else was to save the city from destruction, so he just couldn't risk displeasing the archduke's family any more than they already had.

"Judgment shall reveal those worthy of receiving the Saint of

Ehrenfest's mercy. As you saw, I passed through the door safely. If you do not wish to be executed as a rebel, then you must do the same!" Richt declared.

And so, everyone in the plaza lined up to pass through the door. The town chiefs and the citizens of their towns went first, but since they hadn't participated in the attack and the mayor had very little influence on them, they all passed through so easily that it was almost underwhelming. The city folk who had participated in the monastery attack, however, were evidently a lot more fearful. They faltered in front of the Door of Judgment, afraid that they would be knocked back like the mayor had been.

"Do not fret about those who cannot pass through," Ferdinand told Eckhart. "You need only bind them as you did the mayor."

"Yes, sir!" Eckhart replied, taking out his schtappe. The sight was enough to send a wave of panic surging through the citizens, causing some to swallow their fear and rush toward the door, yelling all the while.

"Ngh!"

"Gaaah!"

Several among the flowing stream of people were knocked back by the door, and Eckhart instantly detained them with bands of light.

Once everyone had attempted to pass through, the Door of Judgment faded, and six bound people were taken onto the stage.

The Execution

“Those rejected by the door harbor malice toward us. They shall be executed here and now,” Ferdinand announced.

“As you wish. These men are all firmly in the mayor’s faction. I have no defense for them. Rather, I am grateful that the Door of Judgment has proved the innocence of everyone else,” Richt responded.

Ferdinand knelt in front of me. My heart was pounding hard. The blood drained from my face as the realization hit me that these people were about to be executed. It wasn’t necessarily a surprise, since Ferdinand had said that the mayor would be executed from the very start, but now that it was happening before me, my heart thumped painfully and a cold sweat ran down my back.

“Rozemyne, do not avert your gaze.”

“...Okay.”

Neither Richt nor anyone else in the plaza seemed to feel any sympathy for those who had dragged them into this mess. Or, well, maybe that wasn’t the right way to put it. They didn’t seem to feel any disgust or hesitation toward them, either. Everyone was simply acting like it was completely natural for those deemed to be traitors or harmful to the community to be executed; they were wrongdoers for putting the entire city at risk, and this was a just punishment.

“Justus.”

“At once, Lord Ferdinand.”

Justus headed to the large box that had been brought onto the stage and opened the lock with a loud clink. The front side of the box opened flat, revealing its contents—five shallow drawers stacked on top of each other like a makeshift filing cabinet. But from where I was standing, I couldn’t see what was inside them.

“Ferdinand, what is in those drawers?”

“Hasse’s identification medals.”

He was apparently referring to the citizenship medals that we stamped our blood onto during our baptism ceremonies. In the city of Ehrenfest, the temple took care of registrations, marriages, and cancellations due to deaths. But elsewhere, the registrations were all done during the Harvest Festival, with the mayor sending word upon the death of a citizen. Scholars in the castle managed the medals themselves, following reports from priests and tax officials to keep them all properly organized.

"We brought them all here since we did not know how many executions there would be, but in general, they are not to be taken outside the castle," Ferdinand explained. I could guess that it was like taking a box of confidential papers outside of a government office, in which case it made sense that the scholar in charge of them would need to stay close and keep a close eye out.

Justus took out a piece of parchment and called out to Eckhart. "Make sure nobody gets close."

Eckhart brought out his schtappe and transformed it into a sword, before taking up position beside the box. He held his blade at the ready, prepared to cut down anyone who got close, which was enough to show just how valuable the box was.

"Justus. Begin."

"As you wish, Lord Ferdinand."

Justus gripped his schtappe and chanted "*messer*," turning it into a knife. With the sheet of parchment still in hand, he walked up to the light-bound traitors sprawled out on the stage, their faces twisting in fear as they watched his feet approach. A couple choked out hoarse cries for help, but nobody answered their calls as Justus knelt down to stamp the closest man's blood.

The traitor's thumb was slightly pushed out between the bands binding him, at which point Justus pricked it with his knife. As the blood started seeping through, Justus pushed the fresh cut against the parchment, producing a slowly expanding red stain.

Ow, ow!

Even though it wasn't happening to me personally, I could almost feel the pain as I watched the knife pierce the skin and draw blood. I wrapped my hand around my thumb in shared discomfort and shifted

my focus so as to see as little of what was happening as possible.

Once Justus had confirmed that the blood was firmly stamped against the parchment, he smoothly whipped his knife through the air. The slight amount of red that had been streaking down the blade seemed to disappear into thin air.

Huh...? The knife is clean again?

Justus held up the blood-marked parchment to the crowd, proving that it had been stamped, which elicited cheers from the citizens and an approving nod from Ferdinand. He then headed to the next prone man, pressed his blood against the parchment, and showed the crowd again. This process repeated.

“Ferdinand, what in the world is Justus doing?”

“Selecting the identification medals. It is the work of priests and scholars to handle them.”

For nobles, the identification stamping that was done during every baptism ceremony registered their mana. For commoners, however, it only registered their blood. That was why, during my first baptism, I had simply needed to press my blood against a white, flat-looking stone. I naturally hadn’t written anything on it, nor had I even been asked my name.

These medals were stored according to what year they had been registered, but beyond that, there was no quick way to identify whose was whose. They were instead usually tracked using blood; during funerals, they would place the medal on the body to ensure that it belonged to the person in question. To this end, Ferdinand had taken some of my blood to find my medal during Myne’s funeral.

I hadn’t noticed, though, because I was unconscious.

For funerals held outside Ehrenfest, some of the deceased’s blood was smeared on a wooden board, which was then given to the scholar who visited the city during the Harvest Festival. They then sent the boards to the castle along with the collected taxes. These boards would be returned with the medals attached, which would then serve as grave markers.

As Ferdinand explained the system to me, Justus walked over to the final person.

“You won’t get away with this...!” she cried, the only woman

among the six traitors. She was the mayor's wife, glaring at us with hate in her eyes and tears streaming down her cheeks as the bands of light kept her bound.

That's terrifying...

As I continued to endure her intense glower, my throat bobbed, goosebumps rose on my arms, and my hands started to tremble a little. I wanted to step back and hide in Ferdinand's shadow, or at least look away, but I had been told that I needed to watch the entire execution. I had no choice but to keep looking at her, so I clenched my teeth and tightly clasped my hands, trying to at least stop them from shaking so visibly.

As the wife and I continued staring at one another, Justus finished the blood stamp. He, at least, seemed entirely unfazed. With the last one complete, he wove his knife through the air while saying something and returned it to schtappe form. He then waved the schtappe around again, this time saying "*auswahl*," which made the blood-stamped parchment ignite in golden flames like a magic contract. It flew over the box being guarded by Eckhart, trailing fire behind it, then burned away into golden light that sprinkled down onto the drawers.

Instantly, the drawers started to rumble without anyone touching them. The topmost and second topmost ones both launched themselves open and shut, acting strangely until six medals suddenly shot out from within.

"Oooh!"

Awed cries could be heard from the crowd as the ivory medals used to register the people as citizens flew into the air before settling into Justus's hands. He looked over them carefully, then smoothly walked in front of Ferdinand and kneeled.

"Here are the medals, Lord Ferdinand."

Justus held up the medals gracefully and, once Ferdinand had accepted them with a nod of gratitude, stood up and briskly returned to the box. He firmly clasped the lock back on, then stood in front of it protectively.

"Rozemyne, step back and stand by Justus," Ferdinand said, before waving his free hand to make his schtappe appear within it. I

could guess he was about to use some magic, so I did as requested, leaving only Ferdinand standing in the center of the stage.

He scanned the area as if making sure there was nobody near, then held his schtappe high in the air. Mana poured from its tip, forming letters and complex designs in the air.

“Aah, it’s my first time seeing this!” Justus exclaimed, his brown eyes wider than usual and gleaming with joy. He was leaning forward slightly, absorbing as much as he could of the magic circle that Ferdinand was drawing in the air.

“Justus, what’s about to happen?”

“The execution of the traitors, milady. This is a spell taught only to archduke candidates, so nobody is allowed near when it’s being cast. That way, they can’t hear the chant he’s saying, or see the details of the complex magic circle,” Justus explained. “I knew there existed a spell specifically for executing traitors, but I’d never gotten the opportunity to see it. This kinda thing is *really* rare, since usually nobody even thinks about acting against the archduke. Aah, I’m so glad I wormed my way into coming along!”

Seeing Justus clench his fists and shake with excitement at the upcoming execution, I deeply understood why Ferdinand had given such a terrible grimace when he arrived to accompany us. I took a full step back.

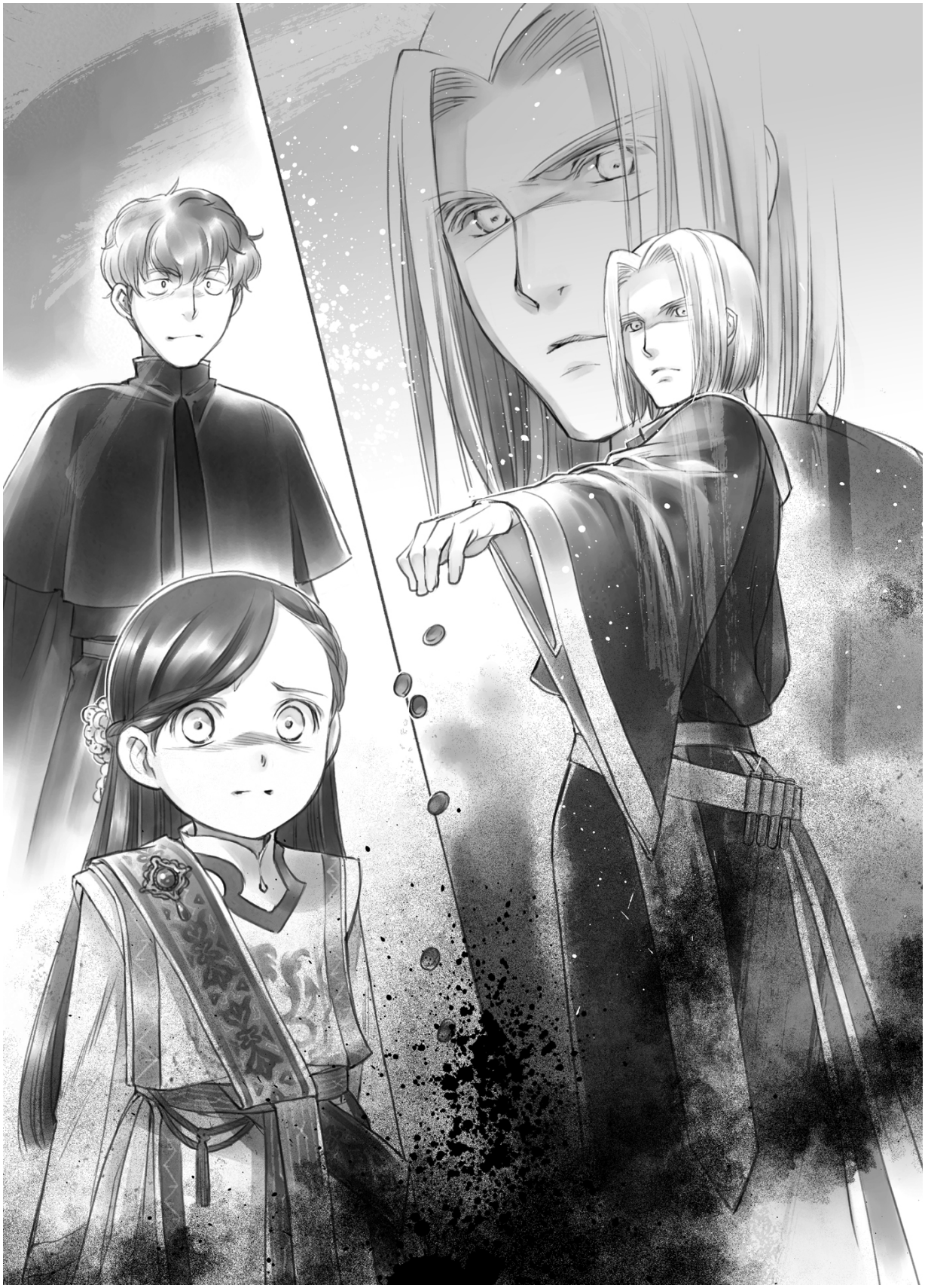
“You’ll be learning this spell yourself one day, milady. Please send word to me if you ever get the opportunity to use it.”

“I will pray to the gods that such a day never comes.” *Nor shall I tell you if one does*, I added silently, before looking back to the execution.

Ferdinand swung his schtappe as he stood in the center of the stage. He must have completed forming the magic circle with his mana by that point, as a black mist wavering like fire spewed out from within. Perhaps it was a spell connected to the God of Darkness. It looked a lot like the mana-sucking black mist that I had seen during the ambush at last year’s Spring Prayer, so the dots weren’t hard to connect.

Keeping his eyes locked on the ominous black magic circle, Ferdinand’s lips moved in a chant. He then tossed the medals into it.

They stopped in midair, as if sticking to the magic circle, before getting completely enveloped by the black mist.



“Eckhart, release their bindings!”

“Yes, sir!”

At Ferdinand’s order, Eckhart quickly whipped his schtappe, making the light binding the six people disappear in the blink of an eye.

The now freed traitors reacted in a variety of ways. Some blinked in confusion, remaining sprawled on the ground, unsure what was going on. Others screamed and tried to run, one of whom raced directly toward Ferdinand in an attempt to take him down with them. It was the mayor’s wife.

“Ferdinand?!” I cried as I saw her sprinting toward him at the center of the stage. But despite my desperate cry, Ferdinand didn’t even blink; he spoke with his eyes locked on the magic circle, not even sparing the woman a glance.

“Fear not. There is nothing they can do.”

In the end, they were afforded only a brief moment of movement. Both the mayor, who had stood up on wavering legs to flee, and his wife, who had tried to attack Ferdinand, froze in place after a few steps. Then, they dropped down onto the stage. When they attempted to stand back up, while they could move their arms, their legs were completely paralyzed.

“Ngh! My... My legs!” the woman screamed.

Soon, the others started crying out as well—voices of pain, fear, and desperation.

I narrowed my eyes as I watched them closer, and that was when I noticed their feet had turned light gray. At first, I assumed they were all simply wearing matching shoes, but then the color spread to their clothes. They were gradually being dyed gray, and the further it advanced, the less they could move.

“...It looks like their legs are being turned to stone.”

“That should spread across their entire bodies,” Justus replied, now leaning forward even more eagerly without even trying to hide his enthusiasm.

I really couldn’t share his enjoyment. Had Ferdinand not been shooting me the occasional harsh glare, I would have already closed my eyes and covered my ears so that I wouldn’t have to see their

writhing bodies or hear their piercing screams.

The black mist eroded the medals like acid, the white stones breaking apart from all sides. By the time they had been reduced to half their original size, the prisoners were gray up to their waists. Their torsos hardened before my eyes, and as the color reached their necks, they lost even the ability to scream.

When the medals had broken apart entirely, the prisoners were gray from head to toe, frozen like statues. Ferdinand then whipped his schtappe, making the magic circle disappear.

In an instant, all six statues broke apart. Large cracks had run through them, spreading until each person collapsed onto the stage with a heavy thud. The impact was enough to shatter them completely, sending large chunks of what looked like stone all over the place. These fragments then began to crumble like sand until, eventually, their ash-like remains were carried away on the still-cold spring wind.

They had no medals to attach to their gravestones, and no bodies to bury. Traitors were allowed no burial, nor were they permitted to be mourned.

This is awful...

I couldn't stop thinking about their faces, twisted in fear and despair, their mouths agape in dying screams that still rang in my ears. The looks of agonized suffering that remained in their eyes until their very last moments were burned into my mind, having been frozen on their statue-like faces before they were turned to ash and blown away on the wind. No human being should have to die like that.

"Spectacular. Wasn't that wonderful, milady?" Justus asked excitedly. But I didn't even have the motivation to put on a fake smile and nod; how could he have been so excited to watch people be killed in such a horrid, disrespectful manner?

That was... beyond words.

My toes felt unnaturally cold. The contents of my stomach stirred as I was overwhelmed with disgust. I would have actually preferred to pass out completely than experience the emotions that were surging through me, but I wasn't low on stamina or mana. All I could

do was stand at the edge of the stage and continue to watch, not even allowed to close my eyes.

The plaza was silent, and everyone present wore expressions that made their terror toward the nobility clear. They had just witnessed the immense power that nobles wielded and been thoroughly taught that their lives could be taken away at any moment.

With the spectacle over, Richt, who had been kneeling on the opposite side of the stage, stood up to address the crowd in a clear voice. “Everyone, the traitors are now gone. They stood against our archduke and put our entire city at risk. Our good names were sullied due to their actions. To restore our honor, we must work to repay the damage they caused until our newly baptized children come of age, and yet more years after that. We must act together so that the mercy of the Saint of Ehrenfest, who saved us from execution as traitors, will not go unrewarded. The journey ahead will no doubt be tough, but it is a journey that must be made.”

Richt looked just as fearful as the crowd he was speaking to, but even so, he was doing his absolute best to try and get Hasse back on its feet. This was not the end; it was the beginning of a new decade, during which Hasse would repay the archduke’s family, and seeing their determination moved me.

It’s not over yet. Not for Hasse. And not for me, as the Saint of Ehrenfest.

I took deep, deep breaths to collect myself. The screams were still echoing in my ears, but I couldn’t let them distract me forever. Handling the situation in Hasse after the mayor’s execution was part of the task that I had been given; I needed to work together with Richt as much as possible to help the city recover.

And so, I deliberately walked to the center of the stage, acting as calm and graceful as I could. I stopped beside Ferdinand, all the while fighting down the bile that had risen up my throat as I moved. All eyes were on me, from both the crowd gathered in the plaza and the people remaining on the stage.

The moment I closed my eyes, memories of the guilty writhing in pain and terror flashed through my mind. I shook my head to force

them away, took a powerful step forward, and raised my head.

“Here you are,” Ferdinand said, handing me the voice-amplifying magic tool. I gripped it tightly, moved it to my mouth, and then sucked in air.

“People of Hasse...” I began to address the crowd, but my voice was quivering slightly. I swallowed, trying to steady myself, then took another breath. “People of Hasse,” I repeated, this time sounding a bit better, “please endure for just one year.”

Relieved that I had managed to push down my unease, I continued. Nobles used the enormous power of mana to strike pure terror into the hearts of commoners, but it was also used to save their lives. I had been given the role of a saint, so I needed to play my part and give hope to Hasse and its citizens.

“Whether Spring Prayer is held in Hasse next year will all depend on how the archduke perceives your efforts in the meantime. I shall do what I can, but the deciding factor will be your own actions.”

The aghast expressions of the farmers lit up slightly when they heard that—by working hard, they might still get Spring Prayer next year. Some started whispering that they could surely manage so long as it was just one year, and the returning hope in their faces lightened the burden on my shoulders a little.

“It has been proven that none among you harbor traitorous intentions. Now, please prove through action that you wish to atone for your crimes; I would like to visit Hasse during Spring Prayer next year to offer prayers and blessings to you all.”

At that, cheers erupted from the crowd. Amid the noise, Ferdinand instructed me to bring forth my highbeast, and together we headed to the monastery. Joining me in my Pandabus was Fran, Zahm, Brigitte, and Justus with his big box.

“That was absolutely wonderful, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Thank you, Brigitte.”

I managed to smile back, but my head was spinning. My chest ached, and my stomach churned like my body was trying to throw up all the bad feelings inside of me. I wanted to escape reality, either immersing myself in books or going to sleep to provide a brief respite from my thoughts.

When we landed in front of the door to the monastery, we were greeted by gray priests, the Gilberta Company, and everyone's attendants, all of whom were kneeling in wait.

"Justus, Eckhart, Damuel, Brigitte—prepare your rooms within the chapel," Ferdinand said, handing each of them a red feystone.

They all got to work at once with their attendants, with Justus ordering his to carry the big box out of my highbeast.

Now that everyone was out of my Pandabus, I put it away. Drained both physically and mentally, I hung my head, only for a bitter rush of vomit to catch in my throat once again. I couldn't throw up here and now with everyone watching, so I desperately swallowed it down and wiped my teary eyes with my sleeve.

"Rozemyne, you seem... unwell. You need rest. Attendants, prepare her room," Ferdinand instructed.

My attendants hurriedly stood up and went inside. I had given Gil a magic tool to open my hidden room since he had gone to the monastery first, but while the room would be ready to some degree, there were still some things that had to be organized before I could rest.

I saw my attendants off, in a complete daze, then aimlessly looked around. That was when I saw Dad among the people who had come out to greet us. He looked incredibly worried, and it was immediately obvious that he was wracking his brain for anything that he could do to comfort me.

A single thought ran through my mind: I wanted to run over, call him "Dad," and sob into his chest.

"Rozemyne."

"...Ah."

Ferdinand placed a hand on my shoulder, and I immediately came back to my senses. I would never be permitted to do anything like that. I lowered the arms that I had started to raise, putting my foot back down before I could start moving toward him.

Ferdinand gestured me forward, but no sooner had I started walking than Dad offered me his thick cloak.

"Lady Rozemyne, I offer you this cloak, if you would accept it. You look very cold."

I looked at the cloak, and then up at Ferdinand, who shot Dad a firm look. But Dad simply returned the glare, continuing to hold out the cloak.

Ferdinand looked down with narrowed eyes for a moment, then furrowed his brow. “Are you cold, Rozemyne?”

“Yes, I’m cold. I’m... very, very cold. I thank you ever so much, Gunther.”

I took the cloak from Dad and hugged it close. It was a little dusty but not enough to mask his smell, which made me feel both relief and bitter sadness. I buried my face in the cloak on the spot.

“High Bishop. Have this if you’re still cold.”

“No, this one’s a lot warmer.”

Unexpected voices called out to me, and for a second, the tears stopped. I looked up and saw five soldiers all holding out their cloaks to me. I couldn’t help but smile a little as I saw the row of men forming a cloak wall in front of me, and the heaviness in my heart seemed to lighten ever so slightly.

“I’m afraid that I would be unable to carry any more, but I appreciate the concern. May you all be blessed for your kindness.”

With the cloak in hand, I went to my hidden room, where I found my attendants busily moving around to prepare things for me to sleep. I moved to a corner and started spreading out Dad’s cloak, hoping to wrap myself up in it and stay out of everyone’s way.

“Rozemyne, let me see that for a second.”

“No,” I replied, hugging the cloak tightly to protect it from Ferdinand’s outstretched hand. He rubbed his temples, then quickly snatched one end.

“You cannot bring it to bed as is. I will merely be cleansing it. Give it to me.”

“...Cleansing?” I asked, tilting my head.

Ferdinand used that opening to steal the cloak. He took out his schtappe and began chanting something right then and there, causing a ball of water to appear from seemingly nowhere. It engulfed the cloak before quickly disappearing again.

“What was that spell?”

“As I said, a cleansing spell.”

It was apparently an essential spell for knights when they spent multiple days on feybeast hunting trips, as it could be used for cleaning both one's body and tools.

"I didn't know that magic could be so convenient. I've never heard of that spell before."

"It would be unnecessary for you to learn, since you have attendants and servants," Ferdinand explained.

It was considered a waste for nobles to use mana to clean themselves when they could simply have somebody else do it. But in circumstances such as these, where one had to stay outside without any attendants accompanying them, there was no other choice.

"This is a special exception. It would be a disaster for you to bring that to bed, but there is no time to clean it now," he continued, plopping the cloak on my head. It was clean now, and the dusty smell was gone. "Rest well. I shall explain the circumstances to the Gilberta Company."

At that, he exited the room, as if to say that his business here was done.

As I passed the time smelling the cloak, I heard Gil tell Fran that he had brought in enough hot water. Monika then promptly chased them both out of the room.

"Lady Rozemyne, your bath is ready. Would the men be so kind as to leave?"

That day, I slept with my head buried in Dad's cloak. The nasty, distressing feelings faded, and I didn't have a single bad dream.

The Spring Ingredient and Discussing Spring Prayer

Eventually, I woke up from my peaceful slumber. I crawled out from under Dad's cloak and stretched as hard as I could before spreading the cloak out on top of my bed. My attendants would have done this for me under normal circumstances, but I wanted to do it with my own two hands. I smoothed out the wrinkles with my palms, then carefully folded it.

"Okay. Perfect."

Fran picked up the now-folded cloak, and together we headed to the dining room for breakfast. My attendants and the commoners couldn't eat before us nobles, so here in the monastery, all the nobles—including the guard knights—gathered first. We naturally couldn't act too casually when Ferdinand was here.

By the time I arrived, everybody was awake and eagerly digging in.

"Good morning, everyone."

"Good morning, Lady Rozemyne."

Brigitte and Damuel appeared to have just started, while Justus had clearly been forced awake by his attendants. Ferdinand, however, was already close to being done; he must have woken up considerably earlier than anyone else.

"Hello, Rozemyne. I see you slept well."

"Indeed. I was very snug last night."

While Monika and Gil were preparing my meal, I had Fran call over Dad so that I could return his cloak. I had wanted to give it back myself, but the curse of nobility made me unable to do things like that. The most I could do was offer my thanks as Fran handed it to him.

"Gunther, I shall return your cloak. It brought me much warmth

over the night," I said as Dad knelt before me. He looked up a little, then his light-brown eyes crinkled in a small, relieved smile.

"I am glad to have been of assistance, Lady Rozemyne. From what I have heard, you will now be traveling to towns as part of Spring Prayer. Please take care of yourself."

"I thank you ever so much. You may tell the rest of your family that I wish them well, too."

"We are honored."

Our exchange was brief, but just having the opportunity to speak to him made my heart flush with an indescribable warmth.

As I watched Dad leave and return to the group of soldiers, Brigitte narrowed her amethyst-colored eyes in thought. "You certainly seem close to that soldier, Lady Rozemyne," she said aloud.

She was the only noble out of all those present who didn't know he was my real dad. Ferdinand and Damuel knew, of course, while Justus and Eckhart had both found out during their background check on me while I was Myne.

I smiled and gave Brigitte the excuse that we had prepared ahead of time. "Gunther has a long history with the Gilberta Company, who I have been ordering hair sticks from since before my baptism. Effa and Tuuli, the two who always come to take my orders—do you remember them?"

"I have seen them in your chambers several times before, yes. Tuuli was the little girl who helped take my measurements, I believe, and I understand that you request her services often."

I nodded. "Gunther is Tuuli's father. He also works closely with the husband of Corinna, the woman making your dress. Prior to my baptism, Gunther would often serve as a guard when I went to the lower city on business related to the orphanage workshop, or when the orphans went into the forest to gather."

"I see," Brigitte replied, returning an understanding nod.

The cover story was designed to make sense to anyone informed enough to be suspicious, so I was glad to see it working so well.

"Rozemyne, we shall be resting today, then leave for Spring Prayer tomorrow," Ferdinand said upon finishing his meal. "I will

come and see you later this afternoon. There is an important matter we must discuss."

At that, he headed back to his room.

I promptly started on my own breakfast, aware that the Gilberta Company and the soldiers were due to depart for Ehrenfest very shortly. They needed to eat as soon as possible or they would certainly be late, so I worked my way through my food as quickly as I could while still maintaining a graceful appearance.

Once breakfast was done, I returned to my room so as to not get in anyone else's way. I sat in a chair and closed my eyes for a moment, only for the events of yesterday to flash through my mind once again. My mood plummeted in the literal blink of an eye.

"Lady Rozemyne, the others have finished eating and are preparing to leave. Will you see them off?" Fran asked, snapping me back to my senses.

I gave a nod and stood up, going with him to the front gate. There we found a row of carriages, almost all of which had been packed with luggage. There was only one that was still being prepared, with priests helping the soldiers to load the remaining things.

"Is everything ready?" I asked the gathered members of the Gilberta Company, who had seemingly been discussing something among themselves.

Benno took a step forward and knelt, then Mark and Lutz did the same.

"Lady Rozemyne, the honorable Lord Ferdinand informed us that the matter in Hasse has been settled. We heard that you gave a praiseworthy performance."

"I could not have done it without the Gilberta Company's assistance. You have helped me more than I could ever put into words. Thank you."

They frequently gave me advice, and their connections to other merchants had been vital in our efforts to spread rumors among the commoners; they regularly visited Hasse to keep us informed and manipulate things in our favor.

"Because of your plan, those in Hasse had time to discuss matters over winter, and I am of the opinion that this proved crucial in

obtaining the favorable result we secured yesterday. There surely would have been much stronger opposition to the mayor's execution had they not understood their actions nor had the time to consider an appropriate response."

I was so far removed from the common sense of nobles that it was hard to believe I could have properly directed the scholars. I would surely learn more and more about how nobles did things in the future, but for now, I was completely ignorant. If not for Benno and Mark, a lot more people would have been executed.

"I am glad to have been of service to you, Lady Rozemyne. This tragedy has shown the world that we are a company whom you trust, and henceforth, it shall be significantly easier for us to do business within Ehrenfest and Hasse. If you ever have need of us again, please do not hesitate to ask," Benno intoned. I could guess that he was being sincere, but his last sentence was definitely an indirect demand that I contact him before doing anything stupid.

I searched through my memories for anything that I should tell him about, then clapped my hands together in realization. "Ah, yes. There is one thing I wish to say. This won't be happening immediately, but I would like to visit Illgner to search for new kinds of wood to use for paper. I will surely ask for your advice when the time comes," I said casually.

For some reason, Benno had a vacant expression. Mark was looking at the ground, and Lutz let out a heavy sigh. As I tilted my head in confusion, Benno looked at me with a smile. But his dark-red eyes told a different story; had we been in my hidden room, he would have no doubt unleashed his thunder on me right about now.

"...Understood. I shall eagerly await your return from Spring Prayer, Lady Rozemyne, so that I might hear the finer details of this matter. We would like to thank you for providing us new contacts among the nobility and discuss the dress that you have hired Corinna to make," Benno said with a polite laugh.

But, despite his courteous tone, I knew this was just his roundabout way of saying: *"Don't give me extra work when a bunch of nobles are already calling for me day in and day out, you idiot!"*

I maintained a composed smile, but on the inside, I was in a

panic. *Noooo! Now I don't want Spring Prayer to end!*

And so concluded my discussion with the Gilberta Company. While everyone got into their loaded carriages, I handed out the small silvers that Benno had prepared and given to Fran ahead of time.

"I know the road from Hasse to Ehrenfest is not an easy one with these numbers, but I am entrusting the safety of Justus and the Gilberta Company to all of you."

"Understood."

"You can count on us."

The soldiers let slip eager grins as they looked at the money I had handed them. There had apparently been fierce competition back at the gate over who would go to Hasse for guard duty, and they all seemed satisfied with their pay. I always gave Dad a large silver instead of a small one, but I had heard he was using it to buy a round of drinks for everyone, so not much would be going home with him. And by "heard," I mean Tuuli had told me in a letter—though her handwriting was very hard to decipher.

Despite everyone being ready to go, there was one person who hadn't gotten in a carriage yet. And who else would that be but Justus?

"This truly is a shame. If only I could accompany you during Spring Prayer as well..." he said sadly.

We were going our separate ways here since he needed to return the box of medals back to the castle as soon as possible, and since his own highbeast couldn't carry it, he was traveling to the Noble's Quarter by carriage. His attendants were going with him, too.

Justus was the only noble leaving with the soldiers, but he was deliberately delaying his return for as long as possible, looking between Ferdinand and me with clear melancholy.

Ferdinand let out an exasperated sigh, impatiently waving him into his carriage. "Spring Prayer is a religious event performed by priests. We have no need for a scholar now that the matter in Hasse has been settled. You even went as far as to steal work from the one in charge of the city to come here. Are you not satisfied yet?"

"I am satisfied with what I saw in Hasse, but I wish to follow Lady

Rozemyne wherever I can. It seems to me that there is hardly ever a dull moment with her."

"That is simply your imagination," Ferdinand replied, now glaring at Justus. "Leave already. The others cannot depart until you do."

Having no other choice, Justus climbed into his carriage. And with that, they were off. One by one, the carriages slowly started to move, with the soldiers walking next to them as guards. Dad served as the rear guard for the group and was thus waiting at the back, so I used this opportunity to say one final goodbye.

"Gunther, take care on the road."

"And you take care of your health, Lady Rozemyne," Dad responded with a grin.

By then, the final carriage had started to move. He followed after it, the cloak I had slept in last night swaying behind him, and once he had completely disappeared from sight, I returned to the monastery.

It was quiet now that most of the people were gone. I started to rest after lunch, and eventually, Ferdinand arrived with Eckhart to talk.

"The only attendant you need with you here is Fran. Have the rest leave the room."

"Very well. Everyone but Fran, I must ask you to leave," I instructed. They all quickly did as asked, leaving him and my two guard knights.

Fran poured tea for everyone, then stood by the firmly shut door. There was a long table here similar to the one in the High Bishop's room, and Ferdinand and I sat on opposite sides such that we were facing each other. Eckhart was seated beside Ferdinand, while Damuel and Brigitte were standing behind me on either side.

"First, I would like to discuss the ingredient that we shall acquire midway through Spring Prayer," Ferdinand began. I sensed both of my guard knights stiffen up at those words, and I instinctively straightened my back; the room had gotten palpably tense.

"Should I take your decision to discuss this with my knights present to mean that feybeasts are going to be involved again?"

"Given that feybeasts tend to gather in mana-rich locations, we can assume that there will be a considerable number in the area.

Justus has reported that we are likely to encounter talfrosch."

Ferdinand helpfully provided a name, and while I had no idea what kind of a feybeast that was, my knights seemingly did. A grimace flashed across Brigitte's face, which led me to conclude that, whatever it was, it was particularly disliked by girls.

Ngh. Please, let it be anything but a bug...

"However, considering what occurred on the Night of Schutzaria, it would not be wise to underestimate what could happen on the Night of Flutrane. It is impossible to say whether we are going to be faced with feybeasts of great size or great number."

"In that case, shouldn't we bring more guard knights with us? At the very least, we could have Cornelius accompany us, since he's already assigned to me," I suggested.

While it was important to keep my potion-making a secret, Cornelius was family and someone who I trusted.

But Ferdinand shook his head. "That is not an option. Cornelius is both a minor and an apprentice. He cannot be given work outside the city."

"I seem to recall him visiting Hasse with us when you constructed this monastery. Am I wrong?" I asked, thinking back to who rode whose highbeast on the way here.

At that, Ferdinand and Eckhart both grimaced.

"Rozemyne, those were abnormal circumstances," Ferdinand explained. "None of us could have predicted that we were going to leave the city."

That was a reasonable response; not even I had intended for us to build the monastery in Hasse straight after lunch in the Italian restaurant.

"So we won't be able to bring any more guard knights with us..." I conceded. "Is everything really going to be okay?"

"Fear not, Rozemyne. Most feybeasts pose no threat whatsoever to Lord Ferdinand," Eckhart said reassuringly, openly placing his utmost faith in him. He even seemed excited to have the opportunity to serve as his guard knight.

He probably wasn't wrong that most things wouldn't be an issue with Ferdinand around, so I decided to entrust all the security details

to them and focus on the gathering itself. I took out my diptych, readied my stylus, and began asking questions.

“Ferdinand, what kind of material is the spring ingredient?”

“The nectar of a rairein, a flower said to be beloved by the goddess herself,” Ferdinand replied.

We would be heading to a spring that became so rich with mana at this time of year that it was known as The Goddesses’ Bath. Flowers known as rairein bloomed there, and their nectar was this season’s ingredient.

“The flower’s petals close during the night, and it slowly produces nectar, before eventually blooming at dawn. To prevent other mana from polluting the ingredient, one must gather it at that very moment. We shall thus be leaving at night and awaiting dawn with our guard kept high.”

I wrote all that down into my diptych, then looked up at Ferdinand. “Have you ever been to this spring?”

“No. I went gathering quite regularly while attending the Royal Academy, but since graduating and returning to Ehrenfest, I have not had such leisure,” Ferdinand explained. “I am familiar with violent, dangerous feybeasts that must be hunted by the Knight’s Order, but I am not particularly well informed on harmless feybeasts and all the materials available here. As a result, we are largely reliant on Justus’s information when it comes to gathering in Ehrenfest.”

There was no doubting that Justus was an absolute weirdo, but he was truly knowledgeable about all manner of subjects. What’s more, since he readily went to gather materials himself, the information he provided could be trusted.

“I shall prepare the tools you need for gathering and lend them to you again when the time comes.”

“I thank you ever so much.”

Once we had finished talking about the rairein nectar and Justus’s previous encounter with a talfrosch, Ferdinand ordered Fran and the guard knights to leave the room.

“I now wish to be alone with Rozemyne so that I might discuss matters in Hasse. Everyone, clear the room.”

“Yes, sir!”

Fran poured us fresh cups of tea and then exited, with Damuel and Brigitte following close behind. Eckhart seemed to want to stay and continue doing his duty as a guard, but he too was forced to leave.

Ferdinand sipped his freshly poured tea, set the cup down, and then looked at me steadily with his light-golden eyes. Us facing each other alone like this always meant the start of a lecture or some kind of scolding.

I placed my hands on my lap and straightened my back.

“Rozemyne, I would like you to tell me what you have learned from your experience with Hasse.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, and images from yesterday immediately flashed through my mind. When I opened them again, I clenched my fists, looking at Ferdinand head-on and doing my best to not get emotional.

“...First, I’m now painfully aware that I need to fully grasp noble culture as soon as possible.”

The problem in Hasse had stemmed from my ignorance in three crucial areas: the cultural importance of ivory buildings, the contrast in what commoners and nobles deemed common sense, and the hospitality that nobles were supposed to be given. In order to prevent something similar from happening again, I needed to master noble culture as soon as I could.

“Correct. Were you a normal noble child, you could slowly learn about our culture and customs beneath the protection of your parents. But in order to run your workshop and spread printing throughout the duchy, you have already leapt into the world of adults.”

There was a lot that I needed to learn, and I needed to do it as quickly as possible, since I was doing things no other child would ever do. I was no longer a commoner; I needed guidance not as a merchant, but as a noble.

“Nobles will be unmoved by the logic of a commoner merchant. All you have done so far is establish an orphanage and a workshop in Hasse. You acted on impulse without preparation, and the only reason it ended without any major incident was because the

enemies you made were commoners living within the archduke's Central District."

"As far as I'm concerned, this *was* a major incident," I protested impetuously. What would you call an execution that had resulted in six deaths if not a major incident?

Ferdinand let out a dismissive laugh. "That happened because of your insistence on saving Hasse and keeping it on the map. Under normal circumstances, the entire city would have been erased, saving much time and leaving fewer problematic loose ends."

"What...? No way. That would definitely cause more problems."

"Another disagreement born from our different values, I see. To me, it was much more time-consuming and tedious to save Hasse than to destroy it."

The point we disagreed on most was the value of a human life. The gap between commoners and the nobility was just unfathomably vast.

I slowly shook my head. "I understand that my culture doesn't mesh well with this world, but I will never get used to taking the lives of others so easily."

"...You do have a commoner family, I suppose. It will be tough for you to fully adopt a noble's way of thinking, but do your best to absorb as much as you can."

I didn't mind working to learn something when I had willing teachers there to explain it to me, but there was a big difference between understanding something and believing it. My mindset would be firmly rooted in my Urano upbringing no matter what happened, so overwriting it completely would be almost impossible.

"I can master day-to-day culture by watching others and copying what I see, but changing the very way I think about things is another matter entirely. There's a fundamental part of me that makes my thought process unlike everyone else's in this world, but I don't know how out of place I really am. It won't be easy for me to force myself to become like a regular noble."

"Regardless, if you intend to continue spreading the printing industry as the archduke's adopted daughter, you are inevitably going to be dealing with nobles. If you do not grasp the culture, then

problems will occur with consequences far more severe than what you saw in Hasse. Not everything can be solved solely by relying on the archduke's authority."

The incident in Hasse had seriously blown up in my face, and that was just a problem with commoners. Doing something that attracted the ire of nobles would lead to something even worse, so I needed to proceed carefully, making sure to consider every action I took.

"I need to start using indirect euphemisms so that I can't be held to my exact words, and I need to advance things carefully so that no unexpected problems occur. Does that mean I need to work on my impatience before anything else?" I asked.

Ferdinand grinned and gave me a nod; I had given him the exact answer he wanted. "I cannot empathize whatsoever with your lust for books and the blindness they instill in you, but I do understand that you desire them above all else. It is important that you understand there are likely no others who value books as much as you do; if you wish to spread the printing industry, you will need to learn patience and cease forcing things ahead at an unnatural pace."

In other words, he was telling me not to spread the industry any further until the people wanted it. Perhaps it would be best for me to focus on business and the improvement of printing technology while operating my current workshops at maximum capacity.

"In that case, I will slow my expansion to a gentle pace that won't invite any opposition, and use that time to improve paper and the overall literacy rate," I replied.

Once I no longer needed to dedicate my energy to educating the noble children, I wanted to improve the education of commoners as well. That would mean more customers for my books.

But my grand plan was halted almost immediately by Ferdinand, who frustratedly raised a hand. "Stop. What exactly are you talking about?"

"Hm? I'm just thinking about working on the quality before quantity."

"And I thought you were finally beginning to understand... Where is all this coming from?" Ferdinand asked, now cradling his head.

Weird. Why is he reacting like that?

“Um, well... if you thought I was finally beginning to understand a moment ago, let’s rewind the conversation back to what happened in Hasse. This time, I don’t intend to underestimate the cultural dissimilarities between commoners and nobles. In particular, I think it’s important to teach mayors and town chiefs exactly how nobles think.”

“To what end?” Ferdinand asked, not comprehending why this was necessary. But it seemed clear to me that commoners in a position where they needed to deal with nobles would benefit from learning their culture.

“Hasse’s mayor ultimately ordered the attack because he was convinced that any transgressions would be forgiven so long as he offered money, women, and wine to whichever priest or noble took issue with him. Due to the influence that Bezewanst had on the Central District while he was alive, I am certain that other mayors hold the same misconception. It would be better to teach them now that their bribes are no longer acceptable.”

Ferdinand responded with a blatant grimace. “You intend for me to explain these simple matters to every single mayor?”

“Well, I’m just a little kid on the outside. The adults don’t invite me to their nighttime discussions.”

Not only were there no opportunities for me to speak to them, but I wasn’t sure how seriously they would take the advice of a kid. Meanwhile, you only had to take a look at Ferdinand to know that he was a serious man who wouldn’t joke around; one word from him and they would no doubt carve his warnings deep into their hearts.

But sadly, Ferdinand shook his head. “Is it not obvious to them that people must be accommodated differently? Why must I waste my time educating fools so helpless they would lead themselves to their own demise?”

“...All you’d need to do is speak to them for a little while when we pass through their cities during Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival. I think you’ll find it much more tedious and time-consuming to run around inviting problems, destroying cities, and executing people than to take some time to educate them.”

Ferdinand drummed his fingers on the table. “I see. You do have

a point. If you insist on educating them, I shall permit you to do it yourself. We will not be spending the night at every city, however, so that will not provide the full coverage that you seek. Instead, as the High Bishop, you will need to discuss this with them prior to performing your Spring Prayer duties. Do not attempt to push this tedious busywork onto me."

"...Fiiine."

The next day, at both winter mansions we visited for Spring Prayer, I faced the mayor and town chiefs who came to greet me and explained what had happened in Hasse. I made sure to put up my saint facade and frame my concerns as worry for their safety, saying things like: "I am certain nobody here would do something similar, but I worry how far the former High Bishop's influence may have spread."

Given the number of mayors who began to avert their gaze midway through my explanation, I could guess that my efforts had saved us at least a little trouble.

The Goddesses' Bath

It turned out that Bezewanst only ever visited cities close to Ehrenfest, sticking to a limited area within the already relatively small Central District. The moment we reached a particular distance away from Ehrenfest, the attitudes of the mayors and town chiefs changed considerably.

"Is this something that's hard to notice from the archduke's perspective?" I asked.

"...Bezewanst was the High Bishop for a considerably long time thanks to Veronica's influence, and he always selected tax officials who would carry out his whims. The reality was, he had more leverage in Ehrenfest than a laynoble scholar. I can imagine his relationships to commoners were given no scrutiny as long as the taxes were collected in full from each city."

At that, Ferdinand paused, before continuing with a bitter smile.

"Even my late father was weak to Veronica, due in no small part to him... taking me in. This all happened many years before Sylvester became Aub Ehrenfest. Sylvester lacked the strength and a good enough cause to remove his own mother and uncle from power, the latter of whom had served as High Bishop for decades.

"In any case, being a noble is the height of tedium; all just actions will encounter fierce resistance. To see actual results, you must accumulate power and thoroughly set the stage over an extensive period of time. Attempting to act against injustice the moment you see it runs the significant risk of causing more problems elsewhere. You must learn to sit back and observe the situation, even if you find what is occurring deplorable."

I nodded, but deep down, I couldn't imagine myself managing to silently overlook something I found deplorable. Ferdinand must have picked up on that, as he shot me a glare.

"Do not nod if you do not understand."

“...I’ll do my best to learn to overlook things if they don’t involve books or my own family,” I conceded, which only made Ferdinand massage his temples and grimace even harder. In any case, I would need to be careful; I knew that the moment I got wrapped up in something, I wouldn’t be able to control myself.

My attempts to educate the mayors and town chiefs aside, Spring Prayer was largely the same as last year, and we consequently went through it without much issue. There were, however, a few things that stood out.

For one, my blessings last year had made such an impact on the harvest that every winter mansion we visited met us with enthusiastic fervor. They spoke to us with heated expressions, no doubt hoping for an even more bountiful harvest this year, since I was now the High Bishop and not just an apprentice shrine maiden.

In addition to that, our journey this year was a lot more leisurely; our potion-fueled death march was a thing of the past. We would arrive at our first winter mansion of the day in the morning and perform Spring Prayer, then speak to the local authorities over lunch. Then, in the afternoon, we would travel to the second winter mansion. Here we would perform again, have dinner with the authorities, and then go to bed. We repeated this process over and over, every single day.

It was fairly tiring, since we had every meal with city and town authorities, which meant I always needed to be watching my words. I was here as the archduke’s adopted daughter and the High Bishop, so I needed to act the part.

The sole silver lining was that I could use my youth as an excuse to retire to my room straight after each meal. Ferdinand, on the other hand, was not so lucky.

It wasn’t long before I had mastered my excuse. *“I would love to spend more time speaking with you all, but I must leave so that I might provide blessings to as much land as possible,”* I would say with a saintly smile whenever they tried to keep me at the table.

Each morning, our attendants would climb into their carriage and head to the winter mansion we planned to stay the night in. Meanwhile, I traveled by highbeast. Fran and Zahm rode with me

since they served my lunch, and because they had been entrusted with managing the divine instrument.

For lunch, our personal chefs—in my case, Ella—prepared meals for us. This was standard practice, apparently done to avoid us having to test for poison and to reduce the burden on cities that were low on food after the winter.

The real reason, however, was that Ferdinand was adamant about only wanting to eat food that he liked. He was able to endure commoner food every now and again, but he didn't want to eat it day after day. In all honesty, I had to agree; I would much rather have food that I enjoyed.

As we continued our Spring Prayer journey, we traded grain from the temple for wild spring vegetables that grew near farming towns, including something that resembled slightly hard lettuce.

"This is the town closest to The Goddesses' Bath," Ferdinand said as we arrived in Fontedorf.

Once we had completed our Spring Prayer duties, we were invited to dinner with the town authorities, as per usual. The town chief spoke to us about the spring while I ate.

"Aah, The Goddesses' Bath? The water there has the power to heal minor wounds and illnesses. There are no travelers there at the present due to the snow still covering the mountains, but in the summer, people come from far and wide to acquire its water."

"So the water has special powers, then?" I asked. "Is it a spring of Flutrane, the Goddess of Water? Or Heilschmerz, the Goddess of Healing?"

"It is said to be where all the Goddesses of Spring gather, though nobody has actually seen one there before," the town chief replied, smiling like a kindly old grandpa teaching his curious grandchild.

"I am very much looking forward to the Night of Flutrane now."

"A-Ah, could it be that you need to reach the spring by then? If so, I am sorry to say that you may not make it in time. It may be nearby, but... there are mountains you must travel through," the town chief stammered, glancing uneasily between Ferdinand and me.

The spring known as The Goddesses' Bath was located on a shortish mountain surrounded by forest, some distance away from

any human settlement. And due to all the snow, it would take several days to reach it by carriage. The town chief asserted that we wouldn't be able to make it, no matter how hard we tried.

But Ferdinand simply shook his head. "Fear not. We shall travel by highbeast, making the snow and distance irrelevant."

"Ah... Ah, yes. I see. Flying highbeasts certainly would allow you to avoid those problems."

The town chief sighed in relief, as did many others. There was one who crossed their arms with a worried expression, however.

"The talfroschs at the spring have most likely accumulated a lot of power by now. I imagine that you will be safe with your accompanying knights, but please do take care."

"I thank you for your concern."

As the talfroschs never strayed far from the spring and thus posed no threat to the local towns, it seemed they were largely left alone. That in turn meant that they grew fairly large, so we would need to stay on guard when we arrived.

"While it should not take us long to reach the spring, it would be ideal for us to exterminate the talfroschs while it is still bright. As such, we shall depart well ahead of time," Ferdinand mused aloud.

And so it was decided that we would set up camp in the forest, hunting the talfroschs and other local feybeasts while we were there.

"We were just about to start hunting the harmful feybeasts ourselves to ensure the safety of our farms, so it would be an enormous help if you exterminated those in the forest for us," one town chief said, his eyes wrinkling in a grateful smile.

While the forest was rich with food, the smaller feybeasts thriving there would apparently start invading the farming towns once they began growing crops. Farmers could hunt the smaller ones not dangerous enough to demand the Order's help themselves, but doing this alongside their usual labor would be extremely strenuous.

"You may consider it payment for your information," Ferdinand said, at which point one of the grateful old men clapped his hands together.

"Then allow me to tell you one more thing—you would do well to bring sweets to The Goddesses' Bath."

“Sweets?” I asked, tilting my head.

“You may not need any if you are traveling by highbeast, but it seems that the goddess of the spring has quite a fondness for sweets such as honey, milk, and fruit. Leaving such an offering by the statue at the entrance of the forest will allow one to reach the spring without getting lost.”

“Oh, I see. In that case, I will certainly prepare sweets,” I said. “I thank you ever so much for your valuable information.”

We lived in a world where building up mana and asking the gods for help resulted in actual magic. If an offering would make our path easier, then it would be wise for us to bring plenty of sweets.

“I shall leave the sweet preparations to you, Rozemyne. Be ready to depart tomorrow.”

We would be leaving the majority of our attendants in Fontedorf, instead heading to The Goddesses’ Bath with an elite strike team. The knights could look after themselves and thus needed no attendants, but I would be bringing mine, since my highbeast had the capacity for it.

In total, I would be bringing Fran, Monika, Nicola, Ella, and Rosina.

Ferdinand had suggested I bring a chef so that we could eat better food, and I was sure that Monika and Nicola would provide useful assistance in this regard. Rosina, on the other hand, was accompanying us at her own request, having said that she didn’t want to be left alone. I had thus ended up bringing her along too, under the agreement that she would help out with any attendant work that wouldn’t risk damaging her fingers.

I returned to my room with Fran, who had served my food.

“Monika, Nicola—begin preparations for spending the next few days in the forest. Inform Ella and Rosina the same.”

“You mean the food, water, clothes, medicine, and so on that we’ll need while staying at The Goddesses’ Bath?” Monika asked to confirm.

Fran nodded in response, then turned to me. “Lady Rozemyne, you may leave the preparations to us. The High Priest has informed

us of what we need."

"All the luggage will be put into my highbeast, so be sure to include food for the knights," I instructed, looking over my attendants before resting my eyes on Nicola. "Nicola, inform Ella to prepare sweets as well. Honey or jam should do."

Out of everyone here, Nicola was the most enthusiastic about food; I had no worries about leaving this responsibility to her. She always helped Ella with a smile and was closer to her than anyone.

"The sweets are for offering to a goddess. It seems that such an offering will allow us to reach the spring without losing our way," I explained.

Nicola beamed with excitement. "Lady Rozemyne, we should prepare some of your special sweets as well, not just honey. I am certain that the goddess would be even more overjoyed if we offer confections she has never had before."

"Very true. You may tell that to Ella as well."

"Okay!" Nicola exclaimed, her reddish-orange hair bobbing up and down as she nodded. She then paused for a moment, carefully meeting my gaze. "Lady Rozemyne... Would you like us to also prepare sweets that, um, won't be offered to the goddess?"

"Certainly. We can all eat them together when we reach the spring."

"Okay!"

Since cookies were easy to eat, Ella opted to bake some as our sweets. Well, I suppose she was cooking rather than baking them; there was no oven available, so she had instead used a frying pan. They ended up looking like bite-sized pancakes as a result, but a quick taste-test confirmed that this wasn't an issue.

We finished the last of our preparations in the morning and ate lunch, then headed to The Goddesses' Bath by highbeast, leaving behind everyone's attendants except mine. Together we soared through the sky, tracing thin roads laced between farms on our way to the forest.

It took some time, which was to be expected since the spring was several days away by carriage, but we managed to arrive at the entrance to the forest before fifth bell. Snow still coated the small

mountain from its peak down to about the midway point, while the base signaled the coming of spring with a plethora of greenery.

We landed at the entrance to the woods, at which point Ferdinand started giving instructions to the guard knights.

“Eckhart, Damuel—search for the spring from above. Brigitte, stay here with Rozemyne.”

At that, Ferdinand, Eckhart, and Damuel got onto their highbeasts and returned to the skies. Those of us left behind got out of my Pandabus and stretched, taking in the chilly air. While it was absolutely more comfortable than riding in a carriage, driving for such a long time still tired me out.

As we continued to stretch, Monika pointed toward the forest. “Ah! Lady Rozemyne, is that not the statue we should offer our sweets to?”

I looked over to see the statue of a goddess sitting right beside the road leading into the forest, covered in dirt and vegetation from having been abandoned over the winter. It was easy to guess that it had been there for many, many years; the finer details of the face and clothes had worn away so that, even while looking with squinted eyes, I couldn’t tell which goddess it was meant to represent.

“Lady Rozemyne, shall we clean it?”

“I cannot stand to see a goddess look so filthy.”

My attendants all furrowed their brows. They had been raised in the temple, surrounded by near spotless effigies of the gods their entire lives, so it was no doubt hard for them to overlook what they were seeing.

“Feel free to brush away the vegetation and clean it a little, but you’ll have to hurry; there isn’t much time before Ferdinand and the others will return.”

Fran, Monika, and Nicola got to work at once, speedily cleaning the statue. They brushed away the dead leaves and plants before using a dry rag to scrub where we would be placing our offerings. That alone made the statue look significantly better than it had a second ago.

“Ella, prepare the offerings, if you will.”

Ella took out honey, milk, dried fruit, and cookies from the large

box that she was cradling and gave them to Nicola, who in turn brought them over to me. I delicately placed the sweets and some nearby renfruhls—white flowers that marked the beginning of spring—onto the base of the statue.

“May we safely reach The Goddesses’ Bath,” I prayed, clasping my hands together.

It was a habit that my many years on Earth had deeply ingrained into me, and it was only when I noticed the confused, uncomfortable looks that everyone was giving me that I hurriedly corrected myself.

“Praise be to the gods!” I declared, raising one leg and throwing my hands into the air like I was praising the sun. My attendants did the same behind me.



Once we had completed our prayer, we hurried back into my highbeast; while the spring flowers had started to bloom, it was still incredibly cold outside. We all waited for Ferdinand and the others while eating the dried fruit that we had kept in Lessy.

“We have returned,” Ferdinand announced upon his eventual return, his highbeast being the first to land. I hurriedly wiped my hands and climbed out of my Pandabus to greet them.

“Welcome back, everyone. Did you find The Goddesses’ Bath?”

“Unfortunately, it could not be seen from above. There were unnaturally few gaps between the trees or rivers. We can conclude that mana is obfuscating the area, preventing the spring from being reached from above. Justus said that he found it quite easily from the sky when he visited during the summer, so it might be that now is a special time, with a greater amount of mana accumulating as the Night of Flutrane draws near.”

This abundance of mana, like what we had seen during the Night of Schutzaria, meant that the information Justus had acquired in advance wouldn’t be particularly useful. Ferdinand always prepared for things well ahead of time, so I could guess that he wasn’t very fond of unexpected developments like this.

He crossed his arms as if on guard and began scanning the area, his gaze eventually falling on the goddess statue. “I suppose this is the only entrance to the forest.”

I looked toward the statue as well and gave a big nod, simultaneously confirming that our offerings were still there. “It’ll be fine. We cleaned the statue, provided our offerings, and then prayed to the goddess, so we should reach the spring without any issue.”

“Your optimism astounds me, but very well. I shall take the lead. Brigitte and Damuel, stick with Rozemyne and stay behind me. Eckhart, bring up the rear. Follow me.”

Ferdinand urged his highbeast forward into the forest, its extended wings folding as it floated slightly above the ground. Brigitte rode hers behind him, while I followed her cape in Lessy, making him also float slightly.

See? I’m competent! I can do these things too, when I set my mind to it!

We hadn't been able to see it from the entrance, but a little farther inside, there was plenty of snow that hadn't melted yet. It was also pretty dark, maybe due to the rows of tall trees that were blocking out the light.

"Damuel! A zantze!" Eckhart suddenly shouted.

"I'm on it!" Damuel replied, rushing forward on his highbeast to hunt the cat-like feybeast. He came back in no time at all, only to be lectured by Eckhart on needing to improve his aim so that he could seize the feystone in a single blow.

"Damuel, there's an eifinte. Go!"

This feybeast looked similar to a squirrel and was about as large as a cat. It had two short horns protruding from its head and moved fairly nimbly, leaping from branch to branch as Damuel chased after it.

We waited in place until he had retrieved the feystone.

"I see that Damuel is still rather slow," Ferdinand observed. "Perhaps his limited amount of mana has caused him to rely on fighting without it."

"It appears that he requires further training in mana-based combat, as well as standard physical improvement," Eckhart replied, Ferdinand and him musing on the best way to train Damuel as they watched his movements. It seemed that he was still young enough for the Knight's Order to take an interest in honing his talents.

The feybeasts that appeared before us were small in size and number, so they were hunted fairly quickly. Damuel fought alone, working up a sweat for our sake, until we eventually reached a small clearing that seemed to be a campsite of sorts. We passed through it, heading for the spring deeper inside the forest.

"...What direction should we be heading in?" Ferdinand asked aloud, looking around. We had passed through several campsites while hunting feybeasts, but the road had slowly disappeared beneath the snow, stopping us from advancing any farther.

I took a page from Ferdinand's book and looked around as well. We were surrounded by trees, as we had been since we entered, but there was one spot where I noticed a sliver of light peeking through.

“Ferdinand, what about there? I see some light between the trees.”

“Where?”

“Over here,” I replied.

As I moved Lessy closer to the light, the trees themselves moved aside to make a path for me. I blinked in surprise, having not expected that at all, then looked at Ferdinand. “D-Did that happen because of our offerings?”

“Perhaps... but that might not be the only reason,” Ferdinand murmured with a bitter expression before advancing his highbeast down the opened pathway.

Brigitte followed, with me close behind.

Our surroundings became gradually brighter as we progressed along the thin, curved path, until eventually the trees fell away completely. The murky forest had opened into a clearing, with the sun shining brightly above us.

“...Is this The Goddesses’ Bath? It’s beautiful.”

To my surprise, the clearing felt like it had jumped from the tail end of winter to the middle of spring, time-wise. Clear water sprung forth as the beaming sun shone bright light down upon it—an unthinkable sight considering that we had just come from a road so covered in snow that we couldn’t even see it.

Surrounding the spring were groups of white renfruhls, and birds could be heard chirping overhead. A gentle wind stroked the water’s surface, which gleamed as more fresh water bubbled forth and flowed further down.

At the center of the bluish-green spring were pale pink flowers, which looked exactly like water lilies at first glance.

“Those are raireins, the flowers supposedly loved by the goddess herself.”

“And we’ll be gathering their nectar?”

“Correct. But we shall advance no further today. I sense feybeasts nearby, likely the talfroschs, and we have far too many non-combat personnel with us. We shall return to camp for now,” Ferdinand said.

This time, we traveled in the opposite order, heading back to the last campsite we had passed. Now, even the snowy clearing felt

somewhat dark and gloomy when compared to the dazzling spring.

“Rozemyne, step back.”

Brigitte and I did as instructed, moving back to the trees, at which point Ferdinand and Eckhart each flicked something into the middle of the clearing. In an instant, the snow began to melt before our eyes. I watched on in a daze, at which point Ferdinand drew his highbeast close to me.

“Place this magic tool inside your highbeast; it will allow the creature to remain without your presence,” Ferdinand said. And he was right. I stepped out of my Pandabus, leaving the magic tool inside so that it wouldn’t disappear when I moved far away.

The air was exceptionally cold, like tiny daggers stabbing into my skin, maybe due to the nearby snow or the tall trees blocking the sun.

“Attendants, begin preparing food. We shall go forth and hunt the talfroschs. Rozemyne, ride with Brigitte and stay alert. I shall teach you how to gather the rairein nectar once the hunt is over.”

Once Ferdinand had given everyone a job to do, I checked to make sure that I had the gathering kit he had lent me, then climbed onto Brigitte’s highbeast.

“Now then, everyone—I entrust the food to you all.”

“Be careful, milady. We await your safe return.”

The Night of Flutrane

Once I was on Brigitte's highbeast, we began heading back to the Goddesses' Bath, following the sharply curving path created for us by the trees. Ferdinand raced ahead on his own highbeast, and the surface of the sunlit spring began to swell upward upon his arrival.

"Talfroschs! Rozemyne, your blessing!" Ferdinand shouted from up ahead.

I immediately poured mana into my ring, accustomed to the process since I had prayed for Angriff's blessing many times before.

"O God of War Angriff, of the God of Fire Leidenschaft's exalted twelve, I pray that you grant them your divine protection!"

At that, a blue light flew out of my ring before raining down upon everyone. I was anything but a fighter and held everyone else back with my lack of stamina, so blessings were the most I could do to help out in combat.

"Damuel, Brigitte—stay by Rozemyne! Eckhart, follow me!"

"Sir!"

A large shadow formed in the center of the spring. From it, three—no, four—smaller shadows burst forth, leaping out of the water.

The talfroschs turned out to be toads, about as wide as an adult spreading their arms out as wide as they could. While this sounded pretty big, it was almost nothing compared to the goltze that we'd fought during the autumn, or the schnesturm that had become the Lord of Winter. Where the talfroschs did excel, however, was in how disgusting they looked.

"Why am I always up against (toads)?" I asked with a sigh.

Damuel and Brigitte both looked at me in confusion, having not understood. "What do you mean?" they asked.

"(Toads) are creatures that look a lot like talfroschs. You understood what I meant, right, Damuel? These talfroschs remind you of Count Bindewald, don't they? And the similarities don't stop

there—they're even about to be exterminated by Ferdinand."

Damuel burst into laughter, before quickly facing forward in an attempt to hide his amusement. His armor let out a small clank as he moved to cover his mouth, but the fact that his body was still shaking made it pretty obvious that I had really tickled his funny bone.

Brigitte hadn't seen Count Bindewald herself, so she didn't have the same reaction. "A man who looks like a talfrosch? I would very much like to keep my distance from him."

"They're going to combine," came Eckhart's voice.

I turned around to see the largest talfrosch flick out its tongue, wrapping it around a nearby smaller talfrosch before pulling it into its mouth. No sooner had it swallowed than it began rapidly growing in size, firing its tongue at the remaining talfroschs one by one.

"Eep! Eep!"

"There is no need to be afraid, Lady Rozemyne; mere talfroschs pose no threat to us," Brigitte said. "They are simply... gross, and nothing more."

It was clear that she disliked talfroschs and found them disgusting—a sentiment I agreed with entirely. The left arm she kept wrapped around me for protection was even more tense than usual.

Ferdinand and Eckhart turned their schtappes into swords, filling them with mana as they glared up at the still growing talfrosch. They then set their sights on the creature's belly, which continued to swell in size as it swallowed more and more of its companions, before raising their weapons to attack.

The talfrosch's long tongue whipped out at incredible speed, wrapping itself around Brigitte's highbeast in an instant. Before I could even process what had happened, we were being dragged through the air toward its mouth.

"Wha?!"

"Eep!"

I noticed Brigitte trying to whip out her schtappe, probably to change it into a weapon, but we were yanked into the talfrosch's wide-open maw before she could. The creature then closed its mouth, its tongue still wrapped around us, leaving us stranded in a pitch-black, uncomfortably warm, and foul-smelling cave.

Brigitte took this moment to turn her highbeast back into a feystone, freeing us from the tongue. She then transformed her schtappe into a long halberd like the one she had used before. Perhaps due to the mana inside, it shone a little in the darkness.

“Lady Rozemyne, are you okay?” Brigitte asked, stabbing her halberd into the roof of the talfrosch’s mouth to stop it from swallowing us. I was doing fine, since she had been holding onto me the entire time, though due to her having softened her armor, I had very nearly suffocated in her soft chest.

“I’m okay. It’s very wet and sticky in here, though.”

“In that case, would you be so kind as to fill your gathering knife with mana and stab its tongue?” Brigitte asked, keeping her right hand firmly on her halberd as she crouched down with me in her left arm. She was setting me down on the tongue, but she wasn’t about to let go of me.

We both grimaced at the soft springiness beneath our feet.

“Okay,” I said, taking out my knife and pouring mana into it as instructed. “I’ll do it.”

I could feel Brigitte tighten her grip around me, determined to protect me no matter what. Once the knife was full, I stabbed it into the talfrosch’s tongue as hard as I could.

“...Wh-What?”

Nothing happened. The talfrosch didn’t shriek, nor did it open its mouth. I broke out into a cold sweat, surprised by the complete lack of reaction, and nervously refilled my knife with mana, stabbing the tongue over and over again.

“Hyah! Hyah! Hyah!”

Suddenly, a bright light pierced the darkness, causing me to instinctively close my eyes. My legs trembled, and my body suddenly tilted diagonally, at which point I lost my balance with the knife still in hand. I rolled down with Brigitte, who tightened her grip around my stomach before leaping toward the light.

By the time I realized that the light streaming in was from the talfrosch opening its mouth, I was already soaring through the air in Brigitte’s arms, having been flung out of the thing’s mouth. I could hear all sorts of sounds again. The stench disappeared as clean air

washed over me, accompanied by the sting of cold wind brushing my skin.

“Go straight into the spring!” Ferdinand roared.

In response, Brigitte directed her speedy free fall toward the water. I shut my eyes tight, desperately clinging to her as I braced for a hard impact.

We landed in the spring with an enormous crashing sound, but the landing was surprisingly soft. I didn’t feel any pain or even any resistance; it was as though the water had simply accepted us in.

It was strange. At this time of year, the spring was supposed to be full of freezing water from the melting snow—water cold enough to stop one’s heart if they jumped in unprepared. But this water was neither hot nor cold. In fact, I could breathe just fine, too. And when I opened my eyes, I could see so clearly through the stirring water that even the air bubbles coming from my own mouth were visible.

There was a large shadow blotting out the sun above, and two balls of radiant light racing toward it. I could guess that these were attacks launched by Ferdinand and Eckhart. They smashed into the talfrosch, sending it soaring high into the sky, where it exploded.

Brigitte and I quickly rose to the surface, gasping for air the moment our heads were above the water. By that time, the reverberations from the attack had started to settle down.

“...It’s over,” I said, sighing with relief. But Brigitte looked up at the sky and gave a sharp warning.

“No, here they come!” she exclaimed, her voice tense as she readied her schtappe.

When I looked up myself, I saw dark blobs coming down overhead. I squinted, thinking they were maybe the exploded guts of the talfrosch... only to make eye contact with one of the many, *many* falling frogs.

“Eep?!”

Frogs—or talfroschs, rather—of all sizes rained down from the sky, ranging from as big as my thumb to the size of an adult fist. Some landed on my head, face, and shoulders, sticking to me in an instant. A shudder ran down my spine the second I felt one of their damp, slick bodies wriggling on my cheek.

“GYAAAH! Get them off, get them off, GET THEM OFFFF!”

“Rozemyne, cease your screaming! Peel them off and kill them with your knife, otherwise they will recombine,” Ferdinand said sternly, mercilessly abandoning me to focus on crushing the talfroschs around him. Eckhart was busy doing the same.

As it turned out, talfroschs simply split into smaller versions of themselves when hurt, and what made them especially annoying was that you could only kill them when they were as small as they could go.

Brigitte similarly had her hands full with the talfroschs around her.

Once I understood that no one was coming to help me, I tried to get the talfroschs off myself, shaking my head while flailing my arms and legs. But they clung to me as much as they could. The slimy things moving on my face destroyed the last ounce of consideration I had toward acting refined and graceful; I immediately dropped the facade and wailed in desperation.

“No, no, no! I can’t do this! Someone, please! At least get the one off my nooose!”

“Come to me, Lady Rozemyne! I will remove them for you!”

“Damuel, you are the most heroic person I’ve ever met!”

Damuel flew over, picked my flailing body up out of the water, and set me down onto his highbeast. Once he had pulled the talfroschs off of me, I wiped away my snot and tears.

“I hate this! I’m never coming to this spring again!”

“You fool,” Ferdinand barked out instantly, shooting me a cold glare. “We are hunting these talfrosch so that we might gather the nectar tomorrow at dawn, so you *will* be coming here again. In any case, the talfrosch has been defeated. You shall now be able to gather safely tomorrow.”

“Are you *really* sure about that?”

“Enough! Tonight is the Night of Flutrane. Get in bed early and prepare for dawn tomorrow.”

Upon arriving back at camp, I immediately closed Lessy’s windows so that Monika and Nicola could help me change out of sight.

“Even a healthy person could become deathly ill from falling into a spring at this time of year, Lady Rozemyne, and you are far from healthy,” Monika said. “How are you feeling? What did the High Priest say?”

“You won’t be able to go gathering tomorrow if you catch a fever. Please take care,” Nicola added, both of them lecturing me as they peeled off my wet clothes and wiped me with a towel they had dipped in warm water.

Brigitte was changing as well. “Your highbeast certainly is splendid, Lady Rozemyne. I never thought I would be able to comfortably change clothes while camping on a long-distance mission such as this.”

Apparently, if not for my Pandabus, she would have been forced to change in the snow, spreading her cape across a tree branch to serve as a makeshift curtain. In my opinion, that wasn’t something a noble lady should ever have to do, even if she was only removing her feystone armor.

That said, according to Brigitte, minors weren’t given missions that required them to leave the Noble’s Quarter. And since adult women married fairly quickly, it was rare for female knights to go on hunts or gathering missions deep in the wilderness.

Ferdinand gave me instructions on how to gather the nectar as we ate the food my attendants had prepared for us. All I needed to do was move it from the center of the flowers into bottles, but he was very firm that I had to do so using the metal spoon he had given me.

“The spoon is made such that it will not pollute the mana. Use it when scooping the nectar into the bottles, no matter what. The ruelle flowers and fruits gathered on the Night of Schutzaria held properties entirely unlike the same flowers and fruits gathered during other seasons, and the same may be true for the rairein nectar gathered tonight,” Ferdinand said, wearing the expression of a mad scientist.

I wasn’t really all that pleased that he was getting the time to indulge in his own hobbies, though this was probably because I still wasn’t given much reading time. Call me selfish all you want, I strongly believed that Ferdinand wasn’t being fair.

“Ensure that you put nectar into each bottle. I wish to experiment

with the nectar that has your mana and the nectar that doesn't."

I didn't really mind Ferdinand using the materials for his own research, but I was starting to think that his ultimate goal here wasn't actually to help gather ingredients for my jureve. But maybe that was just me.

Once we had all finished our food, we went to bed early. I reclined the driver's seat of my Pandabus so that I would have room to stretch my legs, and Ferdinand shook his head with exasperation upon seeing all the blankets that my attendants had spread out.

"Your highbeast is unnatural and bizarre."

"I prefer the term 'convenient.' Just be glad that I didn't make him into an (RV)."

"Good grief... In any case, it is sizable; all the women here may choose to sleep in it. Fran, come with me."

And so, Ferdinand decreed that Lessy would be the sleeping place for all the girls in our group. Brigitte got inside and Fran left, looking a little relieved to not be stuck in the girl-filled highbeast.

That night, I woke up to the strange sensation of my Pandabus swaying side to side. When I sat up, I realized that I could see the Goddesses' Bath through the window.

But why...? We should be at the campsite, I thought, wondering whether this was simply a dream as I continued peering out the window. The spring looked entirely different from how it had during the day, perhaps due to this being the Night of Flutrane. The red moon—which was actually more of a dark pink upon closer inspection—was reflected in the water's surface.

In fact, the whole spring was... *shining*. It wasn't just the light from the moon, either—small, round, bubble-like things of various sizes were slowly rising out of the water, shining brighter than fireflies. They burned with mysterious light as they rose out one after another and floated around, resulting in quite the magical sight.

"Wow, this is amazing! They're so sparkly!" came Nicola's voice.

I turned around and saw her looking out the window too, wearing a bleary expression that made it hard to tell whether she was fully awake or still half asleep.

Her sudden exclamation woke up Brigitte, who leapt up and whipped out her schtappe in an instant before peering outside herself. After a moment's pause, she looked at me with her brow furrowed.

"...What is the meaning of this, Lady Rozemyne? The air is positively brimming with mana."

"I have no idea, but it's beautiful. I don't think we're in any danger."

Each shining bubble leaving the pond let out a bright, clear sound similar to a bell, and their chimes overlapped to create some very strange music. Rosina started murmuring musical scales in her sleep, then suddenly sat up and asked, "Where is the harspiel?" in a sleepy tone, aimlessly groping around for the instrument.

"Calm down, Rosina."

By that point, Ella and Monika were of course waking up as well. They all looked outside in unison, then blinked in surprise.

"What in the world is going on...?"

Rosina began to move her fingers restlessly through the air, overwhelmed by the music being played from the lights above the spring. Her eyes soon fell on the harspiel that was with the rest of the luggage.

"Well, everyone's awake now, and I can't imagine we'll be going back to sleep anytime soon," I mused aloud. "It should be fine for you to play, Rosina."

"I thank you ever so much," she replied, eagerly picking up the harspiel and playing music to match the sound of the bubbling spring. The songs she chose perfectly accompanied the high notes coming from the lights.

"Your musician truly is talented, Lady Rozemyne," Brigitte observed.

As we all listened to Rosina's symphony with the lights, they began to gather around Lessy, floating right up to the windows and trying to come inside as though they had minds of their own.

Monika smiled. "I think the lights like your music, Rosina."

"Maybe you should go outside and play for them?" Nicola added, giggling with Monika. The lights blinked as though indicating their

agreement.

“Shall we offer up music, then?” I suggested. “The Goddesses of Spring love music, to my knowledge; they might appreciate such an offering on the Night of Flutrane.”

“And the goddess of this spring likes sweets, Lady Rozemyne. We should offer up our remaining cookies,” Nicola added, and Ella agreed with a smile.

Together, Nicola and Ella brought out a box of sweets, while Rosina climbed out with her harspiel. Brigitte followed, keeping a close eye on our surroundings, leaving Monika with no choice but to join us as well.

I jumped out into the clearing, feeling like I was having a nighttime picnic. It wasn’t cold at all, and the spring was giving birth to even more glistening lights. The high-pitched, reverberating chimes they made were so beautiful that just hearing them filled me with exhilaration.

I peered into the shining spring and saw yet more mysterious lights rising up from its depths. That was when I noticed some talfroschs nearby, flicking out their tongues to eat them.

“Brigitte, the talfroschs!” I called, pointing in their direction.

Brigitte instantly whipped out her schtappe, hunting them down one by one, and the lights floating out of the water happily swarmed around Brigitte as if thanking her.

I looked around and saw that the floating lights had split in three groups: one stuck with Rosina and her harspiel; another went to Ella, Nicola, and Monika with their cookies; and the third stayed with Brigitte.

The lights seemed to like music, as they were all flashing in time with Rosina’s harspiel. They liked my arrangement of the song from my Urano days the most, blinking rapidly as if clapping in approval.

“They seem to enjoy the song that you composed, Lady Rozemyne. Would you care to sing the lyrics for them?”

“...I think I will sing an entirely new song for them,” I said. I didn’t have my own harspiel with me, but I could make do with just my voice. And if they liked to hear new songs, then I could just debut another from my Urano days. It was one of the spring songs, the

lyrics of which I had translated into this world's language in preparation for the next time I needed Ferdinand to do something for me.

I stepped in front of the spring and inhaled.

"O waters of spriiing..." I began to sing. And as soon as I did, my ring started sucking up my mana on its own, releasing it as I continued my song.

The lights of the spring shone brighter, the entire clearing becoming steadily more dazzling. The stems carrying rairein flowers in the middle of the water began to stretch in size as well, countless stems wrapping around each other as they extended upward. They grew like giant trees resting in the water, and soon, the flowers began to bloom as well.

"O Goddesses, might I be permitted to take some rairein nectar?" I asked once I had finished my song.

A large leaf that had rested in the center of the spring blossomed open and stretched down to rest in front of me. I stepped onto it, urged forward by the lights, at which point it grew even larger in size before slowly stretching high into the sky.

"Wow!" I exclaimed.

It had taken me right in front of a rairein flower. I took the spoon from my belt of tools, just as Ferdinand had instructed, and started gathering the nectar, capping each bottle when it was full.

"Okay, that should do it. In fact, I think I managed to do that perfectly. Go me."

The leaf was so, so high up that I could see the sun slowly rising over the horizon, gradually brightening up the night sky. The lights floating around the spring faded and disappeared one by one as the morning sun washed over them.

"Hm?"

The stretched-out flowers began to shrink, returning to the water's surface. The large leaf beneath my feet was no different, shrinking to the point that it could no longer hold my weight. And then, just like that, the stem snapped.

The End of Spring Prayer

“Eep!”

The leaf dropped to one side, and I soon lost my balance, slipping into the air. I could hear Brigitte yell out my name from below as she summoned her highbeast, but before she could finish, something shot out from the trees. It charged right toward me as I spun backwards, unable to focus my eyes. Then, as gravity took hold and I began falling headfirst toward the ground, it caught me.

My insides dropped as I was suddenly stopped mid-fall, causing me to let out a grunt. I blinked in surprise and looked around to see what had happened, only to see Ferdinand right up close, giving me a scary look for some reason. His eyebrows were furrowed about fifty percent harder than they usually were.



“...Ferdinand? What are you doing here?”

“Oh, merely rescuing you from a deadly fall. Or would you rather I toss you back into the sky?” he asked, glaring at me with his light-golden eyes narrowed in displeasure. I hurriedly clung to him so that he couldn’t drop me.

“My hero. Thank you ever so much,” I said. While he had saved me from the fall, I could still feel an impending sense of danger, maybe due to the lecture that I knew was inevitably coming.

I trembled as Ferdinand set me down in front of my Pandabus, fearing his terribly poor mood.

“Lady Rozemyne, are you okay?!” Fran asked, rushing over with a worried look on his face. I told him that I was fine thanks to Ferdinand, and the tension quickly drained from his expression as he sighed in relief.

“Now then, Rozemyne...” Ferdinand began in a low voice. I tensed up, preparing for a lecture, but all he did was ask whether I had successfully gathered the ingredient—albeit in a rather tired voice.

Feeling a bit surprised by this turn of events, I nodded and showed him the bottles of rairein nectar. “See? I gathered it all just fine. You’re welcome to shower me with compliments.”

Ferdinand took a bottle, opened it, and poured just a bit of the nectar onto his palm. He checked the color and smell, poured some mana into it, and then immediately grimaced.

“...I expected as much, but it is already dyed entirely with your mana. My own is being blocked.”

“What? That can’t be right. I mean, I scooped it up using this spoon, just as you said to...” I took out the spoon, pretty certain that I hadn’t messed up the gathering process, and pouted. “Is it broken or something?”

Ferdinand shook his head. “You misunderstand. The raireins grew from your mana, and thus the flowers themselves were dyed.”

“Ngh... Did I maybe, um, mess up?” I asked, feeling bad for Ferdinand and everyone else who had gone on this journey with us. Had I managed to ruin everything after we went out of our way to defeat the talfroschs and ask the goddesses themselves for the

nectar?

Ferdinand shook his head again while magically cleansing the nectar from his hand. “No, you did not fail; our primary goal was gathering your ingredient, and that was accomplished. However...” He trailed off, then let out a sigh. “In any case, we must return to the Fontedorf winter mansion posthaste.”

It wasn’t just Ferdinand who looked tired. Fran, Eckhart, and Damuel—all the men in our group looked exhausted for some reason. Their faces were pale, and they were sighing as if weary to the bone.

“Did something happen?”

“Too much for me to explain here. We shall discuss the bizarre behavior of the forest and spring tomorrow. The sooner we return and rest, the better. None of you got much sleep last night, I would expect.”

Ferdinand cut the conversation short there, saying that he’d give the details tomorrow, but their night had apparently been pretty crazy thanks to the forest, too. I tilted my head curiously, then called out to stop the men from packing.

“Actually, would you care to wait a moment? I would like to gather some water from the spring before we leave. It’s good for curing light wounds and sickness, correct? It would be nice to have for when those in the orphanage get sick, and I’m sure that Fontedorf’s mayor would appreciate receiving some as well.”

“Do as you wish.”

Luckily, we had several barrels of water inside Lessy to use on our journey. Each was big enough to carry several liters, and two were already empty as a result of us all eating and Brigitte and me wiping ourselves down. My attendants thus scooped water from the spring and into the barrels.

“We can refill our drinking water here as well.”

After filling our drinking pouches with spring water as well, we returned to Fontedorf’s winter mansion. The men were exhausted, of course, and while we girls had all undoubtedly had fun last night, we were definitely sleep deprived too. While stifling yawns and rubbing our eyes, we decided to get to bed early and rest well.

After I had bathed and refreshed myself, Ferdinand came to me with a recovery potion. “Rozemyne, drink this before you sleep,” he said. And after drinking it, I climbed into bed.

“So, what crazy things happened to you boys last night?” I asked the next morning after breakfast, brimming with excitement as I sipped my tea.

Ferdinand, Eckhart, and Damuel, on the other hand, all grimaced simultaneously. It seemed the night had not been an enjoyable one for them.

“...To put matters simply, the goddess harassed us.”

“What? She harassed you...?”

As it turned out, while we girls had been playing with the mysterious lights during the Night of Flutrane, the men had been having a very bad time.

“Do you recall, Rozemyne, how we took turns keeping watch throughout the night?” Eckhart asked.

I nodded. Brigitte, Eckhart, Ferdinand, and Damuel had taken turns staying up and keeping watch, each of them having experience doing so from their training. The incident in question had apparently occurred during Ferdinand’s watch.

“The trees began to abruptly sway without warning. At first, I thought it might simply be the wind, but there was not even a breeze; the trees were swaying on their own,” Ferdinand explained. “I scanned the area, on guard, when suddenly the trees moved as though they had minds of their own, grasping your highbeast with their branches and passing it down from tree to tree.”

My jaw dropped as I imagined how it must have looked for Lessy to be passed between the trees like a baton in a relay race.

“I would understand if you did not believe me. I myself doubted my own two eyes. After all, what I am referring to here is the trees themselves working together to move your highbeast. It was unthinkable.”

As soon as Ferdinand saw Lessy being passed down the trees, he instantly woke everyone else up and began attacking the trees to get us back. But since they couldn’t risk hitting us, they couldn’t

launch any direct attacks. Instead, they ended up chasing after us in their highbeasts.

"...I'm glad we didn't get hit with the full force of your attacks," I said, looking in particular at Ferdinand and Eckhart.

The trees had moved to block their path, putting distance between us as Ferdinand and the others worked to cut them down. By the time they were able to get through, Lessy had already been brought to the Goddesses' Bath. And while they somehow managed to chop their way to the spring, they had ultimately been stopped by a thick wall of mana that blocked their entry.

"It was warm in the spring and there was not any snow, correct? That was due to the mana filling the area. We had all noticed it while hunting the talfroschs, but I never expected that enough strong mana would accumulate to prevent all of us from entering," Ferdinand said with a bitter expression. He possessed so much mana that he had undoubtedly grown accustomed to smashing through almost any barrier in his way.

He had been put in a frustrating situation where he could see Lessy by the spring, but couldn't actually approach us. When the lights began to gather around my Pandabus, he broke out into a cold sweat, and when we just outright stepped out of our own accord, he had apparently shouted "You fools!" on instinct.

...We sure didn't hear that.

"In any case, I ask that you never again thoughtlessly wander out into an area dominated by such immense amounts of mana. It is beyond dangerous," Ferdinand said. "You are only safe while you remain inside your own highbeast, which is filled with your own mana."

I was told that it was dangerous to go outside before identifying whether the one wielding the mana was friend or foe.

"The lights didn't seem hostile at all."

"Even creatures that do not appear to possess hostility can change on a whim if you displease them. And in such cases, it is impossible to say what might happen."

"Oh, that's very true."

It seemed that even Fran, Damuel, and Eckhart had gotten

stress-induced headaches as they watched us from the other side of the mana wall. No matter how much they called out, none of us heard them. None of us *could* hear them. And while they were having borderline heart attacks, my musician started playing the harspiel and my chefs spread out snacks like a picnic.

“If you had the presence of mind to peer into the spring and hunt the talfroschs, you should have been able to notice that we were not there,” Ferdinand said with a glare.

Brigitte and I exchanged looks. When he put it like that, it really was weird that we hadn’t noticed that they were missing. It was strange, but at the time, they weren’t on our minds at all.

“Maybe the spring was so breathtakingly mystical that we all came to see it as a dreamworld?” I suggested.

“While I was in the highbeast, I thought that I must send word at once. But the instant I stepped outside, all such thoughts left me. I was no longer capable of comprehending that we were missing people,” Brigitte replied. It seemed that she had exited Lessy with a feystone in hand, intending to send an ordonnanz, but upon stepping out, she immediately forgot why she was holding a feystone at all.

“The mana must have been exerting its influence,” Ferdinand muttered, pressing a hand against his forehead. “And then you faced the spring and started singing. Your mana spread, and the flowers began to grow. Can you imagine how much panic we felt at that moment?”

It seemed they had been extremely uneasy as they watched me leisurely continuing to sing despite the flowers growing around us. They started to worry whether I would be able to harvest the rairein nectar at all.

Eckhart shook his head, equally exasperated. “What really shocked me was that you stood on the leaf to gather the nectar.”

“No normal person would stand on such unreliable footing as a leaf,” Ferdinand continued. “Why did I give you a highbeast? Why do they exist? Consider these questions carefully.”

I clapped my hands together in realization. *Of course! Had I gathered the nectar while in my highbeast, I would have been completely safe, even after the morning sun shrank the leaves.*

“Normal people certainly are wise, aren’t they?” I said.

“No. You are simply a fool.”

They had almost keeled over in agonizing stress as I stepped onto the leaf and casually gathered the nectar, despite my footing being so fragile that even a calm breeze might knock me off.

“We watched on, terrified of your inevitable fall, until the mana wall started to fade along with the brightening of the sky.”

The light of the morning sun had evaporated the balls of light, and as they disappeared, the spring returned to its usual appearance. But even as everything went back to normal—including the shrinking leaf beneath my feet—I just kept looking at the sky in a daze. It had been so terrifying that Fran actually let out a yell.

“I brought forth my highbeast, burst through the thinned mana wall, and began to race through the sky when, as expected, the stem of the leaf snapped,” Ferdinand said. It was thanks to him acting so soon that he had managed to catch me right as I started falling through the air.

“When you put it that way, I sure was in a lot of danger, wasn’t I? Thank you for helping me once again, Ferdinand. I’m so grateful that I wish I could make you a stress-alleviation potion.”

“I would never drink something so dangerous. Your gratitude is enough, though I must ask that you stop blindly walking into danger time and time again.”

“...I’ll try to do better.”

“As you should. In any case, you know what happened from there.”

“I really didn’t expect that you all had such a hard time,” I said with a sigh. We girls were having the time of our lives in the dream-like fantasy spring, and never had it even crossed my mind that the men were watching on in stressful agony. “But why wouldn’t the mana wall let men in? Fran offered up sweets to the shrine, too.”

“Perhaps the goddess of the spring is not fond of men. It is known as the Goddesses’ Bath, after all. It could be that no men are allowed in during the Night of Flutrane,” Brigitte suggested.

But ultimately, we didn’t understand what had separated our two groups. Perhaps the goddess had just been after the sweets in

Lessy. We came up with a bunch of possible theories, but in the end, there was no way for anyone to know which was the right one.

“In any case, we have gathered the rairein nectar, completing our objective here. We shall return to our Spring Prayer duties starting tomorrow.”

“Right.”

With my spring gathering now complete as well, we would be leaving Fontedorf and returning to Spring Prayer. But before we left, we gave the mayor some of the spring water as planned.

“Thank you for your hospitality. As a token of my appreciation, I offer to you water from the spring. Please use it if someone falls sick or becomes injured.”

“You have my utmost gratitude,” the mayor responded.

“I expect that it will be significantly more effective than the usual spring water,” Ferdinand added. “It has been drawn by the blessed Saint of Ehrenfest, after all.”

The mayor gasped in surprise, looking between me and the sealed barrel full of water.

“Truly?! To think that you would gift us such valuable water...”

“Ferdinand?!” I exclaimed, glaring at him.

But he simply murmured for me to leave it be, since it would apparently be inconvenient in more ways than one for others to learn that the spring’s mana intensified at this time of year. In his attempt to hide it, Ferdinand had made the water out to be precious holy water that was to be used sparingly, having been personally drawn from the spring by the Saint of Ehrenfest.

Well, as long as they get a lot of use out of it, I guess it’s fine.

Several days after we had safely finished Spring Prayer and returned to the temple, Ferdinand summoned me over, seeming more excited than usual.

“Is there something we need to discuss? I’d rather be preparing for my meeting with the Gilberta Company later today.”

“Silence. Just follow me.”

Ferdinand all but dragged me into his hidden room, which he had fashioned into a workshop, to discuss the rairein nectar we had

gathered. He went through his explanation quickly out of excitement, but it contained so much technical terminology that I didn't actually understand what he was going on about.

"...I'm sorry, but could you repeat that with a little less jargon? Or, better yet, give me a book that will teach me said jargon. I'll read it right here and now, I promise."

Unfortunately, he elected to simplify his explanation instead. To sum it up, the rairein nectar was rich with my mana, but it hadn't been entirely dyed by it. What did that mean, exactly? I had no idea.

"This nectar crystallizes when completely filled with mana. You will need to crystallize a portion to use in your potion, like so," Ferdinand said, using his own mana to demonstrate. The nectar morphed into a green feystone-like crystal, which he showed me before handing me a bottle of the nectar.

I poured my mana into it while Ferdinand continued his explanation.

"The nectar has much of your mana within it, due to coming from a flower that you personally matured. It is a material exceedingly rich with pure Water."

"But since it's dyed with my mana, nobody else can use it, right?"

"That would normally be the case, but it seems this rairein nectar in particular can be dyed with another's mana. One must overcome much resistance to do so, but it is very much worth it," Ferdinand said amusedly while rolling the green crystal around on his palm. "I am quite interested in learning whether this is possible only with nectar harvested on the Night of Flutrane, or if it is possible with other ingredients as well. Rozemyne, would you care to grow various feyplants with me to experiment?"

As much as I loved the idea of growing feyplants with Ferdinand's explicit permission and using the research to help with paper-making, there was one thing that gave me pause.

"I don't mind growing feyplants, since I could also use them to help develop paper, but... does Ehrenfest have enough leeway when it comes to mana that we can spare so much of mine on experiments and growing feyplants?" I asked, keeping it to myself that I had already been stealthily growing trombes.

Ferdinand widened his eyes then shook his head, his brow thoroughly knit atop a bitter expression. “It does not.”

“I thought as much.”

Our grand feyplant cultivation plan thus came to a swift end, but Ferdinand wasn’t quick to give up on it.

“In ten years then, Rozemyne. Shall we experiment once the duchy has more leeway and you’ve grown such that you have more mana?”

I didn’t know whether it was due to the new ingredient or him having developed a new magical theory, but Ferdinand was seriously motivated. He was even willing to plan ten whole years ahead for this.

“I’ll have you know that my mana is expensive,” I said with a grin, at which point Ferdinand gave a dismissive laugh.

“What are your demands? I can prepare more money than you will know what to do with.”

“Ferdinand, do you really think that I would ask for money here?” I asked, broadening my grin.

Ferdinand narrowed his eyes, raising his guard a little. But the fact he raised his guard instead of giving up entirely showed that he really did need my mana for his experiments. And if my mana was that valuable to him, then I could drive as hard of a bargain as I wanted.

“If you want my mana, you’ll have to give me a library. I can wait ten years. Have fun.”

Ferdinand furrowed his brow harder, but he avoided giving a clear answer.

Epilogue

“Is this another one of Rozemyne’s recipes? The taste is different from the ones we ate during Spring Prayer,” Eckhart remarked, eating the sweets known as “cookies” that were being served at Ferdinand’s estate.

“It seems that they lacked the proper cooking utensils on the road. Not to mention that these are flavored with tea leaves,” Ferdinand replied. He had taken a liking to tea cookies, so whenever Rozemyne had her chef make cookies in the temple, she had extra made just for him.

“She forced quite a few sweets into my hands when I said that I would be meeting Karstedt in my estate,” Ferdinand continued. “Rozemyne’s sweets all come in a variety of flavors, allowing her to make them to suit the tastes of whomever she is meeting with. According to her, this pound cake was baked with wine-soaked fruit, which is Karstedt’s preference. I eat it at times myself, as it is low on sweetness and strong on wine.”

Eckhart found it a little strange being told facts about his father’s preferences that even he didn’t know. Rozemyne had been a commoner with the Devouring until only recently, when she was baptized as his sister. Shortly after, she was adopted by the archduke and archduchess to bring Ehrenfest wealth in the form of mana and developments in the printing industry.

“Rozemyne was raised in the temple and has thus met with Father only a small number of times,” Eckhart said, following the cover story that Karstedt was her birth father. “And yet, she knows his tastes so well. I cannot understand it.”

“It is simple, really—Rozemyne is selling her sweet recipes to Elvira for use at tea parties, where much information is shared. According to her, it is only natural to research the preferences of your customers so that you might sell them what they wish to buy.

This is much more the attitude of a merchant, but learning the partialities of those one wishes to negotiate with is a skill that even nobles must learn. She uses all means of manipulation to sell me expensive recipes as well," Ferdinand said casually.

Not everyone would understand what he truly meant since he had phrased it so dryly, but he was actually saying that Rozemyne had a talent for exploiting people's preferences in negotiations. Eckhart had known Ferdinand for a long time and knew exactly how harsh he was, so this statement came across as exceedingly high praise.

"I truly did not anticipate you entrusting all of our meals across Spring Prayer to Rozemyne's personal chef, Lord Ferdinand—unique recipes or not."

"I did not entrust *all* of them to her. I offered to have my chefs help in order to lessen the burden on hers, but she refused, saying that it was clearly a plot to learn her recipes for free. Having no other choice, I settled for merely providing the ingredients," Ferdinand said in a dissatisfied tone, taking a bite out of a cookie. But he had missed Eckhart's point entirely.

"...Rather, I am surprised by the fact that you were not at all suspicious of poison."

In all but the most extraordinary of circumstances, nobles did not allow their chefs to mingle for fear of their food being poisoned. Ferdinand was a cautious man, and he more than anyone was always circumspect in this regard. And yet, he trusted Rozemyne—so much so that it was hard to believe he was acting his usual self. She had certainly eaten first to demonstrate the lack of poison, but never had Eckhart ever dreamed that Ferdinand would proceed to eat as well without first having his attendants do further poison tests.

The same could be said for the cookies they were eating right now; that he accepted them after she had forced them into his hands, knowing that he would be serving them to a guest and would thus have to try them first himself as the taste taster, was something Ferdinand never would have done in the past. It was unthinkable.

"I am somewhat unsettled, since I do not understand what leads you to trust her so much, Lord Ferdinand."

It had taken Eckhart a very long time to earn Ferdinand's trust, so

he was a little jealous seeing how quickly Rozemyne had won him over. What made her so trustworthy? What was it that made them so different? Eckhart had pondered these questions all throughout Spring Prayer, but he had found no answers.

Rozemyne appeared to be nothing but a burden on Ferdinand, be it the situation in Hasse, her ill constitution, or all the problems that had occurred while they were gathering ingredients. And yet, despite him grimacing and complaining each time she caused problems, Ferdinand actually seemed to be enjoying himself. He regularly took the time to check up on her, almost as if observing the growth of a precious plant, and freely gave her expensive potions. While this might have seemed normal considering his position as her guardian, anyone who knew Ferdinand would be absolutely shocked. At the very least, he wasn't behaving anything like the man Eckhart knew.

"Why do I trust Rozemyne, hm...? First and foremost, because she was raised in the temple and lacks the deceptive proclivities of a purebred noble. But there are many other things I have seen with my own two eyes. I cannot speak of them here, but suffice to say, I was quite thoroughly convinced."

When Ferdinand said that she was "raised in the temple," he did so with the understanding that Eckhart knew the truth. In other words, he was saying that he trusted Rozemyne because she had grown up a commoner rather than a noble. Eckhart saw this as enough of a difference between him and Rozemyne to satisfyingly answer the questions that had plagued him.

"Lord Ferdinand, the honorable Lord Karstedt has arrived," Lasfam announced as he brought Karstedt into the room.

Since getting married and moving out, Eckhart rarely ever returned to his family home unless summoned, making this the first time he had seen his father outside of the Knight's Order in quite a while.

Karstedt exchanged greetings with Ferdinand, took the seat offered to him, and then looked at his son. "Eckhart, you once again have my thanks for your help," he said, referring to him having taken guard duty during Spring Prayer.

"Think nothing of it. I am simply glad to have been given the

opportunity to work with Lord Ferdinand again. Please continue to send any such assignments my way."

These words came from the heart. Eckhart had been relieved of duty when Ferdinand entered the temple, meaning he could no longer follow him. The only time he was allowed to accompany Ferdinand—albeit in reduced capacity—was when he returned to the castle on official business, but even then he had been instructed to step down when Veronica, the archduke's mother, was present.

Ferdinand could come to the castle more openly now that Veronica had been arrested and he was one of Rozemyne's guardians, though he was only allowed access for Rozemyne-related reasons. Eckhart was simply glad to have opportunities to accompany Ferdinand, so much so that he was even willing to join in religious services such as Spring Prayer under the guise of protecting his little sister for his worried father's sake.

Ferdinand took out two sound-blocking magic tools and set them down on the table. "Hold these, if you will."

Rozemyne's ingredient gathering was being done in secrecy; it was something only to be discussed with the use of magic tools, even when in Ferdinand's estate.

"So," Karstedt began, "was Rozemyne as successful this season as she was in the winter?"

"Indeed. It was a terrible experience for us, but the gathering itself was an enormous success."

Ferdinand described the unpleasant and rather mysterious events that had unfolded on the Night of Flutrane to Karstedt. There was the talfrosch extermination carried out the day before, Rozemyne's highbeast being kidnapped in the dead of night, a mana barrier that would not allow men to pass through, shining balls of mana floating beneath the red moonlight, Rozemyne's song offering causing the raireins to grow, the gathering of the nectar, and the mysterious power that had faded along with the morning sun.

Eckhart spoke about how they had seen the leaf shrink beneath Rozemyne's feet as she stared at the sky, and how Ferdinand had rushed forward on his highbeast to rescue her before she hit the ground.

Ferdinand grimaced and said that, in retrospect, there had been no need for him to rush so much when rescuing her. He hardly sounded like the same Ferdinand that had balked at the shrinking leaves, pounded his mana against the thinning barrier over and over again until it shattered, and then blasted into the sky on his highbeast at maximum speed.

As Eckhart blinked in surprise, Ferdinand took a sip of tea with his brow deeply furrowed. “Falling into the spring would not have harmed Rozemyne in the slightest; she fell into it the day prior while we were hunting the talfroschs and emerged unscathed,” he said with a displeased look. “Do you recall how she had said the water was mysteriously comfortable and breathable? She wouldn’t have died from falling into it. The spring would have protected her.”

That was enough for Eckhart to put the pieces together. He was feeling uncomfortable about having yelled at Rozemyne to use her highbeast when, ultimately, she hadn’t needed to.

“We don’t know whether the spring would have protected her from a fall that high, Lord Ferdinand. I still believe that catching her was the best course of action,” Eckhart said.

At that, Karstedt crossed his arms with a difficult frown on his face. “That is... abnormal. I’ve never heard of anything like it.”

“Indeed. It was a night that cannot be explained by conventional wisdom. Furthermore, there is the nectar harvested from the raireins that Rozemyne grew with her mana. It has many unexpected properties for its kind. First of all...”

From there, Ferdinand began to expound on the harvested nectar in great detail. What they had gathered on the Night of Flutrane apparently differed considerably from the nectar that Justus had gathered on another day.

“The nectar’s mana capacity is completely abnormal, likely due to the enormous quantity of mana that gathered around the spring’s raireins on that night. Not only does it have considerably more mana than the nectar that Justus brought us, its Water purity is spectacular —I can hardly even sense any other elements within it.”

On top of all that, despite the common understanding that materials dyed with another’s mana were usable only by them,

Ferdinand had found himself able to overwrite and dye the rairein nectar that Rozemyne had produced. He made sure to emphasize this fact, excitement creeping into his voice as he made it clear that this was a discovery that could potentially overthrow the established knowledge taught in the Royal Academy.

But while Ferdinand was something of a researcher, Karstedt was a knight through and through. In other words, he wasn't particularly interested. He nodded along with the explanation, but his apathy was becoming increasingly clear.

Like father, like son... Eckhart thought to himself. He had refrained from saying anything since he enjoyed seeing Ferdinand so enthusiastic, but he wasn't interested in this kind of research either.

Justus, on the other hand, would have most likely been on the edge of his seat.

"I am exceedingly curious to discover whether the nectar is special due to it having been gathered on the Night of Flutrane, or due to Rozemyne's mana. I would also like to do further research into the Night of Flutrane's effects on the Goddesses' Bath, but not only does the barrier prevent men from entering, the mana there seems to have a psychological influence on those it comes into contact with," Ferdinand said regretfully, coming to the sad conclusion that this endeavor would be unreasonably challenging to complete.

Realizing that this was a good stopping point for the current conversation, Karstedt looked at Eckhart, who nodded in response. Their silent communication was a success—they both wanted the subject changed.

"I see," Karstedt said before quickly moving on. "I think this every time you give one of your reports, but it's one surprise after another when it comes to Rozemyne's gatherings. I was especially surprised to see her use Leidenschaft's spear as a weapon during the schnesturm hunt. I know that the Knight's Order has no weapons suitable for someone with her mana capacity, but I never would have thought that one of the temple's decorations could be used in such a manner. And I certainly never expected it to contain such devastating

power," he mused, stroking his mustache.

Naturally, the fact that Rozemyne could give the entire Knight's Order a blessing from Angriff, the God of War, was an astounding feat in itself. But Eckhart had already received her blessing enough times that Leidenschaft's spear left a much bigger impression on him. The schnesturm had been raging in the midst of a blizzard so intense that it appeared as a wall of solid white, and following the Order's simultaneous attack to weaken the beast, a single streak of blue light had shot down from the sky and destroyed it in one fell swoop.

"I, too, found myself enraptured by that shining blue spear. Did you know that the temple's divine instrument could withstand being used in battle like that, Lord Ferdinand?"

"The temple of each duchy has a set of magic tools called the divine instruments, and I found ancient records that detailed them being used for practical purposes. Magic tools can be used by anyone who dyes them with their mana, and since Rozemyne cannot use a schtappe, I thought the spear would serve as a perfect weapon for her," Ferdinand explained. This was probably something that only an avid book reader like him would know; he delved into all sorts of works that no normal person would.

Karstedt nodded, just as impressed as Eckhart was.

"But while you may interpret its performance during the schnesturm battle as a sign that the spear is a powerful weapon, the divine instruments are certainly not convenient to wield. You cannot use them as your own weapon without filling them to the brim with a staggering amount of mana, and due to this tremendous requirement, they best serve as single-use weapons. They cannot even be compared to the personal weapons one can form with their schtappes."

Ferdinand casually identified the spear as a weapon that required a ton of mana to use, which was his roundabout way of saying that Rozemyne had a staggering quantity of mana. She was a commoner with the Devouring who had managed to survive until her baptism, and yet she possessed that much. Her very existence was abnormal.

"Speaking of which, I heard that Rozemyne was engaging in

some... cutthroat business in the castle to pay for the schnesturm's feystone. What happened to her budget?" Karstedt asked.

Rozemyne regularly moved between the castle and the temple, but as she generally spent more time in the latter, Ferdinand was tasked with managing her budget. The funds needed to pay the Knight's Order had already been accounted for in that regard, and yet Rozemyne had been working to make her own money.

"Rozemyne has gotten it into her head that whenever she needs money, she must earn it herself. She doesn't even consider any alternatives. When she brought on new retainers, I informed her that Sylvester and you would cover the costs, but you can see how much good that did."

When Ferdinand told her that her dads would pay for the retainers, Rozemyne immediately endeavored to earn money to pay them back. Eckhart concluded that his little sister's very weird grasp on how money worked was due to her having been raised a commoner.

"She seems quite determined to earn money for herself, to the extent that she is absolutely adamant about being financially self-sufficient. Perhaps she simply has a fondness for earning money. As of now, I have decided to leave her be; her actions stimulate Ehrenfest's economy and encourage movement within the political factions. That said, I do find it necessary to intervene when she sells unauthorized images bearing someone else's likeness."

"Ah... *Those*," Karstedt said with a wry smile.

They were of course referring to three particular illustrations, of which Elvira, Justus, and Eckhart each owned a complete set. Both Elvira and Eckhart had been bemoaning that no more pictures of this kind would ever be released from that splendid artist.

"Going forward, I believe she is dedicating herself to book production rather than illustrations. She has always had her sights set on books, and they will sell more among the noble children than illustrations ever would," Ferdinand said with audible relief. But his expression soon turned into a grimace, and he began tapping his temples.

"Is something the matter, Lord Ferdinand?"

“I fear for the future. There are only so many children to buy books as study materials, and once a single book has been purchased, it can be shared among siblings. More children will undoubtedly be born in the future, but her sales base will not be growing very quickly. Either she will shift to inventing new products, or she will pull off some ridiculous scheme to increase existing sales... Whatever the case, she will do something problematic without fail.”

“And what might she do, exactly?”

“If I knew, there would be no cause for concern. It is near impossible to predict what ideas her deranged mind will produce,” Ferdinand said, searching his memories of Rozemyne’s past words and actions for clues of any sort. “She mentioned something about having asked her Gutenbergs to improve the printing press, but what else? Something about wanting to experiment further with paper... Which reminds me—she had a meeting with Giebe Illgner during the winter and intends to visit his province within the next few years according to a report from Rihyarda. Could that be it? Will the inevitable disaster occur in Illgner?”

Talk about having a good memory, Eckhart thought to himself, as impressed as always. But Karstedt shook his head.

“You should worry about the summer gathering before that. Something unexpected has occurred during each gathering attempt so far, and I doubt things will go any differently in the summer. Have you decided on whether you’ll be going to Mount Lohenberg or Mount Ballschmiede?”

Ferdinand grimaced, his brow tightly knitted. “Mount Ballschmiede would be the safer choice, but only Mount Lohenberg has an ingredient that will match the quality of what we have gathered so far. I intend to acquire riesefalke eggs.”

...Mount Lohenberg, hm?

Riesefalkes were gigantic white feybeasts of the flying variety, known as the birds that calmed Leidenschaft the God of Fire’s wrath. They were fairly strong, and stealing their eggs had to be done quickly. Would Rozemyne be able to manage it with her clumsy movements? They would need to move quickly and spare as many

Lohenberg feybeasts as possible, or else Leidenschaft's wrath would explode. In the past, Justus had put them all in great danger by stealing too many eggs, forcing Ferdinand to use several valuable feystones to save all of their lives.

In any case, there was one thing that Eckhart knew for certain: the summer gathering would *not* end peacefully.

Winter Debut and the Playroom

Winter society began with the winter baptism ceremonies and debuts.

I was serving Lord Wilfried, whose father, Aub Ehrenfest, had threatened to disinherit him unless he learned the alphabet, basic math, and a harspiel song before his debut. My master's life had changed dramatically from that point onward, and after spending each day working his hardest, he managed to grasp that which he had previously run away from.

And now, he was playing the harspiel while singing a song on stage, showing all the gathered nobles that he was worthy to be called the archduke's son.

"Lord Wilfried, how wonderfully you've grown..." came an awed voice. It was Oswald, his head attendant, moved almost to tears as he gazed up at the stage.

I could understand how he felt. Lord Wilfried's retainers had all been working themselves to the bone to ensure he completed the aub's tasks within the month and a bit they had been given. And while his master spent his days studying to secure his inheritance, Oswald had been struggling with an increasing shortage of staff. I personally had less to do, since we guard knights no longer had to chase after Lord Wilfried each and every day, but Oswald had dramatically more work.

Which makes sense. Most of the retainers had been assigned to him by Lady Veronica, and now more than half of them have been let go.

But of all the retainers forced to quit, none had been replaced. Lady Florencia had wanted to assign replacements, but this was something Oswald had pleaded against. Were Lord Wilfried to fail his tasks and be disinherited, then his new retainers would have their honor stained forever after only a month of service. As such, it was

decided that his new retainers would not be assigned until after his winter debut.

...In reality, Oswald just didn't want Lord Wilfried to become distracted adjusting to his new retainers, especially since he was exhausted enough as it was.

To all the retainers who had done their best to support their lord since the news he could be disinherited, seeing him successfully play the harspiel for his debut brought them more joy and pride than anything.

"Pretty moving to see how much Lord Wilfried has grown, eh, Oswald?" I said.

Up until recently, I had spent my days as Lord Wilfried's guard knight chasing after him whenever he ran away or was off playing pranks, so seeing him change his lifestyle and make his debut as a proper member of the archduke's family warmed my heart, too. He really had worked hard, so much so that surely nobody would have any problem with him becoming the archduke—not the aub, not the other nobles, and not Rozemyne.

Whenever Rozemyne had dropped by to check up on Lord Wilfried during her sparing castle visits, she would always taunt him one way or another while critiquing his attendants. She would say, for example, that they weren't working hard enough, that they were slacking due to having made a little progress, and that they were being too soft on him before firing them on the spot. Then, she would look at how much progress Lord Wilfried had made and ask whether that was *really* the best he could do.

Although she had Lady Florencia's permission to do so, Rozemyne was speaking completely out of turn for a child, and it had been pretty terrifying to see the building resentment toward her from the nobles she had gotten fired.

That said, when I warned Cornelius about it, he said it was no big deal...

"Today, of all days, I imagine we can praise Lord Wilfried without Rozemyne complaining about it."

"Indeed, Lamprecht. I know that our days of vigilance must continue, but I imagine Rihyarda will not look daggers at us for

rejoicing on this fine day."

As Oswald and I exchanged looks and a quiet chuckle, Lord Wilfried finished his performance and descended from the stage with his music instructor.

"Congratulations, Lord Wilfried. Your debut was a complete success," Oswald began. "The sight of your regal behavior upon the stage warmed my very heart. Lamprecht was moved as well."

The other retainers quickly followed suit, each proudly offering him their heartfelt praise.

Surrounded by his retainers, Lord Wilfried lowered his voice and asked a quiet question. "I messed up a few notes, though. Was it really a success?"

"Both the archduke and archduchess looked very proud," answered Linhardt, one of his attendants. "Your hard work has undoubtedly been rewarded, Lord Wilfried."

Looking a little embarrassed yet overwhelmingly happy that his efforts had been recognized, Lord Wilfried returned a smile. It was a smile brimming with the satisfaction of having achieved victory through hard work, and one that he hadn't ever given while being protected and spoiled by Lady Veronica.

"I pray that your success and vigor continue long into the future, Lord Wilfried."

"Right. I shall do what the son of an archduke must do," he said, puffing out his chest with regal determination. I felt an abundance of pride at this gesture, but also relief that my position as his retainer was safe.

Unfortunately, this special moment we attendants shared was soon smashed to pieces by none other than my own little sister.

"Rozemyne," called Ferdinand, the High Priest.

And there she was. My little sister, the newly adopted daughter of the archduke, gracefully advanced up onto the stage, her hair that was like the night sky adorned with a unique flower-decorated ornament.

The aub introduced her as the Saint of Ehrenfest, a noble girl born with a miraculous amount of mana and a merciful heart who had already worked to save orphans and establish entire new

industries. But I wasn't so sure this was a wise move; the nobles were clearly suspicious of the story and Rozemyne in general, as anyone would be, and it seemed to me that such a grand title would serve as nothing but a heavy burden.

Regardless, Rozemyne remained calm during the introduction, wearing a refined smile that made it clear she never expected anything less. I knew her from the temple well enough to guess that she was actually panicking on the inside, but that didn't show on her face.

Eckhart had always said there was no point in comparing someone trained by Lord Ferdinand to a kid spoiled by Lady Veronica, but the difference between them was as clear as day. The way Rozemyne had warned me about spoiling Lord Wilfried despite him making steady progress just went to show how hard she was being worked by Ferdinand, which made me feel a little sympathetic.

A high-pitched note resounded through the hall; Rozemyne had begun playing the harspiel handed to her by her instructor. The rhythm with which her youthful hand strummed the strings produced notes so beautiful that they were on an entirely different level from the children before her, and she was playing one of her original songs that I had only ever heard while she was practicing. To top it all off, her young singing voice perfectly rounded out the performance.

"Now consider me impressed," said one noble. "This song is complex enough that it could be taught in the Royal Academy."

"It seems that she is as impressive as the aub said," replied another.

Keep it up, Rozemyne. You can do this.

My little sister had given both Lord Wilfried and myself a second chance, and now it was time for her debut. I hadn't spent as much time with her as Cornelius had given that he served her as a guard knight, but she and I still shared a familial bond.

I watched on, thinking that my little sister was incredible even when it came to playing harspiel, when suddenly...

"...What?"

Out of nowhere, Rozemyne's hand began to shine with blue light.

It seemed to be coming from the ring that Father had given her during her baptism. But why, when those rings were basically only used for blessing someone during a first meeting? There was only one answer—she was performing a blessing.

The blue light flowed out with each note played on the harspiel, spreading through the large hall. I hadn't seen such a large-scale blessing since Rozemyne's baptism, and while it had been surprising enough to see her bless all two hundred of the visitors who had been invited then, she was now blessing every single noble in Ehrenfest.

...But why would she do this?

My awe was soon followed by a wave of anxiety, and I quickly went from thinking how incredible this was to worrying what was about to happen.

"Her baptism blessing was pretty impressive, but this is something else..." Lord Wilfried said, looking up at the blue light, impressed.

But we, his retainers, were anything but happy. The winter debut was supposed to secure Lord Wilfried's right to be the next aub. That had been the agreement. But now, it appeared that his role had merely been to make Rozemyne look better—a development that made his other retainers visibly worried and annoyed.

At the baptism, Rozemyne had apparently been instructed by Father, Lord Ferdinand, and the aub to bless all those attending the ceremony. Had they instructed her to do the same again? We had spent the winter doing our utmost to ensure Lord Wilfried did not fall behind Rozemyne, and yet it had happened anyway. It was as though both our and his hard work had been trampled on.

Why are they having her do this when it's both her and Lord Wilfried's debut?!

I reflexively shot an angry look at Father, Lord Ferdinand, and the aub. But there I saw that everyone—the archduke, the archduchess, my parents, and my brothers—were looking at the blue light with surprise. This apparently hadn't been planned. Instead, it was happening suddenly and without warning.

What are you doing, Rozemyne?!

I watched on, holding back the urge to shout at her to stop, until

she eventually finished playing her song. A few scattered claps could be heard throughout the hall as the nobles hesitated, unsure how to react to such a large-scale blessing.

“Behold, the Saint of Ehrenfest!” Lord Ferdinand declared, speaking in his authoritative knight tone while holding a worried-looking Rozemyne high into the air. “May she be blessed for the wealth she brings to our home!”

The nobles who previously hadn’t known how to react took out their schtappes and gave blessings themselves, doing as Lord Ferdinand had instructed.

For a moment, the suspicion struck me that Lord Ferdinand might have ordered the large-scale blessing in secret, since he alone seemed icy calm. But judging by how he quickly strode out of the hall as Rozemyne waved to the crowd, I could guess that he hadn’t expected it either.

With Rozemyne gone, the aub stepped onto the stage to quiet the stirring nobles.

“I imagine it is clear to everyone that Rozemyne is rich with mana and beloved by the gods. She is the Saint of Ehrenfest, and she shall bring new industries and much wealth to our duchy,” he said.

But despite this being nothing more than a quick cover-up for the impromptu blessing, the aub’s words appeared to have shifted the attitude among the nobles; they had quickly gone from seeing the title as an exaggeration to believing it was quite fitting indeed.

“Splendid! I would expect nothing less of my granddaughter!”

“Indeed, Lord Bonifatius. I, too, am overjoyed from the bottom of my heart that an archduke candidate with Leisegang blood has been born. I shall have to direct my house to provide her support.”

Rozemyne’s blessing had been a surprise to all of her caretakers, but that wasn’t how the nobles were viewing the event. House Leisegang and its affiliates had been treated coldly by Lady Veronica for decades, and now they were rejoicing over the birth of an archduke candidate who carried their name. Mother and Eckhart were constantly reminding them that Rozemyne had no intention of ever becoming the aub, but few showed any sign of actually accepting that.

“We’ve prepared many new recipes today, which I imagine many of you have been looking forward to most of all,” the aub began. “This food will soon prove to be a significant weapon in Ehrenfest’s favor, so enjoy it to your heart’s content. The Gifting Ceremony shall be performed after lunch.”

The schedule was thus changed, and it was easy to imagine that all sorts of meetings and adjustments to plans were about to happen.

My anger toward Rozemyne’s caretakers faded, replaced with unease over how the nobles were reacting. Father and Aub Ehrenfest had both made it clear that they had absolutely no intention of making Rozemyne the next aub, but now that Lady Veronica had been removed from power, noble society was shifting into an era of Leisegang control.

Would they really allow Lord Wilfried to become the next aub? It was clear for all to see that Rozemyne’s mana capacity far surpassed his, and she had all the dignity and grace of an archduke’s daughter. Whether she herself wanted it or not, I could see no future in which people did not rise to support her taking the position.

I could tell by the unhappy, anxious, and betrayed looks on the faces of my fellow retainers that they were all thinking the same thing. And in the midst of all that, Lord Wilfried alone wore a grin as he walked to the dining hall for lunch.

“My debut going so well has really made me hungry. Maybe it’s the relief?” Lord Wilfried mused aloud. “Anyway, I’m glad lunch was moved forward; they’re serving some new recipes that Rozemyne just came up with. You like her food too, don’t you, Lamprecht?”

His words made the tension drain from my body. He was right. His debut *had* been a success, and all that disinheritance talk was now a thing of the past. It was best to just celebrate that and think of ways to further support Lord Wilfried.

“Rozemyne’s food certainly is good. I am looking forward to it as well,” Oswald intoned.

There was one order that we retainers all needed to carry out during the feast: gather information. So that was what we did. Then,

once Lord Wilfried had been put to bed later that night, we prepared to gather and discuss what we had learned.

Among the remaining retainers, I was the only one who was a member of the Leisegang faction, and I was Rozemyne's older brother. As a result, it fell to me to ask my parents about Rozemyne's plans and inform the others about House Leisegang's future intentions.

Leaving the night guards to watch over Lord Wilfried, the other retainers and I all went to Oswald in his room. As we waited in the darkness, he was the one to break the silence.

"We have managed to avoid Lord Wilfried being disinherited. All we can do now is believe in the aub's word and continue as we have been."

"Indeed. We should focus on doing what we must to prepare him for becoming the true next aub," another retainer replied.

"Those Leisegangs are all excited to have Lady Rozemyne take the role, but it is still possible for Lord Wilfried to get Lady Veronica's faction on his side."

"Exactly. Lady Veronica's faction will surely support Lord Wilfried until the end of their days, and they still outnumber the Leisegang faction. They'll be strong allies."

Different retainers had different opinions, but since most of them had been scouted for their jobs by Lady Veronica in the first place, they all found themselves acting as though she was still around. I went ahead and put a stop to that.

"Hold on a moment. Clinging to such assumptions is dangerous."

"Explain yourself, Lamprecht."

"Right now, only Lady Veronica and her retainers have been arrested, but no decision has been made regarding how her followers at large will be handled. If we rush things and carelessly bring former members of her faction into our own, we would hardly be providing Lord Wilfried with a stable foundation to build upon. I think we should keep our distance and play it safe, instead starting with neutral nobles."

Oswald fell into thought for a bit, then nodded in agreement. "Lamprecht's correct. It should not be an issue for us to reach out to

members of Lady Veronica's faction, but only after their potential punishment—or lack thereof—has been decided. For now, we should focus on raising Lord Wilfried to be the next aub, and our priority should be getting him as many gifted retainers from the children's playroom as possible."

He was choosing to let the adult circumstances play themselves out as we dedicated our attention to getting Lord Wilfried trustworthy friends to have by his side at the Royal Academy.

"Lady Charlotte's baptism ceremony will be held next year, and it is expected that the three of them will be competing for retainers. Rozemyne will likely be attempting to bring as many gifted female retainers as possible under her fold, so we should do the same with male retainers for Lord Wilfried."

As boys and girls were segregated into separate dorms at the Royal Academy, nobles seeking retainers would customarily prioritize those who were the same gender as themselves. This did not apply to scholars and knights, but attendants were so closely engaged in their master's private life that this was a necessity.

"Lord Wilfried must do everything he can to ensure he does not appear inferior to Lady Rozemyne within the playroom," Oswald said.

While I could see his point, I knew it would be a hopeless effort; Lord Wilfried had almost been disinherited due to his incompetence, and it was Rozemyne who had written up a study plan to set him straight. She had even praised and taunted him to bring out his motivation—something that she was far better at doing than any of us, since we weren't used to doing anything but complimenting him. If she kept up that momentum and took control of the playroom, it was hard to imagine Lord Wilfried being able to do anything against her.

"I understand your point, Oswald, but there is no way for us to avoid Lord Wilfried looking inferior to Rozemyne. The children will undoubtedly be flooding the playroom, hoping to hear her harspiel song and see her blessings."

The retainers all faltered. They probably knew that their expectations were unreasonable.

“While that is true, there must be *something* we can do to support Lord Wilfried,” Oswald replied. “Do you have any better ideas? At this rate, Lady Rozemyne will steal the position of aub without fail.”

“Are you not Lady Rozemyne’s older brother, Lamprecht? Surely you know of some weakness she possesses,” Linhardt added, visibly hostile toward the thought of the aub seat being taken.

I smiled. *This is how it’s supposed to be. We were the ones at fault for standing idly by when Lord Wilfried was decreed to be the next aub.*

“There’s no need for us to view Rozemyne as an enemy. We need only emphasize the attributes Lord Wilfried has that Rozemyne does not,” I said.

The retainers all grimaced, clearly finding it hard to believe there was any area in which Lord Wilfried prevailed. It seemed they had been so focused on Rozemyne’s strengths that they hadn’t noticed how terribly unfit she was to be an aub; she had a clear weakness that there was no doing anything about.

“And the one attribute that immediately comes to mind,” I continued, “is a strong and healthy body. How could Rozemyne ever become the aub when she’s so weak and sickly that she collapses simply from walking too fast down the hall, and can’t even participate in the entirety of dinner before having to leave early to rest? I spoke to my parents and Lord Ferdinand during the feast, and it seems that none of her guardians intend to make her the next aub, no matter how skilled she is. She was adopted to support Lord Wilfried, not replace him.”

The retainers gasped and exchanged looks, both relieved and unsettled at the fact Rozemyne couldn’t be the next aub despite her enormous talents. In their hearts, they wanted their liege, Lord Wilfried, to be the aub, but in truth, they knew that Ehrenfest needed a talented leader with plentiful mana.

“If that’s what they think as Lady Rozemyne’s guardians, then Lady Charlotte might prove to be a greater threat,” Oswald said. “After all, she was raised by Lady Florencia to oppose Lady Veronica.”

His words took me by surprise; I had never thought of it like that. I

had of course expected Lady Charlotte to compete with Rozemyne for retainers, but not once had I considered that she might also be a possible aub.

“Lady Veronica never would have allowed this while she was in power, but while Lady Rozemyne certainly is an overwhelmingly stronger archduke candidate on the female side, if she is not named as the next potential aub, an opening will be created.”

“But as you just said, Lady Charlotte is a female archduke candidate. That gives Lord Wilfried an advantage, doesn’t it?”

The retainers were nodding among themselves. So long as Lord Wilfried continued working in a manner befitting an archduke candidate, it would be increasingly difficult for Lady Charlotte to bridge the gap between them. Sylvester defeating his older sisters in their battle for succession had made that more than clear.

This also meant, in other words, that Rozemyne was such an overwhelming figure that she could easily overcome the gender barrier.

“In that case, we shall guide Lord Wilfried to working alongside Lady Rozemyne rather than opposing her. If we can establish a good rapport now, then it should be possible for us to easily secure the Leisegangs’ support in the future by having Lady Rozemyne and Lord Wilfried marry,” Oswald declared, clenching his fists.

Nobody disagreed with him on that matter. There would be nothing better than the Leisegang faction gathering beneath Rozemyne, and Lord Wilfried directly inheriting the political base that Lady Veronica had constructed in the past.

...This is more realistic than sickly Rozemyne becoming the next aub. If she truly was adopted just to support Lord Wilfried, then Father and the others are undoubtedly planning for her to marry him, if possible.

The next day, the playroom was due to be held. During breakfast, we explained to Lord Wilfried what would happen there. As our priority had been ensuring that his debut was a success, we hadn’t spoken much of what came after.

“So, there are going to be introductions on the first day. I just

need to sit in a chair and listen to people introduce themselves to me, right? And then I need to watch the other kids and pick the best retainers."

"That is correct. You do not have to choose today, however. There is much time to consider this matter over the next three years leading up to your enrollment in the Royal Academy."

"These retainers will spend time with you throughout the entirety of winter while you are a student. They must be gifted, of course, but on top of that, you will want to pick individuals cut from the same cloth as yourself. Both parties will have nothing but a bad time if you disagree on too fundamental of a level."

It was dangerous to take on a retainer who had no intention to serve you; it not only heightened the threat of betrayal, but also risked destroying the future of a retainer if they were relieved from duty. There was no way to avoid this besides successfully flocking with birds of a feather.

"The other nobles will judge your ability to lead the playroom to see if you have the skills required to become the next aub. In this regard, please work together with Lady Rozemyne," Oswald said.

Lord Wilfried responded with a slightly worried look.

"Oh, there is no cause for concern—as long as you actively move around the room and display your strength, everything will go smoothly," said one retainer.

"In fact, that is something that will be hard for Lady Rozemyne to do," added another.

Lord Wilfried crossed arms in thought, then nodded. "Right. Rozemyne is weak enough that she even needs to practice walking. I'll take charge when it comes to moving around."

The playroom was packed with students, and everyone's eyes were on Rozemyne and Lord Wilfried. There were long lines of those waiting to introduce themselves, while the students who had already done so were busy speaking to the kids who weren't old enough to go to school yet.

In a normal year, the archnobles would be flexing their status to the laynobles, and the children who had just finished their baptism

would be rushing to mingle with their factions as soon as possible. But none of that was happening here. Instead, the students were teaching the younger kids about the academy, showing off their academic excellence and loudly discussing their lessons in overbearing voices while shooting brief, occasional glances at Rozemyne and Lord Wilfried.

What had used to be a time for mednobles and laynobles to search out archnobles to protect them had become something much more peaceful.

"Seems like this year's students are on the softer side," I observed.

"Of course they are. There are archduke candidates in attendance, and the fastest way up in the world is to become one of their retainers," Linhardt replied. "The kids here need to be cautious until they've learned more about the candidates' personalities and what they like. The playroom will undoubtedly be quiet for a number of days, at the very least."

He was right; it would be beyond foolish to suddenly start bullying others right in front of an archduke candidate, especially one known as a saint who showed mercy even to orphans. As such, everyone here shared the same wise idea that it was best to hold back on wielding their status like tyrannical clubs, at least for the time being. I wasn't seeing anyone being openly antagonistic about factions, either. It undoubtedly helped that not even a full year had passed since Lady Veronica's arrest, and that the shifting power balance between the adult factions hadn't yet calmed down.

I looked across the kids in the room, quietly observing the children who would be going to the Royal Academy at the same time as Lord Wilfried. Oswald had asked me to form as many bridges as I could with nobles of the Leisegang faction.

...I suppose I should try reaching out to Alexis and Hartmut once the Royal Academy sends out grades. Or, no, it's likely that Cornelius will be approaching them for Lady Rozemyne's sake. He's so overprotective of his sickly little sister that he's probably already vetting her retainers, and if I wait too long the two of them will be snatched up before I can secure them for Lord Wilfried.

The day before Cornelius departed for the Royal Academy, I returned home and visited his room as he was packing his things.

“Cornelius, do you have any plans for Rozemyne’s attendants?” I asked.

But despite all the rumors about how overprotective he was, all Cornelius did was blink in confusion. “Not really. She’s in a weird position where she visits the temple a lot, and despite being adopted by the archduke, she won’t necessarily be in the running for the position of aub. It’ll be hard for her to secure any retainers unless they have some reason to be completely stricken with adoration.”

Cornelius apparently had no intention of actively scouting any retainers for Rozemyne. I began to wonder whether I had been getting a little overprotective myself, having thought about reaching out to find retainers for Lord Wilfried, but after a pause, Cornelius continued.

“And, well... both Mother and Father told me not to, so...”

It seemed that our parents had instructed Cornelius not to get involved in Rozemyne’s selection process, under the assumption that he did not intend to continue serving as her retainer or arbitrate between their recommendations.

“You’re planning to quit, Cornelius? You won’t stay her guard knight?”

“I only became her guard knight under the condition that I could quit when it was time for Rozemyne to pick her retainers. But the truth is, I still haven’t decided whether or not I want to stop serving her. She’s not a bad mistress, but...”

Cornelius trailed off, pausing for a moment before voicing his concerns.

“Damuel came to serve her as punishment, while Brigitte does so for the sake of her home province, Illgner. Angelica didn’t even think about declining when Father summoned her to discuss the matter—well, I don’t think she thought about anything at all, really—but my point is that I still don’t really understand what it feels like to want to serve one person for your entire life.”

Continuing to serve Rozemyne wasn’t too bad of an option, but

that wasn't a good enough reason for Cornelius to make such a life-changing decision. I had once gone through similar fears, so I could empathize with the unrest that he was feeling.

...Yeah, this is no state in which to be thinking about Rozemyne's retainers.

"Lamprecht, why did you choose to continue serving Lord Wilfried? You could have left at any time."

While Lord Wilfried's retainers were being fired one after another, Oswald had said that I was free to quit of my own volition. Lady Veronica was no longer around to force Mother's hand, and now that my little sister had been adopted by the archduke, there was no need for me to continue serving Lord Wilfried if I didn't want to.

I looked down at Cornelius, who was wearing a worried, brooding expression. Perhaps I had made the same face back when I'd had this same discussion with Mother.

"If I had to give a reason, I'd say that I stayed because Lord Wilfried needed me. Plus, I saw no reason to try to serve anyone else when I hadn't even been acting like a proper retainer. In that regard, I thought that Lord Wilfried and I could grow together. But you don't need to hear all that; these things never have clear answers. You'll just have to come to your own conclusions," I said, patting Cornelius on the head.

He looked up at me, now looking more uncertain. "You chose to serve him because you weren't doing a good enough job...? That's a lot different from Eckhart's reasoning."

"Eckhart is abnormal; he won't be a good role model to learn from. You won't find anyone to serve with standards like that."

The look in my eyes became distant as I thought about how Eckhart always prioritized his master far above himself. There weren't many people who would be so stricken for a certain individual that they would continue to follow them even after being relieved of duty. It was standard to change who you served based on trends and circumstances.

"Father serves the aub as the knight commander, and Eckhart will risk his life for Lord Ferdinand while remaining unwilling to serve anyone else. I'm sure that living around them has warped your

perception of how things should be, but nobody expects unwavering loyalty at the start; it's up to the masters to prove whether they're worth it."

"Eckhart is abnormal...? I had assumed that one would need feelings that strong to pick a master, so I'm glad you disagree. I'll try thinking this over some more in an attempt to find my own reason to stay with Rozemyne," Cornelius said as he turned, the unease having vanished from his expression.

In my eyes, Cornelius had made his decision the moment he started actively looking for reasons to continue serving Rozemyne. But I didn't need to point that out to him.

The students headed for the Royal Academy gradually vanished from the playroom until, eventually, only those who would be spending the entire winter there remained. It was then that Rozemyne abruptly took out a deck of karuta and suggested that everyone play together.

The kids quickly divided themselves into groups based on their future school years, and the experienced players mingled with the older kids. Needless to say, the two experienced players dominated.

"Lamprecht! Linhardt! I couldn't win against Rozemyne, but I beat everyone older than me!" Lord Wilfried declared.

His confidence was recovering fast, but the older kids had likely been told by their parents to *accommodate* him. This theory was further supported by the fact that they didn't seem frustrated to have lost—rather, they were looking at the cheerful Lord Wilfried with kind eyes. It was clear as day that they had let him win.

Rozemyne noticed this as well, and after briefly allowing just the slightest trace of annoyance to slip onto her face, she smiled brightly and looked around the kids. "We will be at an advantage for some time thanks to our experience, but each of you will need to have won at least once by the end of winter. Otherwise, we could never consider trusting you to be our retainers. Isn't that right, Wilfried?"

Lord Wilfried merely looked at her in confusion, but the other kids all tensed up.

"I look forward to playing with you all again. Starting tomorrow, I

shall give sweets to the best player.”

It seemed that Rozemyne had no intention of allowing the other children to accommodate her and Lord Wilfried, and to this end, she would be bringing sweets made by her personal chefs. The kids would normally have to wait for such confections to be handed down to them, but now they were right there, within their reach.

In an instant, the mednobles and laynobles all became deadly serious, staring hard at the karuta. This development also meant that the archnobles wouldn’t be able to keep half-heartedly accommodating them; their very worth would be called into question if they lost to mednobles and laynobles.

In a single day, Rozemyne had forced all the kids to take the games seriously.

“Not bad at all...” Linhardt murmured.

I nodded in agreement. She had manipulated them with such skill that all we could do was sit back and watch it play out beautifully. It was really hard to believe that the youngest-looking child in the playroom had accomplished such a feat so deftly, but this wasn’t the first time that Rozemyne had acted well above her age.

After rousing the children with karuta and playing cards, Rozemyne worked with Professor Moritz to teach the kids, granting each one as much time as an archduke candidate would receive. Just watching from Lord Wilfried’s side, I could see them becoming more capable by the day.

While everyone was studying under Professor Moritz, Rozemyne would spend her time quietly reading thick, complicated-looking books she had borrowed from the castle’s book room and writing stories to print in the future. She had apparently advanced far enough under Lord Ferdinand’s instruction that she was already prepared to enter the Royal Academy, so there was no need for her to relearn the same material alongside everyone else.

Among other things, Rozemyne was usually busy writing down the stories told to her by Philine, reading aloud from the picture book, and occasionally dominating in karuta tournaments to keep Lord Wilfried motivated. It was clear for all to see that she was no student, but an instructor just like Professor Moritz.

...Forget about Lord Wilfried looking inferior; it's like Rozemyne's on a completely different level from everyone else.

But, either due to her being so overwhelmingly out of the ordinary or the fact that she was constantly reading thick books despite her poor health, the more energetic boys kept their distance. It seemed they were unsure how to interact with her.

Seeing this, Lord Wilfried deftly took the lead. "Let's hone our skills while we can and beat Rozemyne by any means necessary!" he declared, holding a strategy meeting when Rozemyne returned to the temple for the Dedication Ritual.

Rozemyne's absence always led to the boys becoming more active. The girls, on the other hand, became a lot shyer and more docile, largely refraining from playing karuta and playing cards at all. They kept their distance from Lord Wilfried and watched his group with caution.

Both Rozemyne and Lord Wilfried tended to befriend those of the same gender as themselves. Considering the retainer selection process, it was actually good for them to separate at times, but the girls seemed a bit stifled without Rozemyne there to offer her support. In the end, both she and Lord Wilfried were necessary.

"Lady Rozemyne is really good, though. How can we beat her...?" one boy asked.

There was Ignaz from the neutral faction, Traugott from the Leisegang faction, and Isidore, Laurentius, and Roderick from the former Veronica faction, all gathered together in a group that transcended the wars between their respective factions. It was heartwarming to see them huddle up and hash out strategies. By now they had long forgotten all about accommodating the archduke candidates, and they were more than ready to beat Lord Wilfried at karuta to win the sweets.

The playroom's atmosphere was just perfect, and as I watched Lord Wilfried take charge over the kids, I felt that I could see a future leader of nobles within him.

Hopefully he can at least secure Ignaz and Traugott as retainers.

As his retainer, I wanted to do as much as I could for Lord Wilfried, and thoughts of ways to help passed through my mind as I

watched him talk excitedly with his future school friends.

The High Bishop’s Exclusive Business

“...In short, the Carpentry Guild has been ordered to furnish the monastery recently built in Hasse with everything it needs. The new High Bishop wants it done as soon as possible—in two months’ time at the latest. Her representatives are Gustav the guildmaster and Benno from the Gilberta Company, and it seems they’re willing to pay any price to make up for the tight deadline. They’re also talking to the Construction Guild about this, but we’re not gonna lose to them when it comes to furniture and other interior furnishings. All workshops, put everyone you can on this.”

These were the words of a higher-up in the Carpentry Guild, having summoned every foreman in the city of Ehrenfest who was a member. They all stood up, shouting out with motivation, but I merely sat there in a daze.

Hey now, hey now... What’s this supposed to mean?

I supposedly had the High Bishop’s exclusive business, but she hadn’t mentioned anything about building a new monastery in Hasse. And she definitely hadn’t talked about bringing such a large-scale order to the Carpentry Guild.

The normal process was for a client to bring business like this to their exclusive workshop, then have that workshop bring it to the guild. The two would then cooperate to distribute the work while considering how much money needed to be used. And yet, not only had I not been informed of this job, but I also hadn’t been listed along with the guildmaster and Benno as representatives.

Do I not have the High Bishop’s exclusive business after all...?

I had done several jobs for the High Bishop ever since the Dostal Workshop, which worked for Benno, sent her my way. She had wanted me to make the printing press for her, and we had handled

the wood that the orphanage used for winter handiwork.

The Gilberta Company had told us as an intermediary that she was satisfied with our work, and the foreman of the Dostal Workshop kept saying that he wouldn't have sent the girl our way had he known she was gonna become the High Bishop, so I'd assumed that I had her exclusive business.

Was I wrong...? Or did she drop me at some point for not doing a good enough job?

A cold sweat ran down my back and I could feel my hands trembling. It was like someone had dunked a bucket of ice-cold water over my head. My workshop was the youngest of all those in the Carpenter's Guild, and its status would change dramatically based on whether or not I had the High Bishop's exclusive business —especially since she also happened to be the archduke's adopted daughter. Without it, my workshop's future would be shrouded in darkness.

"Hey, Ingo. You're up next," the guild representative said.

I stood up to hear what my share of the work would be, at which point he instructed me to build the windowpanes for the monastery. At that, I responded with a nod and exited the guild.

The sky was bright and the sun radiant, shooting down summer rays that were hot enough to burn the skin. There were plenty of carpentry workshop foremen out in the street, excited about the large jobs they had been given.

One of them, the foreman of the Dostal Workshop, noticed me and came walking over. He gripped my shoulders, brought his face up close, and whispered: "Ingo. You weren't named as a representative up there, and you weren't divvying up the work with them, either. What happened to you having the High Bishop's exclusive business?"

He had pretty openly voiced the fears stirring in my heart. I wanted to call him an idiot on the spot and say that of course I had her exclusive business, but with everything that had happened, I wasn't so sure myself anymore.

My hesitation to respond turned into an answer itself, which earned me a nasty grin from the foreman. "Alright. Guess that means

this job's my big chance, huh?"

By the time I had realized my mistake, it was too late; he had already concluded that my workshop hadn't done satisfactory enough work for the High Bishop, which had in turn led to me losing her business. All the foremen in the guild would now be vying for her business themselves, whether I liked it or not.

I returned to my workshop and told my craftsmen about the work we would be doing for the monastery. "There's a large-scale job starting right now, and they need it done quick."

Two of my leherls let out excited cheers. Under any other circumstances, a big job for our workshop would be something to celebrate, but I had to shake a bitter hand to quieten them down.

"Linus, Dimo—this isn't anything to be happy about. The High Bishop gave this job to the Carpentry Guild. She didn't speak to me about it beforehand, and I wasn't listed as one of her representatives. We might've lost her exclusive business."

The smiles were immediately wiped from their faces, but my wife Annika simply laughed off my concerns. "Why get all gloomy about that? It's not like she actually said you've lost her business, right?" she said.

"She didn't, but there won't be any opportunities for me to ask her what she thinks about our workshop, and there's no one I can really send to her, either. She could drop us out of nowhere and we'd have no idea."

Annika was right that it wasn't a done deal, but as a commoner, I couldn't just visit the High Bishop any time I wanted. Checking with her would certainly be for the best, but she was beyond the reach of a mere craftsman like me.

"Oh, you're such a worrywart. There's no reason to fret when she's loading orders onto you as much as she is. When she calls you over to make her next order, you'll know for sure. All you need to do in the meantime is finish the job you've been given. Do good enough that you can puff out your chest with pride and show the other workshops why it is that the High Bishop trusts you," Annika said, slapping me on the back with a hearty laugh. She was on the

smaller side, but she had the energy of someone twice her size, and seeing her broad smile was enough to brighten my mood a little.

“Aren’t ya being a little too optimistic?”

“You think so? You only lose exclusive business if you do bad work, and all we’ve ever done is satisfy the customer, right?” she asked, peering at me with her gray eyes.

I knew well enough that she was just trying to ease my anxiety and cheer me up, and I definitely couldn’t let my fears get the best of me with Annika and the leherls watching. And so, I straightened my back and kept my chin up.

“You’re right. Agonizing over this won’t change anything. But yeah, back to the matter at hand—we’re gonna be living in the new monastery to get this job done. There’s a meeting at the Merchant’s Guild for all the workshops that’ll be staying there, so I’ll be attending that as well.”

The explanation was being held at the Merchant’s Guild rather than the Carpentry Guild for three key reasons: the guildmaster was one of the High Bishop’s representatives, they were delivering the down payments, and foremen from the Construction Guild would be participating as well.

I looked around at the crowd on the second floor of the Merchant’s Guild and noticed there were quite a few unfamiliar faces. We were told that they wanted multiple foremen to essentially take turns sleeping in Hasse’s monastery to do work, and that we would also need to bring women—our wives, daughters, or hired servants—along with us. There were plenty of rooms for us to stay in at the monastery, but there weren’t any doors or windowpanes yet, and we would need to drag in mattresses and other daily necessities ourselves.

...So they’re sayin’ we can’t even sleep there until we’ve made the doors and windowpanes? We’ve gotta hurry and make ’em fast so that we can leave.

“Your daily necessities will be brought to the monastery by wagon,” the guildmaster began, “and since it’s bad for business to have foremen away from their workshops for an extended period, you will take turns staying there overnight. Those of you gathered

here today—your workshops will be leaving first.

“Your respective guilds have selected their fastest workshops for this, and while the workload will no doubt be strenuous, I trust you all to succeed. And naturally, your pay will vary according to the quality and quantity of your work. We won’t hesitate to pay extra to cover for the abrupt nature of this job,” he concluded, flashing several small golds to the crowd as encouragement.

The foremen all grinned at the sight.

“This job’ll be easy, since the ivory buildings nobles live in all use the same measurements for their windows and doors. Let’s make a ton of ’em here, and then a ton more once we’re in Hasse,” one said.

As for food, the Othmar Company was apparently distributing the work among various eateries that would be bringing their foodstuffs to sell at the monastery. We had also been told to buy things from Hasse and the surrounding farmers, alongside several other warnings about living there.

With the explanation finished, the foremen all started to return home. That was when Benno from the Gilberta Company called out to me.

“Ingo, could you c’mere for a moment?”

I went over, ignoring the prying eyes of the other foremen, at which point Benno continued.

“Don’t forget you’ve got exclusivity with Lady Rozemyne. You’ll be staying at the monastery from beginning to end, so don’t slack on your preparations.”

As it turned out, they needed someone on site to give instructions, directing which workshop’s products would be going where, and I had been chosen for that role. It was a bit of a relief to know that Benno thought I still had the High Bishop’s exclusive business, but I still had to make sure.

“Hey, Benno... Do I really have her exclusivity?” I asked carefully, wanting a clear answer. But Benno just returned an ambiguous shrug.

“I know she counts you as one of her Gutenbergs, but, what, has she never mentioned you having her exclusive business? That’s news to me. Had I known that, I wouldn’t have listened to the Dostal

Workshop complaining to me day in and day out about having missed their chance."

"Don't need to know about that. What I'm saying is, if I really have got her exclusive business, why wasn't I told about this? A job this big must've been in the works for months."

All the carpentry and construction workshops in the city were being mobilized, and the project needed to be finished in a month or two at most. For a job that required the movement of *this* many people, it had to have been planned well in advance.

...Or so I thought. Benno simply grimaced, shook his head, and raised three fingers. "Nah. This all started three days ago."

"Say what?!"

Benno gave me a quick rundown on the situation: Construction of the Italian restaurant jointly financed by the High Bishop, the Gilberta Company, and the Othmar Company had been completed, and a lunch had been scheduled prior to its opening with the archduke himself due to attend. Apparently, at the table, she had asked to build orphanages outside of the city to increase the number of workshops she had available.

"The High Bishop's been talking about wanting more orphanages for a while now, and at the time, she hadn't intended to make it an ivory building. She was going to talk to some construction workshops and then ask some carpentry workshops for the interior decorations —y'know, build it like commoners would. Basically, the plan was to hire lower city craftsmen once we'd gotten permission from the archduke to build an orphanage there."

"Yeah, I can't even imagine starting something like this before you've secured permission from above."

Benno's story made sense to me; you couldn't move forward with a big project like this without the archduke's permission. But in that case, how had things turned out like this? I crossed my arms, encouraging Benno to continue, and he looked up at the sky, a distant look in his eyes as though he was remembering the day it all happened.

"Lady Rozemyne mentioned this all to the archduke, hoping to get his permission, and the very same day they used some kind of

magic to build the entire monastery. Then, they ordered us to have it furnished quickly enough that the orphans can live there and start work in the workshop by the Harvest Festival."

"Now that's just crazy talk."

"Everything's crazy when you deal with nobles. The guildmaster and I are representatives for this just because we happened to be eating at the Italian restaurant as its financiers. If you want to be a representative too, just go and ask Lady Rozemyne."

"Really?!" I exclaimed, leaning forward. Getting myself recognized as a representative would make the greedy looks on all the other foremen's faces disappear in an instant.

Benno nodded with a grin. "Yep. We're still openly recruiting representatives to help pay the Carpentry Guild and the Construction Guild for their work ahead of time. There's a lot of money we've gotta scrape up, since the deadline's so tight."

"...Never mind. Forget it. That's too much for me."

My workshop needed to be saving for winter prep, so we didn't have any cash to dump on other guilds. Big stores like the Othmar Company and the Gilberta Company were in another league from us when it came to investment power, and while spending this money would be the easiest way for me to establish the Ingo Workshop as having the High Bishop's exclusive business, it just wasn't a feasible option for me.

...Guess I've just gotta prove myself with the quality of my work instead. For now, I'll stay at Hasse and do what I can there.

And so, I moved to Hasse with Annika and stayed in the under-construction monastery, focusing on work all the while. Craftsman after craftsman came to the monastery, and since I stayed there from start to finish, I ended up learning all of their names and faces. Since so many Ehrenfest workshops were being mobilized, there were quite literally crowds of workers at a time, with even carpenters from neighboring cities and towns coming over. It really was a shockingly large-scale job.

We weren't quite able to finish in a single month, but the monastery was ultimately furnished without any significant problems.

As far as I was concerned, the Ingo Workshop had done a good enough job that nobody could accuse us of having lost the High Bishop's exclusive business.

With the job done, the Gilberta Company's apprentice leherl, Lutz, came over to ask about winter handiwork.

"Ingo, sorry to bring this up right after the monastery business, but can I place an order for some more work?" he asked, bringing us the usual request from the High Bishop.

Annika beamed and puffed out her chest with pride, her gray eyes practically shining. "See! What did I say? It's all fine. You haven't been dropped at all."

The job request was a huge relief, especially now that the leherls could relax and focus on work. We soon finished up the winter handiwork preparations for them, at which point Lutz came to us with yet another job from the High Bishop. This time, it had to do with improving the printing press.

"She wants me to talk to the priests actually doing the work in the orphanage workshop and then make improvements based on their input. I've got her exclusive business for sure," I declared, bringing the work order to the Carpentry Guild. But the guild representative's suspicious look didn't change even as he glanced over the sheet.

"Doesn't the fact that the printing press needs to be improved mean that you didn't do a good enough job the first time?"

"Nah, the first job was to get the bare minimum of parts together to make it work. We were planning to improve it from the start."

Just like the monastery, it had been a job where time was of the essence. But explaining that didn't change the doubt in everyone's eyes. The guild representative raised an eyebrow as he looked between my determined glare and the work order.

"Say what you will, but this is still an improvement job. Try getting a signature saying that you have her exclusivity once you get this done. Then nobody can doubt you."

I grit my teeth and restrained myself; there was no point in pushing the subject. All I could do now was finish the job and bring back some kind of proof. If my workshop's reputation kept

plummeting like this, it could risk impacting the jobs we were getting from other customers, too.

“Hey, Lutz. You were talkin’ about how Lady Rozemyne can’t go to the lower city now that she’s the High Bishop, yeah?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. She can’t just up and visit commoners like that anymore. Lady Rozemyne really misses the time where she could just go and do what she wanted, when she wanted.”

Lutz was taking me and my leherl, Dimo, from the Gilberta Company to the temple.

“Can she visit the workshop in the temple’s orphanage, since that’s not in the lower city?”

“Yeah, kinda. She sometimes visits in the afternoon to watch us work for a little bit.”

The High Bishop had used to visit the lower city workshops herself to get what she wanted, and it was pretty likely that she would come and double-check the work I was doing. That meant there was a good chance I could speak to her, and with that thought in mind, I looked down at what I was wearing—the same work clothes I always wore at the workshop. There was nothing else I could really wear, considering that I was going to work, but something told me that it wouldn’t be a great idea to meet the High Bishop like this.

It’s already kinda bad for a foreman to be walking around the north part of the city...

“Ingo, what’re you looking at your clothes for?” Lutz asked curiously.

I raised my head. He didn’t seem to know the position that the Ingo Workshop was in, though there wasn’t much helping that; merchants would usually go to the Merchant’s Guild rather than directly to the carpentry workshops.

“Don’t sweat it,” I replied. “I was just thinkin’ about this job.” There wasn’t any point in me talking about my crappy circumstances to someone who didn’t know about them.

Once we reached the temple, I looked up at the gate. There was a gray priest standing there, serving as a guard. Lutz shrugged, then

went over to talk to him.

“Nolte, this is Ingo the Gutenberg and his apprentice, Dimo, here to improve the printing press. Lady Rozemyne has permitted their entry.”

“Hello, Lutz. Gil told me about this visit. You may pass.”

Unlike when religious ceremonies were being held, only the side door to the gate was opened. We passed through, and the air around us changed in an instant. The busy clamor of the city faded as we were enveloped in an abrupt silence that pronounced each footstep. It was so quiet that I hesitated to say anything at all as we walked to the boys’ dorm where the workshop was.

“Ingo,” Lutz said, his tone and attitude changing the instant we were inside the temple. “We invited you here to improve the printing press, but the esteemed Lady Rozemyne wishes for you to first discuss matters with the gray priests, basing your improvements on what they believe will make it easier to use.”

He sounded just like the priests in the temple. The fact that a kid who wasn’t even ten years old could change his tone so suddenly left me stunned. I was also working hard to absorb the habits and language of my customers so that I could work my way up and do business with richer customers, but I had gotten my beruf certification by focusing on my own skills while only making lehange contracts, and the foreman I worked for at the time had never taken me anywhere. It was only when I first delivered the printing press to the temple’s workshop with the Gilberta Company that I learned they completely changed how they spoke and acted when visiting nobles.

...Guess I should expect as much from an apprentice working for a big store that does business with nobles. Who knows what kind of training he’s been put through?

The orphanage’s workshop was in the basement of the boys’ building. I had brought Dimo with me, since he had been there when we delivered the first printing press, but I could tell how nervous he was.

“Attention, everyone. Please state your thoughts on the current printing press,” Gil said. “Lady Rozemyne wishes to improve it with the aim of making it as quick and easy to use as possible, so that it

might print more goods."

Gil was the boss of this workshop, and given that he was about the same height as Lutz, they were probably of a similar age. But even though he was still a kid, he was one of the High Bishop's apprentice attendants, meaning he had the most authority out of anyone in the workshop.

The gray priests nodded, then lined up in front of me and Dimo before smoothly stating their opinions.

"I would appreciate it if placing the typesetting board on the press could be made easier."

"The closer we can keep the ink to the press, the better; placing it further away would create more mess. Could you add somewhere for us to put ink-related goods, preferably around here?"

While the priests all wore the same kind of ragged clothes, they spoke in a polite manner completely unlike the craftsmen in the lower city as they listed their desired improvements.

"H-Hold on a second. I gotta remember all this. Make it easier to put down the typesetting board, add a place to put ink stuff..."

"It will surely be difficult to memorize the opinions of so many people. May I suggest writing them down?" one gray priest suggested, holding out a pen and what appeared to be a botched sheet of paper.

He had a point, but the extent of my writing experience was putting together work orders for the Carpentry Guild, and even then, Annika was always the one who did the math. Aside from the things I was used to writing as part of my job, the words just didn't come to me. That said, he was being kind here, and it would be flat-out impossible for me to memorize everything otherwise, so I went ahead and took the pen.

"...Excuse me, but you've misspelled that word," one gray priest noted, having received one heck of an education despite being an orphan.

I scratched my head awkwardly. I couldn't correct my mistake because I didn't actually know how to spell the word, but I couldn't just say that while working for the High Bishop.

As I stood there, grimacing with the pen in hand, one of the gray

priests spoke for me. “Gil, please write in Ingo’s place. I believe that his time would be better spent focusing on the printing press, observing the aspects we find inconvenient and how we wish to improve them.”

“Fritz is correct. Please practice using the printing press yourself,” Gil said, snapping me back to reality as he took the pen and paper from me.

I knew that the gray priest named Fritz had helped me out, knowing that I couldn’t write properly. I raised a hand to express my thanks. He nodded with a smile and whispered something to Gil, who then turned to another gray priest.

“Bartz, please prepare the printing press and go through the process with Ingo and Dimo. The writing shall be done by Fritz.”

“Understood.”

That brief exchange made it clear that the workshop wasn’t being run entirely by Gil; there were adult gray priests helping out as well, which made a lot of sense considering that he was still a child. In lower city workshops, only those with technical skills and experience were allowed to become foremen, so inexperienced kids without a good grasp on the work that needed to be done were never put in charge of anything. It was weird to me that the adults in the orphanage’s workshop obeyed Gil and Lutz when they themselves were stronger and more experienced.

This is apparently just how things are in noble society, but damned if it doesn’t still feel weird.

“Ingo, Dimo—this is the typesetting board, and this is how you print using the press,” the priest named Bartz explained.

Dimo and I both tried it out ourselves. Since the printing press was just a slight modification of a normal press, the process required a lot of arm strength, just like juicing things did. There was a stand nearby for holding the ink and paper, but it didn’t take me long to understand why they would want something that was actually on the press itself.

“So, you’d want the paper around here, right?” I asked, touching the press.

Lutz promptly reached out from the side and pointed at one area

in particular. “Rather, could you put a thin box at a slight diagonal angle around here? The paper is all roughly the same size, so it would be ideal if you could make it with this in mind.”

“Hm, alright. That’d make it easier to print from this angle.”

I imitated the act of putting the paper into place to get a feel for it, all the while impressed at Lutz’s ability to give a concrete explanation of what he wanted.

“The tool for applying the ink could be put here,” Lutz continued, going on to list out a bunch of suggestions.

I nodded, still impressed, but each improvement made me more and more confused; he was being bizarrely specific. Though I let him continue, I was increasingly suspicious that he knew more than he was letting on. I needed to satisfy the High Bishop, and the more suggestions he had, the better.

“The work will apparently be a lot easier and need less power if you make a slidable stand that has the paper and lettering on it. That way, all you would need to do is push it beneath the press, and then pull it out again...” Lutz said, speaking as though he had suddenly just remembered. But the fact that he’d said “apparently” made it pretty clear that there was someone who already knew what a finished printing press would look like, and they were just giving him directions.

“Hey, Lutz. Someone knows exactly what we need to do here, don’t they?” I asked, glaring at him and Gil. “If someone knows that stuff, then there isn’t really any need for me to listen to what the gray priests think; I could make the printing press the High Bishop wants just like that.”

“Er, but...” Lutz trailed off, conscious of everyone around us. He was definitely hiding something and it ticked me off. I needed to do a perfect job here to satisfy the High Bishop and save my plummeting reputation. I was in dire straits and didn’t have time to play around.

“If you want the printing press improved, then let me speak to the person who knows what the finished product should look like! You planning on wasting our time with pointless trial and error or something?!” I exclaimed, causing the gray priests to jolt and take a step back.

I hadn’t said that much, but the air in the room had very blatantly changed. The calm on the priests’ faces immediately vanished, and they looked at me with guarded expressions.

Huh...? I was yelling at Lutz, not them.

I furrowed my brow as the priests exchanged uncomfortable glances. Even though I hadn’t said anything to them, the atmosphere was unusually off now.

Lutz looked around the workshop, then scratched his head with a sigh. “Look, Ingo—we’re from the lower city, so we’re used to people yelling at the drop of a hat, and I understand that this is seen as normal there. But here in the temple, violence is forbidden; nobody yells or gets up in anyone else’s face. All that does is scare people. Should we step outside? I’m sure you’d rather talk like we’re in the lower city.”

Violence is forbidden? Nobody yells? The heck kind of a place is this?

This place had a culture entirely unlike the lower city—I could feel that in my bones. Lutz’s explanation had made it clear that we were the odd ones here, not the priests.

“Sorry Gil, but could you collect and summarize everyone’s opinions? Ingo and I shall finish this talk outside.”

Lutz directed me outside, even asking Dimo to accompany us when I tried to leave him behind.

“Only Gutenbergs are allowed inside the workshop, to protect the orphans and stuff. We can’t let you stay in there alone.”

“...You mean I’m not a Gutenberg anymore?”

“It’s not my place to say,” Lutz replied as we left the temple and returned to the bustle of the lower city. I was finally back where I belonged.

Lutz had said that we could continue our discussion at my workshop. The Gilberta Company was closer, but Dimo and I weren’t wearing good enough clothes to enter a northern store.

When we eventually arrived, Lutz spoke up the moment I closed the door behind us. “I get that you want to speak to the person who knows what the finished press should look like, Ingo, but that’s Lady Rozemyne. She can’t just up and talk to lower city craftsmen

anymore.”

She had been baptized as a noble before becoming the High Bishop, so her status wouldn’t allow her to casually speak to lower city commoners anymore.

“That can’t be true! You’ve been speaking to the High Bishop! And you said that she visits the workshop every now and again!” I shouted, hitting the table.

Lutz raised an eyebrow. “And that’s true. But, what, do you think a craftsman’s going to be treated the same as a merchant from the Gilberta Company who’s used to dealing with nobles? I dunno what’s ticking you off so much, but the temple’s full of nobles; status decides everything there.

“Plus, Gil’s an attendant of the High Bishop. He’s basically her representative in the temple—not someone that a craftsman like you can just yell at for being unreasonable,” he said with a sigh. “All you should’ve done was smile and write down the opinions you were given. You’re lucky the High Bishop isn’t a more heartless noble, otherwise you could’ve been punished for your insolence.

“The problem here isn’t that she can’t come and see you if she wants to, it’s that rude commoners like you who don’t understand status would tick off all the nobles around her. That’s why she just avoids meeting them at all—for safety’s sake. If you annoy a noble, you could be killed where you stand. And it’d be your own fault, too. What I’m trying to say here is give up on meeting the High Bishop in person.”

I gritted my teeth. “I get that I messed up there; I didn’t know how things worked in the temple. But I can’t back down that easily. I need to improve the printing press so that my workshop doesn’t get shut down,” I said, explaining to Lutz that its reputation had been plummeting ever since the monastery job. “I don’t expect a merchant to get the struggles that we craftsmen go through, but things aren’t easy for me right now. The future of my workshop depends on this.”

“Nah, I get you. My father and oldest brother work in construction, and my other brothers are carpenters. They all deal in carpentry, actually. My dad, Deid, went to Hasse for the same monastery job.”

I knew Deid. We had worked together at the monastery. And his

son Sieg was a lehange apprentice at the Dostal Workshop. The fact that I actually knew who he was talking about left me stunned.

"...Why's the son of a carpenter working as a leherl for the Gilberta Company and serving as one of the High Bishop's Gutenbergs?" I asked, blinking in surprise. Even if he aimed to be an apprentice at a big store, there didn't seem to be any connection here.

"It's a long story," Lutz replied, refusing to give any more details. He then looked at me with his green eyes. Somehow, it seemed like his sight was fixated on the future. "I get that your position in the guild is important for your workshop. Lady Rozemyne caused the problem, and I get that. I also get that improving the printing press is more important than anything right now. I'll tell Master Benno what I know about all this, including your perspective as a craftsman, and see whether he can create some circumstances for you to meet her."

"I owe you one!"

I negotiated with Benno through Lutz. He sympathized with the plight of the Ingo Workshop and agreed to take me to the temple, albeit under three conditions.

One: I had to pay an intermediating fee to the Gilberta Company.

Two: I could only speak when Benno gave me his permission.

Three: I had to be emotionally prepared for the possibility that the meeting would end in my death.

"Isn't this fee kinda high? Three large silvers just to go to the temple once? Really?" I began, trying to barter the price down. But Benno flashed me a glare with his dark-red eyes.

"You kidding me? We're putting a hold on store business and greeting nobles in the Noble's Quarter, all so you can visit the temple. If you don't like the fee, I can stay right here and focus on my own work. Go by yourself, for all I care. I'm sure a craftsman who doesn't know a single noble greeting will do juuust fine."

I faltered. Benno was right; that really would go badly. I didn't know how to deal with nobles at all.

"...Alright, alright. I'll pay. Happy now? Gah... This is why you don't deal with big stores..."

I paid the crazy-high fee and endured a lecture on what I should wear on the day of, among other things. Maybe the price wasn't that high after all, given that it included warnings and advice on how to deal with nobles. I wasn't sure why that last condition was part of the deal, but getting a chance to meet the High Bishop was certainly more important.

And so, I steeled my resolve and headed to the temple, accepting the likelihood that this might be the last thing I ever did.

"Whew. It's finally over..."

Once I exited the temple, having been looked over by knights and priests from head to toe in that stifling room, I let out a sigh of relief. As I looked over the familiar lower city, the tension drained from my body. I had finally secured the contract saying that I had the High Bishop's exclusive business—the thing I had been agonizing over since the monastery job was first mentioned.

I've gotta get back and talk to the others about this.

When I had originally brought up that our workshop might've lost the High Bishop's exclusivity, both Annika and my leherls had responded with optimism, but I knew they must've been just as worried on the inside. Her new order was something pretty weird—she wanted me to discuss my work with smiths, but that was something to think about later. Right now, I just wanted to tell them what had happened and put an end to all the worrying.

But while I was enjoying my brief repose, Benno shot me a look, starting to unslick his hair. "Idiot. Nothing's over yet. In fact, this is where the actual problems start. Different professions are going to have to work together on this, and that's not gonna end anytime soon. You're gonna be sharing this work from here on out."

"Nah, that can't be right. This is just a one-off."

The High Bishop had only brought up this crazy idea because she was a noble who didn't know how craftsmen worked; no other customers would suggest we do anything that was this much of a pain. Everything would be fine as long as we could survive this one job.

Lutz shook his head. "Come on. Do you really think Lady

Rozemyne's gonna do this once and then never again? No. Now she's gonna think this is normal and do it every time. You might as well expect every job you have from now on to involve you working with people from other professions," he said, a world-wise look on his face. Those were the words of someone who knew Rozemyne a lot better than I did.

As the worry suddenly started rushing back to me, Benno slapped me on the back. "But now that you've accepted it, you've got no choice but to keep it up. You'll need to talk to the Merchant's Guild and all the other guilds involved, then drop by Zack and Johann's workshops to introduce yourself. You should head to the smiths tomorrow, and I'll send out a meeting request to the guildmaster for you. If you sent one, it wouldn't even get read in time for the delivery date."

"R-Right."

Benno listed a bunch of things that I needed to do all at once, but I didn't really understand the groundwork that merchants always did. He must have noticed that from the way I was blinking at him, because he glared at me with narrowed eyes.

"Get your head in the game, Ingo. You've gotta finish all this before the smiths are due back in the temple. This is something you'd normally have to do on your own without me. This sure is a big mess now," Benno said, crossing his arms. But even then, I still hadn't truly realized how bad things really were.

It wasn't until I was running around the city to greet everyone involved that I finally understood.

"We finally completed that cursed Hasse job that required us to mobilize every carpentry and construction workshop in the city, and now you're starting some other grand mess?!" the guildmaster exclaimed. "A printing press built through the cooperative efforts of workshops from entirely different professions? Enough. Settle this matter among the other experts with your grand title, whatever it was. Don't get me involved with this."

His desperation to not get involved was what finally made me understand what an unthinkable mess I had gotten myself wrapped up in.

Afterword

Hello again. It's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 3 Volume 3*.

This volume begins with the printing press being improved. They were fundamentally just enhancing the normal presses they had already been using to make them even easier to use, but this was new ground for the lower city craftsman. As they exchanged ideas, it ultimately came to pass that Rozemyne bought the schematics themselves. Benno and Lutz had a really rough time arbitrating all of this, and I hope you enjoyed the short story about Ingo preparing for his workshop's future.

Angelica the apprentice guard knight hadn't been given many opportunities to shine up until now, but in this volume, the Raise Angelica's Grades Squadron was established for her sake, thereby tightening the bonds between Rozemyne's guard knights. There were a surprisingly large number of web novel readers who really empathized with Angelica wanting to become a guard knight to avoid having to study; I wonder if the light novel readers felt the same way?

The star attraction of this volume was no doubt the very fantasy-like ingredient collection scenes. Last volume had the ruelle gathering scene near the end, and this volume continued that trend with the Lord of Winter hunt and the gathering of rairein nectar.

I think that Rozemyne worked really hard to participate in the action scenes despite the fact that moving even a little bit causes her to pass out. Though, naturally, her guard knights and Ferdinand are the ones who are really working hard to make this happen. I made some graphs related to the gatherings so you can see what they were gathering and where, so I hope you can have fun imagining the scenes with these in mind.

This was a big surprise for me, but there are actually plans for an

Ascendance of a Bookworm drama CD to be made. I'm really looking forward to seeing what kind of voices Rozemyne and Ferdinand have. If you're curious, please feel free to look on the TO Books website.

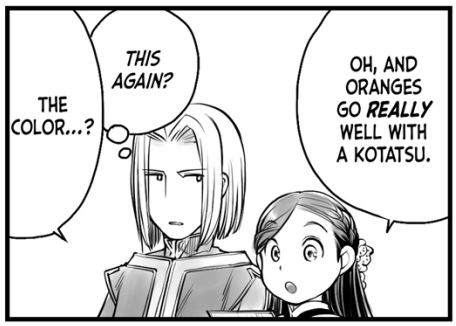
This volume's cover art has a heroic-looking Rozemyne wielding Leidenschaft's spear, while the color illustration depicts the girls enjoying their mysterious night out while the boys watch on in terror. I really loved both images. Thank you very much, Shiina You-sama.

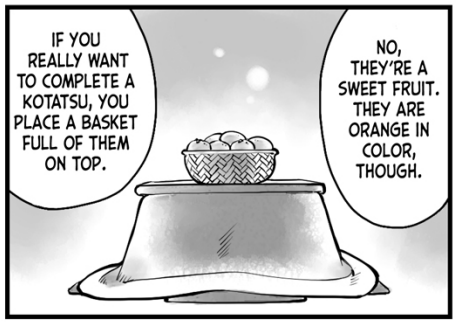
And finally, I offer up my highest thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 3 Volume 4.

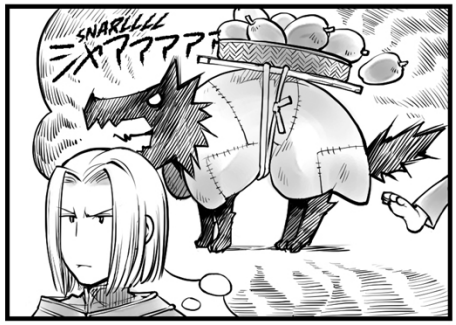
January 2017, Miya Kazuki

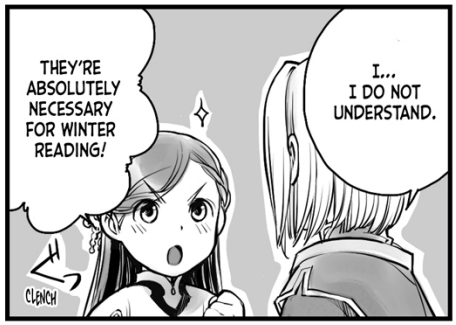

THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME BONUSES!
A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY
Art by You Shiina
twitch twitch
GU
HH...
WEARING SO MANY LAYERS SHE CAN'T MOVE
WINTER = KOTATSU
WHAT IS THAT?
SO COLD...
WHEN IT GETS THIS COLD, I REALLY WISH I HAD A (KOTATSU).
YOU WRAP IT WITH STRAW-FILLED CLOTH, PUT A BOARD ON TOP...
GROWL!!!
THEN PUT YOUR FEET INSIDE TO WARM THEM UP.
UM, WELL... IT HAS FOUR LEGS.
THE WORLD YOU COME FROM SOUNDS HORRIFYING. WHY WOULD YOU EVER DO THAT?
THEY'RE REALLY COMFY, TRUST ME.
Though once you're in, it's very hard to get out again...

KOTATSU AND ORANGES

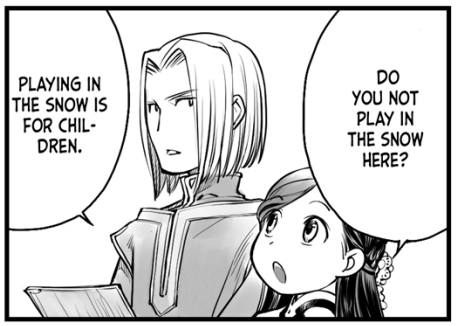


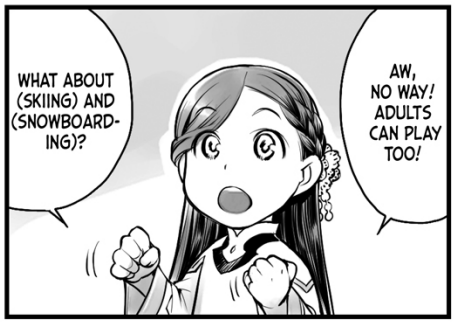




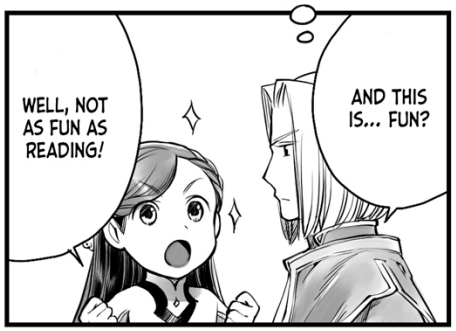


WINTER SPORTS

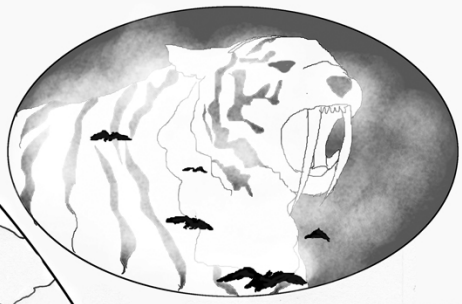








JUREVE INGREDIENTS



The Lord of Winter's Feystone (Schnesturm)

A feybeast that appears in the north of Ehrenfest during the winter, though not always in exactly the same location. This year's Lord of Winter was a schnesturm, but its species can vary each year. It spawns subordinates, stays enveloped in a blizzard at all times, and is massive in size. For reference, those black blobs are the knights.



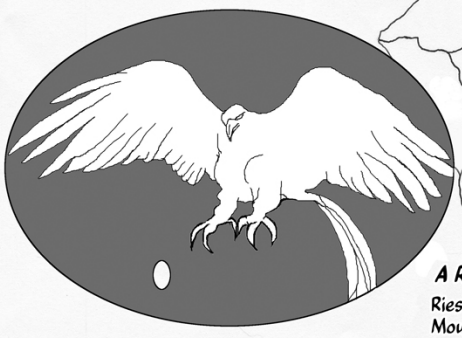
A Ruelle

The fruit of a metallic tree located within a forest near Dorvan. Its lotus-like flowers bloom at night, revealing the purple jewel-esque fruit within. They are apparently only this color on the Night of Schutzaria, and feybeasts swarm the tree to eat them.



Rairein Nectar

Nectar of the flowers that bloom by the Goddesses' Bath. These flowers grew rapidly on the Night of Flutrane, then returned to their normal size come morning. Talfroschs attempt to eat them. The small figure atop the leaf is Rozemyne.

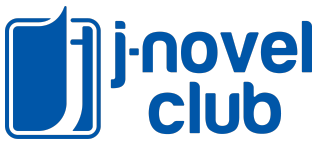


A Riesefalke Egg

Riesefalke are feybeasts that nest on Mount Lohenberg. They are large, white birds of prey, with sharp claws bent into ferocious curves. When hunting for their eggs, it is crucial to wait for when the parent birds are absent.







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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 3 Adopted Daughter of an Archduke Volume 3
by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof
Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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