
ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM
I'll do anything to become a librarian!
Part 4 Founder of the Royal Academy's So-Called Library Committee Vol. 2
Author: Miya Kazuki
Illustrator: You Shiina


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Cast of Characters



Rozemyne

The protagonist. Still looks like a seven-year-old due to having slept for two long years. She hasn't changed on the inside either. She will do anything she can to read books in the Royal Academy, which she is attending as a first-year.

Ehrenfest's Archduke Candidates



Wilfried

Sylvester's oldest son, Rozemyne's older brother, and a first-year at the Royal Academy.

Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, and Rozemyne's little sister by one year. Not yet attending school.

Rozemyne's Guardians



Ferdinand

Sylvester's half-brother and Rozemyne's guardian.

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.

Karstedt

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

Elvira

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

Bonifatius

Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

Summary of Part Three:

Rozemyne was exceedingly busy after becoming a noble, with her work as the High Bishop and the archduke's adopted daughter having left her with very little spare time. She finished the printing press, sold karuta and playing cards in the castle, and made steady progress in her aim to proliferate books. The atmosphere became a lot more tense when Georgine visited, however. Wilfried fell victim to a political trap, and Charlotte was kidnapped, during which Rozemyne almost died of poisoning. Rozemyne was soaked in a jureve to recover, but when she awoke, two whole years had passed.

Rozemyne's Retainers



Rihyarda
Head attendant. An archnoble who cared for Ferdinand, Sylvester, and Karstedt when they were kids.



Lieseleta
Angelica's little sister and a fourth-year apprentice medattendant.



Brunhilde
A third-year apprentice archattendant.



Hartmut
A fifth-year apprentice archscholar. Ottilie's son.



Philine
A first-year apprentice layscholar.



Angelica
Lieseleta's older sister and a sixth-year apprentice medknight.



Cornelius
Karstedt's son and a fifth-year apprentice archknight.

Leonore
A fourth-year apprentice archknight.

Damuel
A layknight. Stayed in Ehrenfest.

Traugott
Rihyarda's grandson and a third-year apprentice archknight.

Ottilie
Hartmut's mother and an archattendant. Stayed in Ehrenfest.

Judithe
A second-year apprentice medknight.



Hirschur
Ehrenfest's dorm supervisor. Previously taught Ferdinand.

Royal Academy

Primevere……Klassenberg's dorm supervisor.
Rauffen……Dunkelfelger's dorm supervisor.
Fraularm……Ahrensbach's dorm supervisor.
Pauline……Frenbeltag's dorm supervisor and a music instructor.
Solange……The Royal Academy's librarian.

Royal Academy Students

- **Roderick** — An apprentice medscholar from Ehrenfest. Formerly of the Veronica faction.
- **Anastasius** — The Sovereignty's second prince.
- **Eglantine** — An archduke candidate from Klassenberg.
- **Lestilaut** — An archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.
- **Detlinde** — An archduke candidate from Ahrensbach. Georgine's daughter.

Rozemyne's Personnel

- **Ella** — Personal chef.
- **Hugo** — Personal chef.
- **Rosina** — Personal musician.

Other Royal Academy Figures

- **Schwartz** — A library magic tool.
- **Weiss** — A library magic tool.
- **Catherine** — Solange's attendant.
- **Oswin** — Anastasius's head attendant.

Other Nobles

- **Eckhart** — Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.
- **Justus** — Ferdinand's scholar. Rihyarda's son.
- **Lamprecht** — Wilfried's guard knight. Karstedt's son.
- **Brigitte** — Rozemyne's former guard knight who returned to Illgner.
- **Georgine** — Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.
- **Veronica** — Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.

Temple Attendants

- **Fran** — In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.
- **Zahm** — In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.
- **Monika** — A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.
- **Gil** — In charge of the workshop.
- **Fritz** — In charge of the workshop.
- **Wilma** — In charge of the orphanage.
- **Nicola** — A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.

Lower City Family

- **Gunter** — Myne's dad.
- **Effa** — Myne's mom.
- **Tuuli** — Myne's older sister.
- **Kamil** — Myne's younger brother.

Lower City Merchants

- **Benno** — Head of the Plantin Company.
- **Mark** — Benno's right-hand man.
- **Lutz** — A leherl apprentice.
- **Otto** — Head of the Gilberta Company.
- **Corinna** — A seamstress for the Gilberta Company.
- **Gustav** — Guildmaster of the Merchant's Guild.

Gutenbergs

- **Ingo** — Foreman of a carpentry workshop.
- **Zack** — A smith. Comes up with ideas.
- **Johann** — A smith. Turns ideas into reality.
- **Heidi** — Ink craftswoman. Josef's wife.
- **Josef** — Ink craftsman. Heidi's husband.

Other

- **Dirk** — An orphan forced to sign a submission contract with Count Bindewald.
- **Delia** — Rozemyne's former attendant from when she was a shrine maiden.
- **Lily** — A gray shrine maiden who returned to the orphanage after getting pregnant.

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Prologue

“May I return this book?” asked one student.

“I would like to borrow a carrel key,” said another.

As soft evening light streamed in through the rows of windows, the high-pitched voices of excited girls echoed throughout the Royal Academy library. Most were here to see Schwartz and Weiss, the two shumils who had become such star attractions that even professors sometimes put their research aside on Earthdays to come and look them over. It was only natural that they would draw such attention after having been immobile for so many years.

Solange smiled to herself, pleased by the crowd thronging around Schwartz and Weiss, then warned the girls to quiet down. They apologized for their poor manners and obeyed at once, but Solange knew from experience that their voices would steadily rise again over time. It was surely annoying for the students who wanted to study in peace, but at the same time, she couldn’t help but be glad the library was so lively at a time of year when it was usually a ghost town.

Oh my... I see there are Ehrenfest students transcribing books again.

Upon looking around the library’s reading room, Solange discovered a number of students wearing Ehrenfest capes. Rozemyne was a first-year archduke candidate, and the fact she had become the new master of Schwartz and Weiss was perhaps a sign that she loved the library and its books enough to earn the approval of Mestionora herself.

The students of Ehrenfest were exceptionally passionate about their studies this year, and according to what Solange had heard in the staff dining hall, there were several who had already finished all of their written classes. Given that Rozemyne’s retainers were instructing the students to transcribe learning materials—something no students from other duchies were doing—she could tell that this wasn’t an exaggeration.

This transcription work must all come back to Lady Rozemyne, Solange absentmindedly concluded as she walked along the carrels. Laynobles and mednobles wouldn't waste parchment if not acting under the orders of archnobles or archduke candidates, and if one pondered who in Ehrenfest would want books transcribed, only one answer came to mind.

That is very strange parchment, however. Is it an Ehrenfest specialty?

Solange was not at all familiar with the parchment the Ehrenfest students were writing on. She had asked the professors in the staff dining hall about it the first time she saw some, but it apparently wasn't being used in their classes. She could guess it was only used when the students were given work by the archduke candidates, so it most likely wasn't yet widespread throughout Ehrenfest.

That said, there certainly are quite a lot of new things coming from Ehrenfest.

The music professors had mentioned that Ehrenfest had all sorts of new and original songs hidden up its metaphorical sleeves, and it was said that Rozemyne had composed them all herself. Solange could guess that it was her music teacher who had actually composed them, but that point aside, Rozemyne was skilled enough at the harspiel that few could believe she had missed two whole years of practice.

Perhaps Lady Rozemyne has the divine protection of Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom and *Kunstzeal the Goddess of Art...*

As Solange was recalling the time Rozemyne had overflowed with blessings while praying to the gods, a rain of multicolored light poured down from above. It was closing time.

Students shot their heads up, then hurriedly began preparing to leave. Some returned their carrel keys, others started putting their books back on the shelves, and still others moved to borrow what they were using. The reading room became very busy in the blink of an eye, and Solange was getting ready to close up shop as well.

"Please return your carrel keys to Schwartz. Weiss will handle the borrowing of books. Hurry now, everyone; sixth bell will ring before you know it," Solange announced, walking by the carrels and giving final warnings to the stubborn few

students trying to stay for as long as possible. She looked over the first floor, then went up to the second. There were few who used the second floor, but at times she would find professors sitting in the shade, consumed in their reading.

It was only because of Schwartz and Weiss that Solange was able to properly look over the reading room. Before their return, she had needed to wait until after she had gotten all the carrel keys and dealt with all those wanting to borrow books. Now, she could close the library several times faster than before.

After finishing her patrol of the second floor, Solange began turning off the magic tools used to protect the books from sunlight and the magic tools responsible for the library's warning lights. In truth, there were also magic tools for managing the humidity in the reading room and such, but she didn't have enough mana to use them all; she was forced to run only the bare minimum.

The last thing Solange did was stand in front of the statue of the Goddess of Wisdom, located at the back of the second floor, and report that the day had once again been spent in the service of knowledge.

After confirming that Schwartz and Weiss had finished their work, Solange locked the reading room and the bookshelves before returning to her office just in time for sixth bell. As she put the collected deposits into the safe, she hoped that the last students to leave the reading room had made it back to their dormitories by now. Then, once her duties were completed, she turned off the lights.

"Work is done," Schwartz said.

"Solange. Time for food," Weiss added.

Solange nodded. "Catherine will be bringing it today. She should be here soon."

With that, Solange left her office with a key in hand and walked down the hallway leading to the central building. She would need to lock the door to the central building as well once her attendant Catherine returned with food brought from the central building's dining hall.

Solange opened the door to a second, empty hallway. When she stepped outside and glanced both ways, she noted that the scholar building had many

lit-up windows, while the attendant building was all but completely dark. The professors running the attendant course maintained a strict schedule out of consideration for their own attendants, but many scholar professors tended to prioritize their research above all else. It was as this thought passed through her mind that Solange spotted a figure pushing a cart toward her.

"Welcome back, Catherine."

Solange welcomed Catherine into the library, then closed and locked the door before returning the way she came. She slept in the dormitory for librarians, which was located at the back of the office.

"I've brought your food here as you requested, Lady Solange, since you wish to eat in your room. But how will you fare without gathering information in the dining hall...?" Catherine asked.

Solange was a normal professor—one not entrusted with supervising her home duchy's dormitory. While it was common for dormitory supervisors to eat in their respective dorms, other professors ate in the staff dining hall located in the central building. They could also have their attendants bring them food when they had guests or were feeling unwell.

Considering that Solange worked alone in the library, meals were her only opportunity to socialize and gather information. Having only Catherine to talk to made her feel deathly lonely, and up until recently, she had quite looked forward to her meals. Now, however, she was faced with a barrage of questions about Schwartz and Weiss whenever she ventured to the dining hall. She had found it rather enjoyable at first, but everyone asked the same questions over and over again to the point that it was now exhausting. It was particularly tough trying to answer those who wanted to know how someone had managed to change the two shumils' master.

Nobody believes me when I say they need the blessings of the goddess.

"I apologize for the inconvenience, but is it not nice to eat quietly in one's room every now and again?" Solange replied. "I find it unlikely that the internal politics of the Academy will shift that drastically overnight."

"It certainly is fine every now and again, so long as you have not abandoned the dining hall entirely due to not wishing to leave Schwartz and Weiss alone,"

Catherine noted, indirectly referring to all the librarians of the past who had stayed holed up in the library for as long as possible.

Solange chuckled. “Those two have certainly brightened my life and lessened my workload, but they can hardly socialize with me. Fear not—I will be back in the dining hall tomorrow.”

Solange opened the door to the library dormitory, then shut off the magic tools that lit the office. Schwartz, Weiss, and also Catherine were coming with her, partially for security’s sake. She locked the door behind them, and with that, she finally felt as though her workday was over.

It sure is a shame I still need to write today’s log...

“Lady Solange, I am going to take the cart to the elevator,” Catherine said.

“Please do. I shall write my log with Schwartz and Weiss.”

After watching Catherine push the cart off to the elevator, Solange slowly climbed the staircase in the middle of the silent dormitory with Schwartz and Weiss, heading to her room. There had been many librarians in the past, but now she was the only one, meaning the parlor and common room were left entirely unused.

“If only they would hire one other librarian for me...” Solange sighed. Now that Schwartz and Weiss were active again, however, that was even less likely than it had been before.

As Catherine prepared their meal, Solange wrote out a log for the day while Schwartz and Weiss detailed who had used the library. They had received quite a few more visitors than they had the previous years.

To think I would need to write so much at this time of year... Just how many people will be visiting the library when final exams are around the corner?

Solange finished up her work, feeling both fear and excitement for the future, then noticed that Schwartz and Weiss were staring at her. “Yes, dears? Is something the matter?”

“Milady’s not here.”

“Why is she gone? Why?”

It seemed the two shumils were confused by Rozemyne's absence. That was understandable; their previous masters had generally stayed in the library dormitory.

"Lady Rozemyne will be visiting the library once she finishes her lessons," Solange assured them. "According to the professors, she is working exceptionally hard and passing her classes with very high grades, so it should not be much longer."

Rozemyne was an archduke candidate from Ehrenfest. Solange had been told that the young woman's exceedingly youthful appearance was due to her having slept for two whole years, but her high grades made that seem somewhat questionable.

Though her high grades are not all she is known for...

There were also inglorious rumors about her attacking Fraularm with a feybeast-shaped highbeast and collapsing in the Farthest Hall. None of that mattered to Solange though; Rozemyne was an extraordinary lover of not just the library, but books themselves, such that simply praying to the gods had caused Schwartz and Weiss to move once again. The Goddess of Wisdom had recognized her as their master, and for Solange, that was more than enough; she was sure it was a sign that both the library and her continued work had received the goddess's approval as well.

"She's coming soon?"

"Milady's coming soon?"

"Of course, of course. I too have various matters to discuss with Lady Rozemyne—matters involving the two of you as well... I am much looking forward to her finishing her classes," Solange said as she reached out toward the feystones on the shumils' clothes. She lacked the mana to keep them operational, but she had continually poured her mana into their protective magic circles to ensure they were never stolen away. She added more, praying to lessen Rozemyne's burden by however much she could.

Her work for the day now truly complete, Solange started her meal, completely unaware that the staff dining hall was abuzz with the news that Rozemyne had finished all her classes.

Meeting for the Tea Party

On the glorious night that I finished all of my classes, Wilfried gazed across the students gathered in the Ehrenfest dining hall, then spoke in a grave tone. “As of today, after much sacrifice... Rozemyne has passed her final class.”

“Wilfried...” I interjected. “What exactly do you mean by ‘after much sacrifice’? Hm?”

“I mean that you could have taken it slower.”

At that remark, I saw many of the girls who had been desperately studying nod repeatedly in agreement. A few of those among them who hadn’t yet passed their written classes even started wailing in despair, upset that their hopes had been dashed mere moments before they reached the finish line.

“If only we had just a bit longer... I was so close to finishing my written lessons, but now I will not even get to see Schwartz and Weiss be measured...” Lieseleta wept.

“Are you not exaggerating a little, Lieseleta?” I asked. “They are only being measured.”

“How would you feel if the library closed tomorrow after you put so much time and effort into achieving your goals?” she replied.

The library closing right before I finished my classes...? That would actually kill me!

It was only once I put myself in her shoes that I truly understood how terrible of a situation she was in. Just thinking about the library closing made my heart twinge so suddenly that I could have sworn it was getting crushed into pieces. I truly did empathize with the girls’ despair.

“I have to schedule the measuring session with Professor Hirschur, so there is still time before the date is decided upon. My plan is to visit the library tomorrow, but I will not be measuring them right away. I will permit you to accompany me if you finish your written lessons before the measuring itself,” I

decided, causing the girls to look a little more relieved.

Wilfried, however, shook his head with a frown. “The measuring doesn’t matter. We need to talk things over before Rozemyne gets stuck in the library and never leaves.”

Hm? There’s something we need to discuss?

“Now that you’ve finished your lessons, socializing begins,” Wilfried continued. “I think we’ll want to decide in advance how many new trends we intend to introduce, and also settle on template answers for the questions we know everyone is going to receive. What are your thoughts?”

“I am in favor. There are many questions I’ve been struggling to answer,” an apprentice scholar called out, positively lighting up at the suggestion. It seemed the apprentice scholars had recently been interrogated by students from other duchies while exchanging information.

“Let me ask those of you who have already had contact with other duchies: what questions did they ask you, and how did you answer them?” Wilfried asked. “We can plan according to what we know. Even we first-years are going to be socializing soon.”

Those gathered started providing example after example. This was another instance where our Better Grades Committee organizing everyone by course was really paying off, since we were getting answers from people of all factions. A few older students had already attended several Earthday tea parties and were used to exchanging information between classes, and as expected, the most popular topic of conversation was the secret behind the continued rise in Ehrenfest’s grades. It seemed that the first-years all passing their written lessons in one go had caught the other duchies’ attention, and this interest was only further increased with Wilfried and me having attained what were essentially honors-level grades.

I absorbed all this news with interest, having made passing a priority solely for my own benefit, but the apprentice scholars all started exchanging looks.

“It is true that our grades are the most common point of discussion, but our answer to such questions is already settled,” one explained. “Hartmut has instructed us to say that the Saint of Ehrenfest is the reason for our sudden

improvement and that everyone is going to be even more surprised next year."

"Did you tell Hartmut to do that...?" Wilfried asked me, crossing his arms and deepening his frown.

No, officer, I swear.

"I gave him no such orders," I replied, shooting the culprit a glare. "He acted alone."

"But is my proposed answer in any way untrue?" Hartmut asked, a dazzling smile on his face. "We are currently drawing attention for our written lessons alone. Evasive responses will do for now, and the true surprise will come next year, when those who have learned the Rozemyne Compression Method return with increased mana capacities. I expect that to dramatically improve Ehrenfest's reputation."

In essence, Hartmut had predicted that this was only the beginning for Ehrenfest, meaning the real pain in the neck was going to be felt during the next year onward. It really wasn't something I wanted to think about, but if we didn't settle this matter before I went to the library, we'd only be making things harder for ourselves further down the line.

"...That will do as an answer, but continue concealing the existence of the picture books, karuta, playing cards, and the winter playroom education program," I replied. "I want our duchy to maintain its advantage, at least in terms of grades."

"As you wish."

Wilfried nodded along in agreement. "That should be all for the higher grades. Anything else?"

"I was asked about the rinsham," one girl said. "They wanted to know how it makes our hair glossy, where it is sold, and how it is made."

This was my first time hearing about it, but having the girls clean their hair with rinsham before the advancement ceremony had evidently paid off.

"How have you been answering them?" I asked.

"I always say that I simply borrowed the rinsham, and that I know only that it

is becoming increasingly popular throughout Ehrenfest."

"I see. That will do; no more needs to be said."

Those in the Royal Academy generally lived off supplies teleported in from their respective home duchies. There were no stores here, nor any citizens, as it were; students gathered news of trends and the like, but actual business deals would only be hashed out at the Archduke Conference. Advertising products was fine if you wanted them to sell, but keeping such details close to your chest was also an option.

"I give you all permission to take rinsham, hairpins, and pound cakes to tea parties," I continued. "You may say whatever you wish about them, and discuss how they are growing in popularity throughout Ehrenfest. Do not, however, mention the name of the store that is selling them; their value will plummet if the production method is stolen or something of the sort before the next Archduke Conference. Do your best to increase the price by tantalizing them with samples while keeping some information to yourselves."

The students all nodded with serious expressions. Perhaps because they had recently needed to start earning their own money, they were a bit more sensitive to the value placed on information and how this value could change over time.

"I was asked about drivable highbeasts today," one student said. "It seems that many apprentice knights saw you and Professor Hirschur riding them above the school, Lady Rozemyne."

"Professor Hirschur created a shumil highbeast during our highbeast creation lesson," I noted, going on to explain what had happened in the class. I also made sure to mention that several teachers had come to investigate the rumor about me attacking Fraularm in a feybeast-shaped highbeast. "And with their presence, this rumor was confirmed to be false. It should fade away into nothing soon enough."

"Ah, speaking of which—there are several first-years attempting to make drivable highbeasts," Lieseleta said, breaking into a smile as she reported that many of them had chosen to make shumils.

"Shumils might actually catch on," I remarked. "They certainly are quite cute."

“It is a great boon that your highbeast can be ridden without first having to change clothes,” Brunhilde added. “Should I change my highbeast to a drivable one also? It may take some dedication, since I am used to the one I currently have, but perhaps it will be worth it...” She was the first to ask about changing her highbeast, no doubt wanting to support my new trend on the front lines.

“Doing so exhausts more mana, but by making the highbeast larger, you can carry luggage inside it as well. It also conveniently protects those inside from rain,” I commented. “I must say though, my guard knights have informed me that drivable highbeasts are ill-suited for those who need to use weapons.”

Judithe frowned sadly at my last remark; it seemed she had wanted a drivable highbeast as well.

“Furthermore, for those of you looking to make a drivable highbeast, I would suggest abandoning the tradition of slender animals such as horses and instead going for rounder ones, as they are much cuter—*ahem*, rather, they offer more space inside,” I said, shilling the idea as best I could in the hope that I would see more cute highbeasts soon enough.

“Everyone passing their written exams is, of course, big news, but not many people are talking about Lady Rozemyne being invited to a tea party by the music professors,” one older student said.

“Perhaps that is because the tea parties held by the professors are not particularly rare, even if an Ehrenfest student being invited to one is quite the feat,” another suggested in response.

I glanced over at Brunhilde. “Has a date for the tea party been chosen?”

“I finished my written lessons today and will be discussing a date with Rihyarda. We shall handle preparations for the tea party itself, but you will need to memorize information about the professors ahead of time. It is best to know what you can regarding all those in attendance,” she replied.

“Very well. On another note, I have a request for everyone: I ask that you all investigate just how much of a legendary and influential figure Ferdinand is within the Royal Academy.”

“Lord Ferdinand, you say...?” came a voice among those gathered.

“From what I’ve heard, many legends from his time here still remain,” said another. “Some love it when he is brought up at tea parties; others feel quite the opposite. I will learn what I can.”

Ferdinand, as he often said himself, did not have a personality that would commonly be described as “likable.” He had a caring and protective side to him, yes, but he only ever showed it to people he saw as valuable. For the most part, he spoke in cold, harsh terms; I had to imagine he made a poor impression on an overwhelming majority of people.

That said, he’s skilled at fake noble smiles and exchanging sarcastic barbs, so I imagine he has his fair share of allies as well...

“Ferdinand contributed to my original music compositions, so I would be grateful if you organized them before my tea party with the music professors,” I said.

“Understood,” replied the apprentice scholars. They all wore stern, determined expressions, in stark contrast to the apprentice knights, who did not look very motivated at all.

“Knights, I ask you to also thoroughly investigate the legends Ferdinand left in his wake. It seems he never lost a game of treasure-stealing ditter. Ehrenfest will once again draw much attention while we archduke candidates are here, so do put your all into your training.”

“Lamprecht always told me that glory was a once-in-a-lifetime miracle...” Cornelius protested. “Not to mention, the most common type of ditter played nowadays is speed ditter; the situation is entirely different from how it used to be.”

I furrowed my brow. Treasure-stealing ditter involved a huge mess of knights from various duchies, which created the perfect environment for sly tactics to shine. The variations focused on speed alone didn’t leave much time to think, but they were simple enough that Ehrenfest surely still stood a chance.

“Are you at least analyzing your opponents to find ways to defeat them as quickly as possible?” I asked. “I’m assuming there are only so many different feybeasts the professors can produce.”

“There are a lot more than you might think...” Cornelius replied.

“Professor Rauffen is probably saying that victory can be achieved with guts alone, or claiming that you can just ball up together and smash your opponents in a single move, but you mustn’t take him seriously,” I said. “Attacking all at once like that would be a grave mistake.”

The apprentice knights exchanged surprised looks, which surprised me in turn. I couldn’t believe they had actually intended to launch an all-out attack.

“The obvious course of action is to memorize the weaknesses of every feybeast the professors can create and plan how to deal with each one, so as to be ready no matter what you are faced with. But are you also organizing yourselves into offensive and defensive roles?” I asked. “Are you regularly swapping to ensure everyone is in the position that best suits their strengths?”

“Er, no. We...”

“Rather than attacking all at once, you will want at least one person staying back to observe the battlefield, and several fighters hanging behind so they can step in when your primary fighters need time to recover. Is that not the case?”

Traugott grimaced at my suggestion. “As an archduke candidate, Lady Rozemyne, you do not understand the circumstances of apprentice knights. Fights do not last long enough for anyone to need to recover, so it is best to just unleash our full power no matter what feybeast comes. If we have the time to research weaknesses, we would be better off training to grow stronger instead,” he said. Angelica was repeatedly nodding in agreement, and given that she was a fervent hater of research and thinking in general, this came as no surprise.

“Do recall that the Knight’s Order is tasked with hunting the Lord of Winter in a lengthy battle that can last many days. You cannot defeat it with a single all-out attack, and nobody is capable of enduring for such long stretches without time to recover. Furthermore, it is impossible to predict which feybeast will become the Lord of Winter, but no knight would ever use that as an excuse to avoid doing their research.”

Apprentice knights were unable to participate in the Lord of Winter hunt, but they had most likely heard of the horrors it entailed. They were blinking at me

in surprise, having never expected that I would know anything about such matters.

"Your superiors in the Knight's Order are always looking for ways to defeat the Lord of Winter faster, both researching the weak points of each feybeast and training hard to defeat whatever they may be faced with," I continued. "Even here in the Royal Academy, there is a point to thinking about how to defeat large foes as promptly as possible. Make your roles clear, and always think while you train."

I smiled at Angelica, whose expression made her ennui more than apparent, then looked at Cornelius.

"Which feybeasts are used in games of ditter, how are they defeated, and how long does it take to defeat them?" I asked. "Assuming we pay attention to every duchy, one year's worth of data should equate to information on over twenty feybeasts. Over several years, we should encounter duchies that have faced the same feybeast multiple times, and from there we can learn their weaknesses and how best to fight them. Have the apprentice knights been recording this information?"

"Only through word of mouth. We don't write anything down," Cornelius replied. It seemed that while people would talk about their ditter experiences during practice, nobody actually kept any written records.

Unbelievable...

"That will change, starting now," I declared. "Everyone, write down everything you can remember about past ditter games and the feybeasts used during them. Books exist to store and convey information; if you write this down now and leave the notes for future students, Ehrenfest will grow stronger and stronger with each passing year."

My words drew more looks from the apprentice attendants than the apprentice knights. "If you wish for the apprentice knights to record that manner of information, then we shall record information absolutely essential to tea parties, such as what tea and sweets the professors prefer," one said. "We will then be able to check things without having to research them anew when details are forgotten."

“It is our job to record information, so we shall record the oral history the apprentice scholars have built up over time as well,” added another student. It seemed there were a lot of areas where even the apprentice scholars were relying on speech and memory, and in the end, everyone agreed to share what they knew and write it all down.

“To accompany this new development, I will place bookshelves in the common room,” I announced. “This will give all those who wish to read our new documents the means to do so.”

“Lady Rozemyne, do you intend to turn the dormitory into a library as well...?” Philine asked, earning a smile and a nod from me.

“We will need bookshelves either way, no? These aren’t documents we want other duchies to see, and it is important that all Ehrenfest students have equal access to them.” I was already planning out the book corner of the common room when I saw Wilfried shrug out of the corner of my eye.

“While we’re here, Rozemyne... Could you give me some advice too?” he asked.

“What on?”

“The tea party with Detlinde. I need to form my own plans, since she’s prevented you from joining as well.” I could tell from his stiff expression that he wasn’t expecting it to be a particularly good time, even with it only being a gathering of family members.

“Both Ahrensbach and Frenbeltag are plummeting in the Academy rankings, are they not? Does anyone have any good information regarding them? I will purchase it here and now,” I said. A few apprentice scholars complied, confirming that Frenbeltag was struggling even more than usual after losing Ehrenfest’s mana support.

“I suppose they might ask you to start supporting them with mana again,” I noted.

“‘Supporting them with mana’?” Wilfried repeated. “We were giving mana to Frenbeltag?”

“Indeed. Ferdinand and I would fill small chalices in the temple which were

then sent to them.”

Wilfried understood the true weight of my words, having traveled through the Central District to fill it with mana in the past. “Ehrenfest doesn’t have the leeway for that...” he muttered, and boy would I have liked for his parents to hear that.

“Our response to Frenbeltag should depend on their attitude,” I explained. “If they mention getting aid again, simply say that Ehrenfest is in such dire straits that we rely on our archduke candidates to fill our Central District.”

“Hm?”

“If they are willing to follow our example and attempt the same themselves, I do not mind giving them aid and advice. But if they scoff and say that archduke candidates are above the work of priests, I will never give them aid again.”

Wilfried nodded in agreement.

“What do we know of Ahrensbach?” I continued. “I must admit, I do not know much myself since Aub Ehrenfest instructed me not to engage with them.”

“We have not been proactively gathering information on them either, for fear of earning the aub’s ire,” an apprentice scholar replied. I asked them to rectify that and then looked back at Wilfried.

“For now, stay firmly on guard against Ahrensbach. No matter how friendly or inviting Detlinde may seem, do not be swayed. I expect the attendants you bring to keep a close eye on matters as well.”

Wilfried’s retainers were all aware of the incident that had occurred during the hunting tournament two years prior, so they knew he was no longer guaranteed to become the next archduke. The fact they were still serving him despite all that was proof of their loyalty. “We shall protect him,” they swore, which elicited a subtle smile from their charge.

“Lady Rozemyne...” Roderick began, his voice quavering but his expression brimming with resolve. “Why are you so on guard against Ahrensbach?”

All eyes immediately fell on him. Wilfried and my retainers looked as though they couldn’t quite believe why he was asking such a question this late in the

game, but the other children of the former Veronica faction were giving nods of agreement. Perhaps emboldened by their supportive gestures, Roderick clenched a shaking fist.

“Ahrensbach is a greater duchy, and is their first wife not Lady Georgine, the older sister of Aub Ehrenfest? I do not understand why you view them as enemies. Should we not instead form a friendly relationship with them, just as you, Lord Wilfried, and Lady Charlotte are all close with each other? My father says that he wishes to make a brighter future for Ehrenfest by forging an alliance with Ahrensbach...”

Once his small outburst was over, Roderick hung his head. To my knowledge, he hadn’t understood what he was doing when he participated in guiding Wilfried to the Ivory Tower, and he was distanced from Wilfried shortly after. The adults had probably manipulated him to their own ends, but laynobles and mednobles had very little ground to stand on when wrapped up with powerful people, and that kind of misstep stained one’s reputation for life. Roderick had made such an unforgivable mistake the year after his baptism.

At the very least, I want everyone in the dormitory to be on the same team, but it looks like that won’t be easy.

I could guess that some of the children here had been instructed to feed information back to their parents to help them get closer with Ahrensbach. I needed to explain myself; these students wouldn’t agree with me unless they knew some of the background circumstances at play.

“Roderick, you may not know this since it happened before your baptism, but a noble from Ahrensbach once attempted to kidnap me while I was being raised in the temple, simply because I was a blue shrine maiden with an abundance of mana. Then, when I was attacked and poisoned during the winter of two years ago, the enemy was receiving aid from the personal soldiers of that same Ahrensbach noble.”

The younger children balked, having likewise been completely unaware of these developments.

“Lady Rozemyne... I was told that Viscount Joisontak was responsible for kidnapping Lady Charlotte, but I had no idea you were put through so much as

well...”

“Furthermore, the noble who poisoned me was not the same noble who was executed for kidnapping Charlotte. I can say that for certain, having dealt with them both, meaning the other culprit is still at large. Given the circumstances, are you comfortable saying that this other noble has no connections to Ahrensbach whatsoever? Do you not think it is reasonable for those of us who were attacked to stay on guard, considering there is still such a considerable threat out there?”

“It is reasonable,” Roderick conceded. Those who had nodded in agreement with him just moments ago had now gone pale, so it was clear they really hadn’t been given enough information to make these judgments for themselves.

“I too would like to forge a strong alliance with Ahrensbach, as it borders a great ocean, but a series of unfortunate events has left Aub Ehrenfest guarded against them. It is hard to imagine our two duchies being on friendly terms at any point in the near future.”

My explanation seemed to be enough for the children of the former Veronica faction, who were all sadly hanging their heads.

“There are many things that one cannot understand without seeing the greater picture,” I continued. “For this reason, Roderick, I advise you to hone your knowledge as an apprentice scholar by gathering information from a variety of sources. You are lucky to have so many reliable seniors here in the Royal Academy.”

At those words, Roderick shot his head up and looked around, as if seeing his classmates for the very first time.

“Once you have gathered information from various duchies, think hard and decide for yourself whether allying with Ahrensbach would work in our favor, or whether other duchies have more to offer us,” I concluded.

“I will,” Roderick said, looking much less uneasy than before. The other children of the former Veronica faction were all nodding in silent agreement.

I called an end to the meeting and everyone started to disperse. Just as I was

about to head upstairs, however, Wilfried stopped me and asked to speak privately in a small side room. Thinking about it, “small” maybe wasn’t the right word, since it was sizable enough to fit all of our retainers.

“You’re being too soft, Rozemyne. You need to keep the students from the former Veronica faction better under control,” Wilfried said.

“I am well aware of my softness; I receive such reminders quite often. However, I am set on giving them a chance to redeem themselves, just as you were given a chance to apologize and grow, Wilfried.”

My sharp response caused not just Wilfried, but also his retainers to falter. I took this opportunity to further emphasize my point.

“What is unusual about a newly baptized child blindly following their parents’ orders? They are guilty of the same sin as you, Wilfried. Can you not understand how they feel, having yourself committed crimes without realizing what you were doing?”

“I—”

“You do, surely. Or have you already forgotten what happened two years ago? Perhaps it is ancient history to you now, but not to me. It is fresh in my mind, and I can clearly recall both your frustrated expression and your words of apology.”

Wilfried said nothing in response. He merely hung his head, admitting defeat.

“You are correct that we should not trust those of the former Veronica faction so easily, but their parents have little influence here in the Royal Academy. Should we not use this opportunity to hear them out and allow them to develop their own opinions, thereby improving our relationship bit by bit? The ideal future is not one where we cut off the former Veronica faction in its entirety. As grim as this may sound, I am even willing to cut off the parents but keep the children to ensure that our future faction remains as large as possible.”

Getting the parents on our side would probably be unreasonably difficult; I couldn’t imagine people their age changing their minds so easily. Children, on the other hand, could still be saved.

“Stay on guard while converting them to our side, huh...?” Wilfried asked,

finally managing a response. “Sounds hard.”

“It will be hard, but it is the duty of the future archduke to raise subordinates who will support both him and the duchy. And since I’m not going to be the next archduchess, that means it isn’t my job,” I said flatly, once again making it clear to Wilfried and my retainers that I had no interest in taking up such a position. It was best to be firm about this, especially considering that my retainers had been acting in a rather unruly manner behind my back lately.

“What’s your job, then? What’ll you be if not the archduchess?” Wilfried asked.

“As the High Bishop, my most important job at the moment is to run the temple and perform religious ceremonies. When I come of age, I will leave the temple to be wed, presumably becoming a pawn in some political marriage. Should I for some reason remain in Ehrenfest, I will manage the castle book room for the sake of our next archduke.”

“I don’t think managing the book room will help the archduke much...” Wilfried said with a sigh, causing our retainers to chuckle.

Onward to the Library

I had passed all my classes, meaning I could finally visit the library whenever I wanted. Today was my first opportunity to go there during my free time, and I was so excited that I ended up leaping out of bed before Rihyarda even came to get me. In my fervor, I made a praying pose in the pitch-black darkness of my room and shouted, “It’s library day! Praise be to the gods!” which caused a blessing to shoot up into the air.

I scurried back into bed and pretended to sleep, but little did I know, my attendants had already gathered for a strategy meeting in a nearby room. Rihyarda came in with an exasperated smile and reminded me that fake sleeping would not hide the light of my blessing. She then helped me out of bed while Lieseleta watched on with a warm smile.

“You may begin today in the library, milady, but from tomorrow onward, you’ll need to complete your harspiel practice first,” Rihyarda warned.

After breakfast, I would need to have a meeting with my retainers and see off the senior students. I would then have to work with Wilfried to organize reports regarding the progress of the Better Grades Committee. Harspiel practice would follow, and just like in the temple, I would need to keep practicing until third bell. Leaving before then simply wasn’t an option.

I can’t believe this. I passed all of my classes and I’m still not free. Boo! Boooo!

During breakfast, we selected who would be accompanying me to the library. Cornelius asked everyone their plans for the day as we ate; the likelihood was that my least busy retainers, who had also finished most of their classes, were going to attend me.

Brunhilde had just completed her written lessons and now needed to prepare for the tea party with the music professors, while Lieseleta was studying for her last lesson so that she could accompany me when Schwartz and Weiss were measured. Hartmut had morning classes, as did pretty much all of my apprentice knights.

“Alright. Looks like it’ll be Rihyarda and Philine then. And Leonore is the only guard knight who’s free right now,” Cornelius concluded.

“Cornelius, I am concerned about Lady Rozemyne having only one guard knight. I may need to skip my classes for this, but it is my duty to keep—”

“No, Angelica. Just no. Go to your classes,” Leonore said, interrupting her before turning back to Cornelius. “Lady Rozemyne is so excited about this that she prayed and gave a blessing first thing in the morning. I could not bear to keep her any longer. I will be fine on my own.”

“Yeah, I doubt she’ll wait any longer than she already has,” Cornelius noted. “Oh well. Good luck, Leonore.”

“It’s no trouble. Hardly any students have finished their lessons this early,” she replied with a small smile.

Cornelius nodded, then looked at me with the stern expression of a parent about to let their troublesome child out of sight. “Lady Rozemyne, for the sake of your own safety, please promise me that you’ll go to the library only once morning classes have started. Is that acceptable? If you cannot do that, then from now on you will need to wait for more guard knights to become available.”

I gave him a firm nod. “I promise!”

I’d need to wait for Angelica to pass her classes otherwise, and no way could I survive that!

After seeing everyone off, I waited until second-and-a-half bell, which signaled the start of classes. Rihyarda wouldn’t permit me to leave right away, and so I wiggled impatiently in my chair for what must have been an eternity, staring at the door all the while.

“Okay, I’ve surely waited long enough now,” I eventually said.

We exited the dormitory and stepped into the pure-white hallway outside, which was completely empty now that classes had started. These classes were supposedly being held on the other side of some doors, but no voices leaked through; the only noises were our footsteps and my eager humming.

“Library! Library! Oh, what a place of joyyy! Tralala! Tralalalala!”

“Lady Rozemyne... Did your musician not completely rewrite the lyrics to that song?” Philine asked.

“I don’t see your point,” I replied, shrugging off the comment. The library here in the Royal Academy was much larger than the book room back in Ehrenfest’s castle, and tearing my way through its contents would be quite the welcome challenge—a challenge I could finally begin, since today was my first time actually getting to read in the library. What song would be more appropriate to sing?

Incidentally, my original lyrics contained “Praise be to the gods!” and “Glory be to the gods!” but I had replaced these with “Tralala!” and “Tralalalala!” respectively so that I wouldn’t accidentally give a blessing.

“Actually, Leonore, now that I think about it... most apprentice knights seem to have a proclivity for disliking reading. Does that hold true for you also?”

Leonore, the only one of my guard knights who had been recommended to me based on her intellectual nature, gazed up toward the ceiling. She had the look of a scholar to her, with intelligent blue eyes that carried a thoughtful glimmer. As far as I could tell, it was rare for knights to actually like sitting down with books; the knight course seemed to be more for those who preferred moving around.

“Compared to you, Lady Rozemyne, I could hardly call myself much of a book lover, but I appreciate reading more than most knights.”

“In that case, will you read over the documents I find and teach them to the others? I intend to search the library for books on feybeasts, as well as study resources written on pre-civil war tactics and strategies. Our notes from Ferdinand and Eckhart have led me to believe that modern classes on tactics and strategies are less substantial than they used to be. I want to find reading material on ditter and analyses on feybeast weaknesses in the hope that they will prove useful to the apprentice knights.”

“There is no need for you to go through such trouble, Lady Rozemyne. I can do that myself another day,” Leonore said, but this was something I actively wanted to do. I wanted to feel like a librarian, even if only for a little while.

“Think nothing of it, Leonore. It is the duty of a librarian—rather, the duty of a

library committee member—to search the shelves for books," I replied, proudly puffing out my chest.

Leonore, along with everyone else, was gazing at me in confusion. "Lady Rozemyne... What is a library committee?"

"An organization of students that assists the librarians of a school," I explained, but their stares remained just as uncertain. It was another reminder that Japanese school culture was not universal in the slightest.

Philine placed a hand on her cheek. "So they are like the apprentice scholars who work in the castle?" she asked, tilting her head in thought.

"More or less. I intend to take two courses in my third year so that I can become a librarian, meaning I am going to be both an archduke candidate *and* an apprentice scholar," I said, puffing out my chest again. Everyone winced in unison at my sudden declaration.

"I wish I could say that is too much for you to handle, but..." Rihyarda trailed off, so Philine finished the sentence with a difficult smile.

"It is hard to call anything impossible when one understands the unmatchable fervor Lady Rozemyne has for the library."

"Truly. Considering that she actually managed to lead all the first-years to pass their classes on the first day, I'm not certain what I should say here..." Leonore admitted, giving Philine—one of the first-years in question—a sympathetic smile.

"Ferdinand himself advised me to take both courses, so there is no cause for concern," I assured them. "I shall pass them both!"

"Milady's here."

"Milady. Welcome."

Upon entering the library's reading room, Schwartz and Weiss came out from behind the work counter, their ears wobbling slightly as they walked. Their voices alerted Solange, who poked her head out from the office with wide eyes.

"Oh my! Lady Rozemyne?!" she exclaimed.

“Professor Solange. Schwartz. Weiss. Good morning to you all.”

Schwartz and Weiss closed their eyes upon reaching me, telling me they had worked hard and that they wanted praise. I stroked their foreheads, pouring some mana into their feystones while Solange also started making her way over.

“Good morning to you too, Lady Rozemyne. Were you not forbidden from coming here until after you passed all your classes?” she asked.

“I finished them all just yesterday. I worked my hardest for the sake of the library and its books,” I explained proudly. Solange gave me a disbelieving stare before looking over at Rihyarda and Philine for confirmation. When they nodded, she cooed in admiration.

“To think you would pass even your practical lessons so quickly... I am stunned by your excellent academic performance. Perhaps it was only natural that you would have the qualities necessary to become the master of Schwartz and Weiss.”

The fact that classes were currently being held meant there was nobody else in the library, so I could read at my leisure. I gazed around the reading room with a broad grin on my face until my eyes rested on the wide staircase to my left. “I’ve been looking forward to seeing the second floor ever since my first visit...”

“We’ll take you.”

“Second floor, milady.”

Happy to have work to do, Schwartz and Weiss began leading the way, their cute little heads bobbing from side to side. The stairs were made of the same ivory material as the rest of the building and were wide enough that five adults could climb them side by side.

“How many books are there in the library?” I asked.

“If you include the old documents moved to the storage area for preservation, I would say about thirty to forty thousand,” Solange answered. Schwartz and Weiss bobbed their heads a little more eagerly, seeming to be nodding.

“Most on first floor. Like twenty thousand.”

“Because classes. Everyone reads them.”

“Yes, as they say, the majority of our books are stored on the first floor as study resources,” Solange explained. “The documents for each subject are preserved, and as Schwartz said, there are about twenty thousand in total.”

Among those twenty thousand, one could find anything from simple wooden boards to books that were actually bound and made with parchment. The bound ones were written by individuals and then given to the library, and they often covered several different subjects.

“How do you sort the books that aren’t limited to a single subject?” I asked.

“The same way we sort all our other books...” Solange replied. “We record who they were written by and then put them with the rest. Though it is somewhat rare for such skilled students to give their books to the library.”

“It must be hard to categorize them in any other way... And it must cause even more problems when one person keeps a book checked out for a long time,” I mused.

“Whoever borrowed it first has all the authority,” Solange replied with a smile. “There are never enough books and carrels once final exams draw near. If possible, I would divide up the books and organize them better, but I simply haven’t found an opportunity.”

“I’m going to read them all anyway, so would you like me to organize them according to their subject in the process?”

“Oh my, Lady Rozemyne... Is that truly your intention? That will be quite the endeavor.” Solange was still regarding me with a smile, but in a way that made it clear she wasn’t taking my claim very seriously. It was the expression of an old grandma nodding along to her granddaughter’s ridiculous dreams, but I was more serious than I had ever been.

My shoes clinked against the ivory steps until, soon enough, we reached the top. The sight before me was so glorious that I let out a breathless sigh. The second floor was similar to the first in that there were rows of pillars and windows, but while the first floor had carrels and desks between the pillars, the

second floor had pairs of sizable bookcases standing back-to-back. Attached to each bookcase was a writing desk, positioned in such a way that they received more than enough light.

The bookshelves had three layers, such that an average adult could reach one layer while standing up, another while seated, and the third while reaching down beneath the desk. The books themselves were chained to the shelves.

"Oh, my stars and garters! It's a (chained library)!" I exclaimed.

"What was that, Lady Rozemyne...? I didn't quite catch it."

"Oh, nothing important. I was simply so moved that I tripped over my tongue."

The temple's book room had similarly chained books. There, the reading desks were slanted, and there were few enough books that they were chained directly to the desk so that they could be opened and read at will. Here on the second floor, however, there were so many books that they had to be chained to shelves instead. The sheer quantity of reading materials almost moved me to tears.

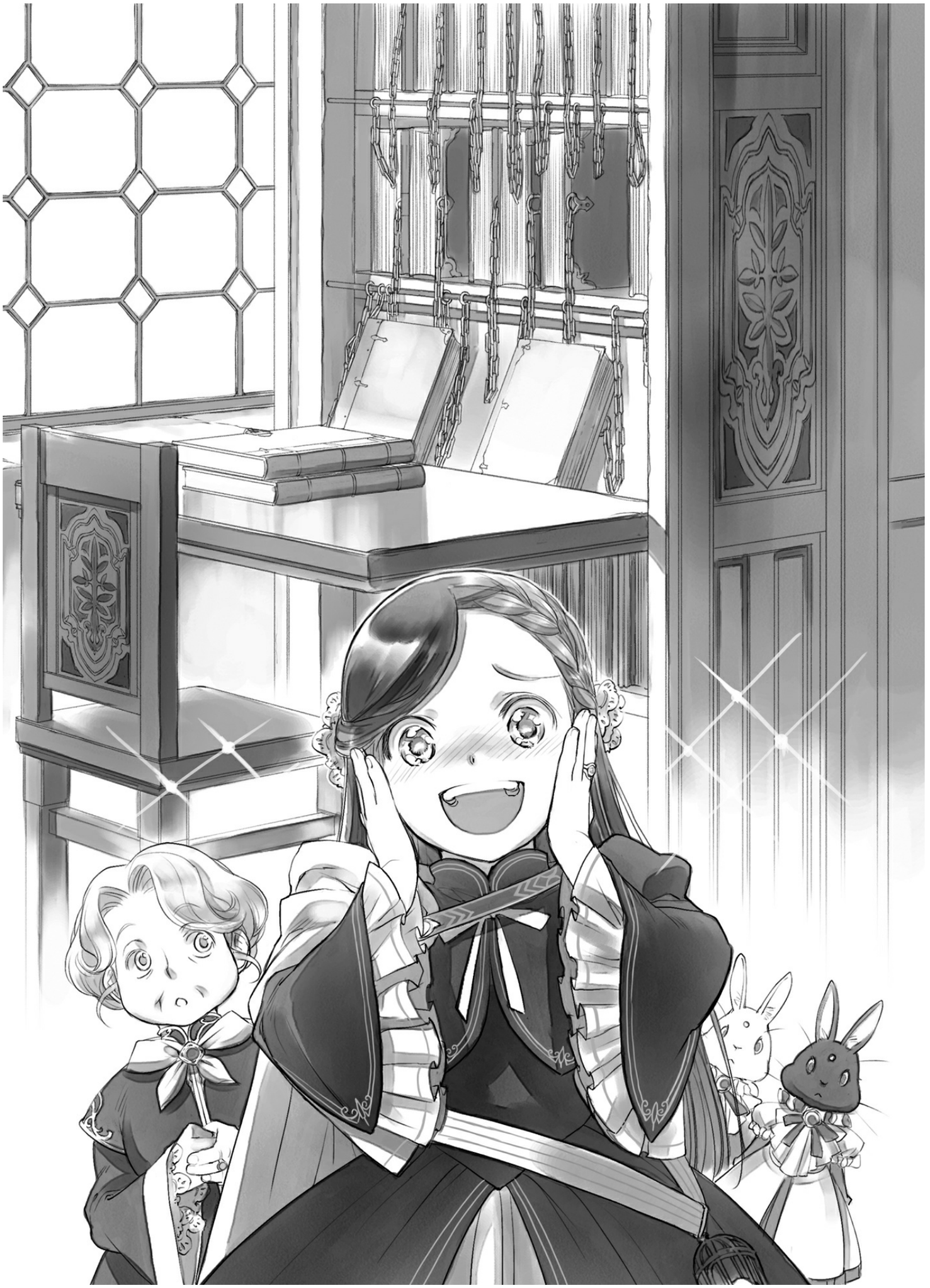
Yes! Yes!!! Forget traveling to another world; it feels like I've traveled back in time!

The books stacked on the shelves had leather covers and were secured to their chains with metal plating and rivets. Had they been positioned vertically as one would normally have expected, the metal would scrape against the leather covers of the neighboring books, thereby ruining them. For this reason, the books were usually kept in neat piles so that they could be carefully lifted off of each other instead. This stacking method was also apparently used to prevent the parchment from swelling—something that happened when it absorbed too much moisture. Leather belts were attached to the books to help prevent this as well.

I knew all this trivia from before, but this is my first time actually seeing it in action! This is so fun that I could dance! Maybe I should...?

There was no doubt in my mind that, once the Library Committee was established, I would get to share the troubles of past librarians and ponder the

future of the library just as I had always dreamed of doing while reading books about it.



Once there are more books, there'll be more chains on the bookshelves! People will fight for reading desks in the sun! And when several people want the same book, they'll fight over that too!

At the moment, it was easiest to read on the desks located at the east and south portions of the library, but picking up and moving the chained books just wasn't an option. If one wanted to read in a bright environment, they would need to time their visit in accordance with the movement of the sun. Due to the limited developments in printing technology, however, pretty much none of the books here had duplicate copies.

"Do people ever butt heads when they both want to read the same book?" I asked, trembling with excitement. But Solange casually shook her head.

"There is no fighting here. Status decides all, and if two students are of the same status, then the person from the higher-ranked duchy gets priority."

Come again?!

That wasn't good. I had mostly ignored the duchy rankings, only bothering with the whole Better Grades Committee thing because Sylvester had asked me to, and it was a bit annoying to have people looking down on me. Now that I'd found out they had an impact on who was granted access to books and reading desks, however, they were a far more serious concern.

"I must do whatever I can to raise Ehrenfest's ranking!" I said. But just as I was steeling my resolve to involve the entire Ehrenfest Dormitory in my righteous quest, Rihyarda rested a hand on my shoulder.

"Please calm down, milady. Few students are going to be prioritized over an archduke candidate, and you will find that most candidates and archnobles read in their rooms. You will almost certainly not experience any such conflicts."

"Oh, I see..."

My enthusiasm disappeared as quickly as it had come into existence. Still, I couldn't help but feel it would be wise to raise Ehrenfest's position in the Academy rankings, if only in case of an emergency of some kind.

While my eyes had immediately been drawn to the chained books, once I

actually looked around at the second floor, I saw about a thousand proper books in total stacked on the shelves-cum-desks positioned across the walls. At the center of the room were bookshelves with boards, bookshelves with scrolls, and even broader bookcases holding barrel-looking things that contained more scrolls. There were also several reading stands designed for scrolls, as well as sideboards for placing one's ink and pens.

All in all, the second floor looked somewhat chaotic compared to the more organized first floor. Solange gave us a more detailed explanation as we walked.

"This is where a portion of the research findings made by professors of the past are stored. There are scrolls and boards, in addition to books from older generations," she said. Most research was conducted in private, and few professors wanted to publicize their findings, so the library usually only received the documents that were deemed useless after the professor who had written them passed away.

Over the years, more and more research was being recorded on scrolls, apparently due to professors being too apathetic to turn their findings into proper books; doing so required time and money that they didn't much care to spend. The end result was fewer and fewer books being added to the library's collection. When I thought about it, I could certainly see Hirschur being the kind of person to write her findings on a scroll in a stream of consciousness, then roll it up for safekeeping.

Scrolls are easier to make than books, but harder to actually read.

The lack of conventional pages meant that searching for certain sections of text was more of an ordeal, and they took forever to roll back up once you were done reading them. They were entirely unlike books, which were easy to flip through and could simply be snapped shut.

"I do my best to bind the research praised by royalty into books, but..."

"You have a limited budget," I said, finishing the sentence for her. "Oh, Professor Solange! What's that statue? I don't believe I've seen it in the temple before."

Solange followed my finger with her eyes, then broke into a smile when she saw the ivory statue nestled between two bookshelves. It portrayed a goddess

cradling a book that was made of gold and adorned with feystones.

“That is a statue of Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom, cradling the Grutrissheit. It is thanks to her blessings that the transcribed books of students gather here in the library,” she explained.

As it turned out, the library in the royal palace had a similar statue as well. There wasn’t one in the Ehrenfest castle book room, so I wondered whether it would be wise for me to prioritize adding one and praying every day for more books to come.

“Which book will you start with, Lady Rozemyne?” Solange asked.

“Excellent question. I think I will start with the books on the first floor. There are many there that cover similar topics, so categorizing and organizing them shouldn’t pose any problems.”

“Categorizing and organizing them?” Solange repeated, blinking in surprise.

I nodded. “Yes. I am thinking of organizing them according to subject, grade, the year they were written, and so on in order to make finding what one needs easier. There are some subjects that changed greatly after the civil war, so organizing them according to pre-civil war and post-civil war might be prudent as well. You are fine with me doing this, yes?”

“Certainly, but...”

My intention was to record all of the books in the library as I read them, then I would think about how to organize them properly.

Aah. But if my goal is to organize them, then I’ll need stickers of some kind...

I wanted to place stickers on the spines of the books while organizing them. Hide glue was an option, but as it was organic, there was a good chance the stickers would grow moldy or rot over time. These books deserved much better than that.

I’ll ask Ferdinand what he knows when I get back.

I decided at that moment that I would have stickers made by next year so that I could organize the books according to the Rozemyne Decimal System.

“Erm, Lady Rozemyne... I understand that you are burning with passion to

organize the library, but I cannot have an archduke candidate doing that manner of work. If you would advise me on your planned organization methods, I will take them into consideration," Solange offered, but I wanted to organize them on my own terms. It wasn't something I could put in somebody else's hands so easily; I just needed permission so that I could do what I wanted, for my own sake.

"No, no. I wish to establish a library committee and fulfill my duty as a committee member. Please allow me to do the organization work."

Schwartz tugged on one of my sleeves. "Library committee? Explain."

"Milady? I'm confused," Weiss added, tugging on the other.

"A library committee is made up of students who would aid the Royal Academy's librarians with their work. I wish to help Professor Solange," I said.

"Library committee?"

"Milady, working?"

Solange paled the moment she realized what I was suggesting. Her eyes opened wide, and she firmly shook her head. "Goodness, that would be simply unacceptable. Am I not a mednoble, and you an archduke candidate? I could never ask you to work beneath me."

"I plan to take the scholar course to become a librarian myself one day, so please consider me both an archduke candidate and a lowly apprentice scholar."

"Be that as it may... I still could never dare ask so much from you," Solange said, shaking her head even more firmly than before.

Rihyarda sighed and stepped forward, shooting me a sharp glance. "Milady, please do not trouble Professor Solange with your selfish desires."

"My apologies... Do forgive me, Professor Solange." Not once had it occurred to me that my proposition to help out as a member of the future Library Committee would get so obstinately rejected. I had expected Solange to appreciate the assistance, since she was struggling to run the library alone, but that evidently wasn't the case.

“I am satisfied with just the kindness of your offer, Lady Rozemyne.”

I mean, it’s less kindness and more an obsessive compulsion to mark the library as my territory, but okay...

With my pleas rejected, I yielded and settled for just reading the books. Schwartz and Weiss prepared carrels for Philine and me, while Rihyarda went to fetch ink and paper. The sheer amount of reading material made the experience very worthwhile indeed.

The first floor of the library contained mostly documents covering classwork. While many of the books went over similar content, the varying skill and the handwriting of those who had produced them meant that no two were completely alike. The more detailed, oft-used books even had notes and scribblings in the margins that made them especially useful.

As I was reading and putting together my register of reading materials, a multicolored glow, like light through a stained-glass window, shone on the pages of my book. It seemed that lunchtime was near.

“Let us return for lunch, milady,” Rihyarda said.

I gave back the key to the carrel I was sitting in, after which Schwartz and Weiss cleaned up the books for us. I stroked their feystones and filled them with a little bit more mana.

“I will return in the afternoon,” I said, saying my farewells to Solange before leaving for the dormitory.

Now, what can I do to get my library committee made?

Solange had turned me down, but I hadn’t yet given up on my dreams of creating a library committee. I pondered my next move, only to be interrupted as Rihyarda gave a heavy sigh.

“Milady, you truly are behind when it comes to proper socializing.”

“In what way...?”

“An archduke candidate should never have made such a blunt request in the middle of the library like that.”

How should I have asked, then...?

As Rihyarda muttered that this was something I should have learned during the two years I was asleep, I desperately tried to figure out a more noble-like method of making requests. After thinking things over for a bit, I clapped my hands together.

“Rihyarda, shall we invite Lady Solange to a tea party?”

“Where is all this coming from...?” she asked, blinking with surprise.

I chuckled, realizing that this was pretty much just a repeat of the Italian restaurant’s test run. While I hadn’t really been planning it at the time, everyone had thought I was intentionally buttering up Ferdinand and Sylvester with a lavish feast before making my request. Ferdinand had praised me for finally learning some proper noble methodology, and now I just needed to put that experience to use.

I’ll hold a tea party, lavish Professor Solange with delicious sweets, and get my library committee made no matter what!

I Want to Found the Library Committee

As soon as I got back to the dormitory, I conveyed to my attendants that I wanted to welcome Solange with a tea party and get the Library Committee made. I would naturally need them all to be active for the occasion.

“I now call on your aid in these desperate times,” I intoned.

“Lady Rozemyne, we will of course assist you in holding a tea party, but...” Lieseleta trailed off, making troubled eye contact with Brunhilde before looking over at Rihyarda.

Lieseleta and Brunhilde would normally say “As you wish” and then immediately get to work ironing out the details, but here they were hesitating. I also looked at Rihyarda, hoping to glean the reason behind their unusual behavior, and she returned my gaze with an expression so stern that I reflexively straightened my back. She was exuding the exact same aura as Benno and Ferdinand normally did right before scolding me; I could sense the thunder she was about to unleash.

“What is your reason for lavishing Professor Solange?” Rihyarda asked. “Up until now, you have kept to yourself and done your best not to make any waves. Do you truly intend to use your authority to pressure someone of a lower status to conform to your desires? What will Professor Solange think when someone she has just met makes such a forceful approach?”

For my part, I didn’t quite see how lavishing someone with food connected to using my authority to force their hand.

“Is it common for nobles to use lavish parties to force other nobles to obey their demands? Ferdinand and Sylvester once told me it was very noble-like of me to make a request after treating them to food. Am I misunderstanding something here?”

Rihyarda squeezed her eyes shut before letting out a long sigh. “Not entirely. But in this case... Yes. You misunderstand.”

“My apologies,” I replied, shaking my head. “I am by no means an expert here.”

Rihyarda looked away from me, instead turning her gaze to Lieseleta and Brunhilde. “It is easy to forget, since Lady Rozemyne has wisdom far beyond her years and is receiving such excellent grades here in the Royal Academy, but she is deathly lacking in social experience due to the two years she spent asleep. My boy, Ferdinand, has also given her a lopsided education due to his arcane priorities. You two now understand that well, correct?”

Lieseleta and Brunhilde both nodded.

“Lady Rozemyne,” Rihyarda continued, “you mentioned that you once treated Lord Ferdinand and Lord Sylvester to a feast before making a request, which they then accepted, correct?”

“The meal wasn’t intended to curry their favor, but that is what happened, yes.”

My commoner upbringing really clashed with noble common sense there...

“In that case, you are not mistaken to think that the feast was a means to earn their favor before you made your request. Such behavior is acceptable because you are of a lower status than them, meaning they could refuse you regardless of whether you lavished them or not. If you were to do this with Professor Solange, however, you would in essence be giving her an order that she cannot refuse. This is because, in this situation, you are the one with higher status.”

In essence, a lower-status individual treating their superiors was equivalent to a harmless show of gratitude, while a higher-status individual doing the same to a subordinate was akin to saying: *“I’m above you, yet I’m still pouring this much time and money into securing your favor. You know what’ll happen if you refuse, right?”* In other words, it was a blatant threat—a demand for immediate oral confirmation, which could then be used against the lower-status individual should they later attempt to back out.

“I wasn’t thinking about it like that at all...” I murmured.

In my mind, the sweets were nothing more than a means to casually butter up

Solange, while the tea party itself would serve as an ideal opportunity for me to mention just how much I could aid her if she accepted my help. I certainly hadn't intended to use my authority to threaten her.

"I am more than aware that you have an intense love for books and wish only to involve yourself with the library, but Professor Solange and those around her do not yet understand you well enough," Rihyarda explained. "Your suggestion to host a tea party is especially troubling for Lieseleta and Brunhilde, because while they recognize your intentions and are obliged to make the necessary arrangements as attendants, they also realize they are setting up something that Professor Solange is unable to escape from."

I swallowed hard at those words. On the one hand, I was relieved that Rihyarda had stopped me before I charged ahead with my idea, but on the other, something didn't seem quite right.

"Actually, Rihyarda... I was told that professors are higher in status than students in the Royal Academy. Does that not apply to Professor Solange also?" I asked. Assuming this was indeed the case, making a request during a tea party would surely be acceptable.

Rather than Rihyarda, however, it was Lieseleta and Brunhilde who shook their heads at me. "You are correct only on paper, Lady Rozemyne," Brunhilde noted.

"Indeed," Lieseleta continued. "That rule is primarily applicable to the professors who teach classes. Professors from other duchies cannot hope to know the political minutiae of all their students and vice versa, so in the classroom, the positions of professor and student primarily dictate interactions."

"However, milady... Recall what Professor Solange once said," Rihyarda added. "Did she not mention that many students completely ignore her requests for them to return their books? Do you think she could flatly refuse the appeal of an archduke candidate who is openly lavishing her, simply due to her position as a professor?"

Now that she mentioned it, I could remember Solange looking extremely troubled while refusing my help. Rihyarda had probably noticed that and came

to stop me.

“In other words, I was troubling Professor Solange so much that you found it necessary to intervene, Rihyarda?”

“It is not normally the place of attendants to make themselves known in public settings, but you were causing her so much grief that I wanted to pick you up and leave at once,” she replied, making it more than apparent she had been sweating bullets from the library all the way to the dormitory. “Even with all that aside, you should not be telling Professor Solange that you wish to help her in the first place.”

“Wait, really? Why not?”

“It only complicates matters when the person attempting to help is of a higher status. Try to see the situation through her eyes. Suppose that Lord Sylvester offered to help you with your work, then forced you to use methods completely unlike those you are used to and started wandering around without ever giving you a moment to yourself. How would that make you feel, milady?”

I could already picture Sylvester strolling around the temple and the workshop, complaining about how we ran things and ordering us to do this or that. It was so stress-inducing that I barely contained my scream.

Please, never come again!

“Ngh... I understand your point. As far as Professor Solange is concerned, I must be the biggest pest in the world.”

“I didn’t mean anything quite that extreme, but yes, you are to Professor Solange as Lord Sylvester is to you,” Rihyarda observed. I suddenly realized that I had just indirectly called Sylvester the biggest pest in the world, and so I hurriedly attempted to correct myself.

“Er, actually... Not at all,” I said, shaking my head. “I am endlessly grateful to my dear adoptive father. I would never consider him a burden for helping me, nor would I wish he would stick to doing his own work. Ohohoho...”

Rihyarda chuckled along with me, commenting that Professor Solange would have needed to hide her true feelings in a similar manner. I started to feel a little depressed about how troublesome I was clearly being.

“The perspective you must consider is as follows, milady: what would Lord Sylvester need to do for you to feel comfortable trusting him with work?” Rihyarda asked, but she was pretty much begging the question there. I would never, ever feel comfortable trusting Sylvester with any of my work. Ever.

“...I give up on the Library Committee,” I conceded.

“Now, now. There is no need to get so glum. How about you try replacing Lord Sylvester with my boy Ferdinand in this scenario? He is already helping you with your High Bishop work, correct? He also gives you advice and is likely altering various processes to make things easier for you. What are your thoughts on that?”

I imagined Ferdinand lurking around the workshop and giving the gray priests instructions. Thinking about it, a lot had changed over the past two years, what with Justus managing the workshop at times and the Gutenbergs being sent to Haldenzel. Not once had I considered that a bother though.

“I’d actually be more concerned *without* Ferdinand helping me...”

“Precisely. It is not necessarily the case that the help of a higher-status individual is unwelcome. The key here is to think about the wants and needs of the person you wish to assist, but at the moment, milady, you are thinking only of yourself,” Rihyarda chided. “Do you not think Professor Solange would be more willing to welcome your help if you made it clear your actions are going to benefit her?”

“That makes sense,” I replied with a nod. “In that case, I won’t follow through with my tea party idea.”

“No, Lady Rozemyne. The tea party is important. I ultimately think holding one is a wise move,” Rihyarda said, causing me to blink in surprise.

Brunhilde smiled. “In the end, it is easier to accept help from someone you know than someone you do not. Tea parties exist precisely to bridge the gaps between individuals. You must first start by socializing so that you may deepen your bonds with others.”

“Wait, Brunhilde. Think about this for a moment,” Lieseleta interjected, raising a hand and glancing between the two of us. “I agree that holding a tea

party is a good way to strengthen one's connections, but will this not burden Professor Solange? She is currently the only person running the library. What will happen while she is gone?"

Lieseleta's astute observation turned my enthusiasm from a burning flame into mere embers. Despite all the information I had found out about Solange over the past few weeks, it seemed that nothing had stuck with me.

Talk about being self-centered...

How could I have forgotten that Solange was running the library alone? It was hard to imagine she could entrust things to Schwartz and Weiss while she attended a tea party. My selfish desires might have resulted in the library being shut down for an entire day.

"Sorry..." I said, hanging my head. "I didn't even come close to thinking all this through enough."

"If you understand that, milady, then start figuring out what to do next. Also—and this is the most important part—make sure to discuss any ideas you have with us first. You should tell us what you want done, why you want it done, and what your thoughts on the matter are." Rihyarda got on her knees so that her eyes were just slightly below mine, took my hands in hers, then lowered her head. "It is the job of an attendant to understand the will of whomever they serve without any words being exchanged. However, we have not yet served you for long enough, so we cannot understand you on our own."

Even after being adopted by the archduke, I had spent most of my time in the temple and then gotten knocked unconscious for two whole years. Rihyarda was my head attendant and the first one to be introduced to me in the castle, but even then, I really hadn't spent much time with her.

"My boy Ferdinand warned me about your health, gave me advice, and afforded me some potions, but I still know far too little to serve you as I should."

"I think you have been the best attendant I could ask for, Rihyarda," I said. In my eyes, she arranged everything I needed without fail and ensured that things were running smoothly, but she slowly shook her head.

“All the work I’ve done for you is that of a third-rate attendant, milady.”

I stared at Rihyarda blankly, failing to understand what she meant. If she was third-rate, then did first-rate attendants even exist? Her dark-brown eyes seemed to be even more serious than usual.

“Making life comfortable is the bare minimum expected of an attendant. Third-rates do not implicitly understand the will of those they serve, and so they act only when ordered; second-rates immediately understand the will of those they serve when ordered, but not before; and first-rates act with precision before even receiving an order.”

“And by those standards, you consider yourself third-rate...?” I asked. It took me by complete surprise how strict Rihyarda was when it came to attendant work, but both Lieseleta and Brunhilde were watching on with hard expressions; they both agreed with and respected her.

“I have served many lords and ladies over my many years. First Lady Gretchen, then Lady Gabriele... I served Lady Veronica for a time, then Lord Karstedt at Lord Bonifatius’s request. After that came Lady Georgine, then Lord Sylvester...” Rihyarda began. I didn’t even recognize the first couple of names she listed off, which went to show just how long she had spent in service. “I am confident that I was able to perform first-rate work back when I came of age, but for now, at least, that confidence has left me. You were raised in the temple, milady, and your thoughts and actions differ inconceivably from the young noble ladies I have served and come to know in the past.”

It seemed that even when she used all her knowledge and experience to try to predict my intentions, I would still take her by surprise, catching her off guard with thoughts that she simply could not fathom even after asking me directly.

“The way you prioritize books over your health, your approach to improving the students’ grades, your understanding of tea parties... There are countless situations where I simply cannot grasp your thoughts and intentions,” Rihyarda continued. “Of all the people I have served over the years, none have posed more of a challenge than you.”

From her perspective, I was extremely unbalanced and near impossible to

predict. There were times when I effortlessly led those around me and easily accomplished feats that most adults struggled with, but also times when I was ignorant of things even baptized children knew about, sending all those around me into a panic.

"I cannot predict the gaps in your knowledge, nor can I guess what you lack or need to improve on. With you, I am in a constant state of grasping at straws," Rihyarda finally concluded.

Not once had it occurred to me that I was placing such a heavy burden on Rihyarda. I thought back to everything I had done since coming to the Royal Academy and cringed as a newfound sense of guilt washed over me. Most people I had been with up until now understood my obsession with books; Lutz and Ferdinand even knew that I had lived another life before becoming Myne, so they would stop me the moment I started doing something blatantly abnormal. Here, however, there was nobody to correct my misunderstandings. That much should have been obvious, but it had taken me until now to realize. The blood drained from my face. I knew from experience that my authority could make even minor misunderstandings blow up into serious incidents.

"What I am most afraid of, milady, is following your orders to the letter, and then bringing about a result entirely unlike what you wanted. Attendants exist to support those they serve, but if we cannot understand your intentions, we cannot do good work. So please, milady—communicate with us."

Now that Rihyarda mentioned it, there weren't even any people here to nag me about providing regular reports. It dawned on me that I was slacking on the whole "keeping everyone informed" side of things.

"In that case, Rihyarda, I wish to establish a library committee and serve as a committee member. What should I do to accomplish this? Please tell me how an archduke candidate should make such a request."

Rihyarda looked at me with a difficult frown. "First, milady, you must make it perfectly clear what you want from Professor Solange. What is this 'Library Committee'? What purpose does it serve, and what do you want to do as a member? Keep in mind that when it comes to running the library, she already has enough help from Schwartz and Weiss."

During the winter, the library was largely tasked with registering new students, lending out books, and managing the carrels. The work done during the other seasons did not require the help of an archduke candidate.

“Milady, I recall your discussion with Professor Solange. Do you simply want to help with the menial work, or do you hope to do something more? You spoke much about organizing the books, but your explanation was quite vague.”

I fell into thought. Trying to be sneaky or hide my intentions under layers of euphemisms probably wouldn’t work; I simply needed to say what was on my mind.

“I greatly dislike how the books in the library are arranged almost at random, without a clear organizational structure in place. I want to introduce the Rozemyne Decimal System and organize all the books in accordance with it, thereby making reading materials easier to find, then recover any lost books.”

“...That is much more than providing simple assistance, milady. What you are proposing amounts to outright running the library,” Rihyarda said, quite clearly exasperated.

Lieseleta and Brunhilde, meanwhile, were looking at me with conflicted expressions exuding both weariness and worry. “Lady Rozemyne,” they said, “I imagine Professor Solange was quite troubled to hear you framing such large-scale reforms as basic help.”

In an uncharacteristic development, it seemed I had tried to do something very brash and thoughtless.

“Will reforming the library really be that much of a struggle?” I asked. “I was hoping it would be a fairly simple process once I got to know Professor Solange better.”

Back in my Urano days, my work helping out as a library committee member and my general friendliness with the librarians had resulted in me receiving quite favorable treatment. The books I wanted to get were almost always prioritized, and newly returned ones were always put to one side before going back on the shelves in case I wanted to take them out myself. All in all, it had been a grand old time, but it didn’t seem like the library here was going to be quite so generous.

“If you wish to be so deeply involved in managing the library, milady, it would be much easier for Professor Solange if you made the request as Schwartz and Weiss’s master. Have her negotiate with the Sovereignty for permission to grant you special authority. If she succeeds, you can manage things however you like without it being an issue.”

Rihyarda had phrased it quite casually, but I got the feeling that managing the library with permission from Solange’s superiors was a lot different from founding a library committee.

“Milady, are you thinking that you would rather work with Professor Solange as friendly associates, rather than under orders from the Sovereignty?” Rihyarda asked.

“Yes. I want to be able to have discussions with her about what is best for the library when it comes to organizing books, and about the ideal method to implement. I wouldn’t want to simply order her around,” I responded.

Rihyarda gave an understanding nod. “In that case, you should convey your thoughts to her and convince her of your case, such that she will be compelled to request from the Sovereignty permission to implement the reforms. And to that end, socializing is going to be necessary.”

First came talking to Solange about running the library. I clenched my fists with determination and announced: “From this point on, I will visit the library every day to make Professor Solange feel more comfortable about having a tea party with me!”

“Milady, the tea party will never happen if you only ever read books... Please divert at least a little of your attention to other matters.”

It seemed that the road to becoming an official member of the Royal Academy’s Library Committee was still a long way off. For now, I supposed that I would need to make do with everything being unofficial.

Preparing a Tea Party for Solange

After getting what was more or less a scolding from Rihyarda, I finished lunch and started heading back to the library for the afternoon, thinking over what I had been told on the way. I needed to contain myself, which meant not forcefully closing the distance between Solange and me, speaking only of what Rihyarda had permitted me to mention, and studying noble conversations and socializing based on Rihyarda's criticisms of my performance once I arrived back at my room.

There were only two questions I was permitted to ask Solange: whether she had time to participate in tea parties, and whether she had participated in tea parties with anyone else. That was my limit for the day.

"Milady's back," Schwartz said when I arrived at the library.

"Milady. Welcome," Weiss added.

"I've come to continue my reading from before; may I have the key to one of the carrels?" I asked. I then greeted Solange, who was in the work area by the counter. "Good afternoon, Professor Solange. I do apologize for troubling you with my selfishness earlier. My excitement for the library caused me to forget myself."

"Think nothing of it, Lady Rozemyne. I understand just how invested you are in this humble library," she replied, glancing up from her writing with a smile and the kindly eyes of a grandmother looking at her grandchild. I sighed in relief, glad that she had accepted my apology.

"Erm, Professor Solange... You manage the library yourself, correct? Do you ever have the time to attend or hold tea parties?"

"I do have more time than usual at the moment, given how few students are using the library. However, things will get increasingly busier as some finish their classes early and begin to socialize, while others prepare for upcoming final exams. During that time, I will neither participate in nor hold tea parties. I

could have done so in the past when there were multiple librarians, but...” She trailed off, then looked at Schwartz and Weiss with a smile. “Thanks to Schwartz and Weiss helping me now, my work has become much easier, and I am not nearly so lonely. I owe you much, Lady Rozemyne.”

Whew. It’s nice to hear I’m not just being a pain in the neck.

It was true that my awakening of Schwartz and Weiss had been purely coincidental, and I wasn’t actually being all that useful myself, but still—I had been worried about making a bad impression, so knowing that she thought at least a little well of me was a massive comfort.

“If you are able, I would very much appreciate an opportunity to speak with you leisurely,” I said. “Are you available at any point? There is much I wish to discuss, such as Schwartz and Weiss, as well as the books I am making...”

“The books you are *making*...?” Solange asked, her blue eyes widening in surprise. “You truly do love books, don’t you, Lady Rozemyne?”

I nodded with a grin. “I am in the middle of compiling the knight stories sung by minstrels and the stories that Ehrenfest mothers tell their children.”

To be more accurate, I had already finished one knight book, which was now being both printed and sold, but I was still collecting more stories, so my statement wasn’t entirely untrue. In any case, I was mentioning it to catch her interest as a Royal Academy librarian, and to hopefully encourage her to come to my tea party.

“Oh my. You love stories as well as study resources? We have a few stories here as well, though there aren’t all that many, I must admit. Shall I take you to them?”

“Please do. I would love to read them.”

Solange led me past all the first-floor bookcases filled with study resources and over to a corner where some old, rarely used documents were being kept. On the way there, she mentioned that not many students read storybooks, since they only cared about studying for finals or getting money by transcribing resources for archnobles. Royal Academy lectures were held during the winter, and since most students had their schedules packed with socializing and their

school curriculum, few had the time to read for fun.

“Here are the storybooks,” Solange said when we reached the corner. “This is also where you will find transcribed copies of the bible.”

“I thank you ever so much,” I replied. “Schwartz, please go and open a carrel for Philine and me.”

I stepped inside our carrel the moment it was ready, with Rihyarda following close behind, carrying a number of storybooks. I read through them and organized their names and summaries into my ever-growing register.

Most knight stories followed the same beats of the protagonist going on an adventure to defeat a feybeast or multiple feybeasts, but that wasn’t to say these were the only ones available. Some focused on the friendship between knights, while others featured the trials and tribulations of a lesser duchy’s Knight’s Order upon earning the ire of the Knight’s Order of a greater duchy. All in all, there was a good variety of content.

The only problem with these books was that the language they used was considerably old. This made the stories hard to read, and some had evidently been transcribed so hastily that making out even the letters was near enough impossible.

“Lady Rozemyne, I am finding this quite difficult... I think I need to study more,” Philine said. She was summarizing the storybooks the same as I was, but her slower reading speed was stalling her progress.

I personally wasn’t struggling with the knight stories too much, since I was used to reading the much more elaborate and euphemism-ridden bible, but the same couldn’t be said for Philine. She was more accustomed to studying with the simple text of my rewritten picture bibles, and she didn’t yet have much experience with older books.

“You will need to find a book on older language that you can study, Philine. If you cannot read old documents, you will struggle with scholarly work in the future.”

“Indeed. I will do my best.”

And so, we spent the rest of the afternoon reading knight stories in the

library. I decided to borrow one to take back to the dormitory with me; if possible, I wanted to use it as inspiration to write a story myself.

"Weiss, I wish to borrow this book."

"Okay. Deposit, milady. Three large golds."

I was well aware that books were expensive, but the cost of the deposit still caught me by surprise. Only in retrospect did I truly appreciate how incredible the libraries back on Earth were for lending out books for free. I wanted to pray in honor of the mighty Ranganathan, who had established free lending with his five laws of library science.

I need to spread printing far and wide before free lending can even be considered a pipe dream... Why must the road ahead of me be so long?!

The next day, Cornelius and Hartmut were going to join us in the library. They were surprised to learn that it contained any knight stories to begin with; apparently they had thought it stored only study resources and research notes.

"It makes sense for them to store more than just study resources," I said. "The book room in Ehrenfest's castle contains documents related to the work done in the castle, so would it not be logical for the library to contain documents related to other aspects of the Royal Academy? It only seems like the library contains nothing but study resources because those kinds of documents are the most popular and dominate the first floor for the sake of convenience. I mean, the storybooks I mentioned were tucked away in a corner."

Hartmut noted that he wanted to see documents on past Interduchy Tournaments, if possible. When he explained that they might contain records of previous battles and the feybeasts fought during them, both Cornelius's and Leonore's eyes started to sparkle.

By the time harspiel practice came to an end at third bell, a good number of students were interested in going to the library. I decided to bring them all with me.

"Milady. Good morning."

“Schwartz. Weiss. Good morning to you both.”

“You love books?” the two shumils asked in unison.

“I do. My love for them is why I shall try to visit the library every day from now on. I also wish to return the book that I borrowed yesterday. I hope you’ll both continue to work your hardest,” I said, stroking their feystones.

The students who were seeing Schwartz and Weiss for the first time made surprised noises. “So it’s true that the library has two large shumils now...” one muttered.

“How adorable! I cannot wait to put my all into designing clothes for them,” added another.

I paid no mind to their whispers as I asked Rihyarda to handle the book return process with Schwartz, and then said good morning to Solange.

“And good morning to you as well, Lady Rozemyne. You have brought many others with you today, I see.”

“They’re in search of particular documents, and they were hoping that you could tell them where those might be.”

Solange tilted her head curiously, at which point Hartmut stepped forward with his request. “Do you by chance have any documents about old ditter games played during the Interduchy Tournaments? I would appreciate the opportunity to read about which duchies fought which feybeasts, or anything along those lines.”

“We do not have records of all previous ditter games, but there are some strategy books on treasure-stealing ditter among our older documents,” Solange replied. “We also have records of the winners of past Interduchy Tournaments, as well as a list of each year’s honor students.”

Hartmut and Cornelius exchanged glances, their eyes gleaming with interest. In terms of strategy, the notes by Eckhart and Ferdinand would suffice; what they really wanted were the documents about the past winners of the Interduchy Tournament.

“We would like to see the documents regarding the Interduchy Tournament,”

I said. “Can you tell us where you store them?”

“You always want the strangest resources, Lady Rozemyne. Most students care only about study resources for their classes or books that are profitable to transcribe,” Solange said with a smile as she turned around. “The reading room prioritizes the study documents that are most regularly used. Archival records and the like are stored in separate rooms. Please wait just a moment.”

Solange disappeared for a short while, and then she returned with delicately bound documents not from the bookshelves in the reading room, but from a storage room. They were clearly being treated differently, and so I looked up at her with a curious expression.

“Could it be that we are forbidden from borrowing these?”

“Correct. These materials may not leave the library; after all, we would be in quite the pickle if someone refused to return them. You are free to read them here as you like, however.”

I went to take the thick, heavy documents from Solange with a few words of gratitude, but Hartmut immediately stepped forward from beside me and took them in my stead. “Lady Rozemyne, I shall transcribe these documents. There is information not related to ditter that I wish to know as well. May I borrow Philine to help me?”

“Certainly. I shall trust the transcription to you, Hartmut.”

It would take Hartmut too long to transcribe them all on his own, so he had smartly decided to spread out the workload. He looked around the library, then gave Solange a bemused frown. “Professor Solange, I was hoping for a larger table so that we can transcribe next to each other. Do you have anything other than the carrels?”

“You could always line up desks on the second floor, but as those are documents that cannot be borrowed, I would rather they stay as close to me as possible. All the new students have now been registered, so you are welcome to use the registration table in my office.”

“Thank you,” Hartmut replied. “We will work as fast as we can.”

With that, Solange guided Hartmut, Philine, and two other apprentice

scholars into her office. Hartmut immediately got to work telling everyone their roles as he skimmed the documents, while Philine and the others hurriedly prepared the ink and paper I had provided them with. Solange was fondly eyeing the four when she returned to the counter, such that it took her a moment to realize the rest of us were still waiting here. When she did realize, however, an amused smile crept onto her face.

"Is there anything else I can help with?" she asked.

Leonore made eye contact with Cornelius, then stepped forward. "*Ahem.* Do you have any documents about feybeasts? I am particularly interested in those detailing how to hunt the feybeasts in this area, what the strengths and weaknesses of various species are, and so on."

"If you are looking for something more in-depth than the basic resources, there is a scroll on the second floor that covers those topics. It is quite old, but detailed. A professor who specialized in making magic tools once wrote it based on his experiences collecting materials," Solange explained as she gingerly began climbing the stairs, still wearing the same amused smile. "I must admit, this feels quite strange. It is oh-so rare for anyone but professors to ask for documents from the second floor."

The professors apparently used students who were likely to remain in the Royal Academy as assistant professors to carry documents, and such students were often instructed to read all the resources from one section or another. Solange mentioned that she could tell which students would remain in the Academy after graduation based on what they did in the library.

"Most students who come here seek nothing more than the study resources," Solange explained. "There is a tendency in the Royal Academy for socializing and diplomacy to be prioritized over studying."

Studying could always be done in one's home duchy, but only in the Royal Academy did the opportunity arise to interact with those from other duchies. As a result, it only made sense that socializing would take priority, regardless of the students' own interests. It seemed this hadn't always been the case, though. In the past, students would receive their schtappes only at graduation, which had resulted in many being a lot more enthusiastic about their studies.

“Still, to think that so many are capable of coming to the library despite it being not even a month since this term began,” Solange mused. “Ehrenfest certainly has its fair share of excellent students.”

Upon reaching the second floor, Solange made a beeline for the bookshelf she wanted. The scrolls stored on it looked a lot like the wrapped-up bundles of cloth one would see in art stores, especially considering that the tiny wooden tags hanging from them looked a lot like price tags. Rather than listing any prices, however, these tags were used to identify the scrolls.

One by one, Solange checked the tags of all the scrolls on one shelf. She then pulled out one scroll in particular, which she promptly set up on a reading desk for us. Scrolls naturally couldn’t be transcribed while they were rolled up, so they needed to be kept open on a reading stand.

“Everything is so easy to understand. It even has art,” I observed. The scroll written by a past professor covered not just feybeasts, but feyplants as well. It also contained various illustrations, though these weren’t particularly “good” in any sense of the word. I wanted to read it myself when my retainers were done.

The scroll was spread out enough to show two feybeast descriptions at a time, allowing them to be transcribed simultaneously. As the apprentice knights were the ones who needed information on feybeasts, it was one such apprentice knight who began preparing the ink and paper.

“Leonore, could you copy this picture for us? You’ve got much better drawing skills than me,” Cornelius said, trying to unload the work onto her.

“I do not mind. Is drawing something that you struggle with, Cornelius?” Leonore asked, intently staring up at him.

“It’s definitely not a specialty of mine,” Cornelius replied, averting his gaze out of embarrassment. The smile that Leonore gave him in turn was so warm and gentle that it made something click in my head.

Wait... Could it be? Is Leonore in love with Cornelius?

As soon as I realized that, everything fell into place. I remembered Leonore asking about Angelica’s marriage prospects and smacked a fist against my palm.

Ah, I see! Leonore doesn’t want to be a fine lady like Mother; she wants to be

Cornelius's first wife!

I silently cheered Leonore on. Maybe it was a bit strange of me to say, but the family Bonifatius had created took too much influence from its male members. Their style was very much brawn over brains, so I wanted nothing more than for Leonore to wed into the family as a much-needed injection of intellectual thought.

In any case, everyone had found the resources they needed, so I returned to the first floor to continue reading stories.

When the afternoon came around, Philine left for her practical lessons. Traugott also took Leonore's place as my guard. He and Cornelius fought a little over who would do the transcribing work, with Cornelius ultimately taking up the mantle. I stealthily glanced at his drawings out of curiosity, but they weren't bad at all. Assuming he hadn't just been acting humble before, my art skills really were in a disastrous state.

"Lady Rozemyne, I would also like to have a leisurely talk at some point soon," Solange said as I was on my way out of the library. It took me a second to realize what she was talking about, since my mind was so focused on books, but then it hit me—after all, we had discussed the matter just the day before.

"If you cannot leave the library, Professor Solange, could we perhaps hold the tea party in your office? If you want, I could bring the sweets and tea to lessen the burden on you."

"That would be exceptionally helpful, but are you truly willing to do such a thing...?" Solange asked with a surprised expression. Following her gaze made it clear this was more a question for Rihyarda, since she would need to make the necessary preparations.

Rihyarda gave a brisk nod. "It is no trouble at all. Milady has told us all the details, and this is her way of making things more manageable for you. We are more than willing to prioritize your needs above all else."

"You are busy managing the library alone, are you not?" I asked. "I thought about what I could do to make a tea party more feasible for you and decided on bringing the sweets and tea myself, as though I am preparing for a picnic."

Rihyarda had been surprised when I first suggested the idea, since it apparently wasn't normal to provide the sweets and tea while borrowing a room from someone else. Still, when I explained to her that it was a solution I had thought up to lessen the burden on Solange, she ultimately understood.

"I am aware of how busy you are, and my intention is only to reduce the sudden workload a tea party might impose upon you. If my approach is too forward, however..."

"No, no. You are being quite helpful, Lady Rozemyne," Solange replied. "I do believe I might take you up on your offer. The library gets more visitors on Earthdays, since that is when everyone has the day off, so if possible, I would prefer to hold the tea party the day before on a Fruitday."

"Of course. I am looking forward to it."

In accordance with Solange's needs, the tea party was scheduled for the morning two days from now, and it was going to be held in her office. I told my attendants the plan the moment I returned to the dormitory, which caused Brunhilde to gawk in surprise. She had never expected a tea party with Solange to be scheduled even before the tea party with the music professors.

"It was necessary to accommodate Professor Solange," I explained. "She wanted to hold it as soon as possible, since more students than usual are visiting the library to see Schwartz and Weiss."

Rihyarda had told me that, in order to get the Library Committee established, I would need to exhibit friendliness rather than overwhelming enthusiasm during the tea party. While we were there, it was also important that we arrange a date on which to measure Schwartz and Weiss, plus I wanted to bring the rough drafts of my manuscripts and speak to Solange about her hometown and the stories she knew.

"I suppose it might be a good thing after all to hold the tea party with Professor Solange first..." Brunhilde mused. Her words caught me by surprise.

"Professor Solange mentioned that she does not interact with the other professors much due to being stuck in the library all winter," I said. "Will it not be a fruitless tea party for you, Brunhilde, considering that you want to push trends and fashions?"

“She may be stuck in the library for the duration of winter, but she will socialize during the other seasons like everyone else, no? Also recall that she was aware of our first-years having exceptional grades; she must be socializing to some degree. This tea party will allow us to see how a Sovereign noble reacts to our methods, as well as what they think about our clothes, hairpins, and sweets before the larger tea party with many more professors.”

To Brunhilde, this was the perfect opportunity to gauge how Sovereign nobles would react to Ehrenfest culture, which would in turn allow her to better prepare for the tea party with the music professors.

“I simply wanted to discuss books, stories, and the clothes that are going to be made for Schwartz and Weiss,” I said, but this only made Brunhilde reproachfully narrow her eyes. She glanced at Rihyarda, then bent forward slightly so that we were at eye level. Following our discussion from before, my attendants had elected to more immediately inform me of my mistakes when it came to socializing.

“Lady Rozemyne, you will want to prepare as many topics in advance as possible. If you do not prepare and focus on other topics, you are likely to speak of nothing but books for the entire tea party. Please do not forget to discuss other matters as well. Professor Solange is a mednoble, so she will have no choice but to listen to you with a smile no matter what you say. It is for this reason that you must take great, great care to observe how the people you are speaking to react.”

Lieseleta gave a worried nod of agreement. “Lord Wilfried often mentions that you lose sight of everything else when books are involved. Let us work together so that you can become an archduke candidate who never forgets to be graceful and who always acts wisely. Do not worry—you guided my sister to graduation, so nothing is beyond your ability. I believe in you,” she said, her eyes now full of such intense hope and trust that it honestly hurt to see. I would need to plan well so that I didn’t mess up at the tea party—if not for my sake, then for hers.

My First Tea Party at the Royal Academy

It was the day of my tea party with Solange. I cleaned my hair with rinsham and then had Brunhilde braid it up for me. My clothes and hairstyle were in accordance with the current trends of the Royal Academy, but I also had prominent flower ornaments adorning my hair and chest that would be visible even while I was drinking tea.

Brunhilde and Lieseleta had tried to do their jobs as attendants and gather information on Solange in preparation for the tea party, but nobody in Ehrenfest knew her preferences, nor did any of the apprentice attendants from other duchies. I didn't yet know what sweets she liked, so I was bringing a basic pound cake.

"Nobody knows anything about Professor Solange," Brunhilde said. "It seems true that she has not recently attended any tea parties. I myself never considered her someone to have tea parties with until you guided us to her, Lady Rozemyne. I would have liked to visit the library to discuss matters directly, but I unfortunately did not have the time..."

Lieseleta nodded. "As Brunhilde says, she must have been very lonely spending so much time without anyone to socialize with. Hopefully your tea party does something to assuage that. We intend to provide pound cakes with cream, honey, rutreb jam, and rumtopf as available toppings, so that she may choose whatever she prefers. We can also use this to ever so slowly determine her preferences for ourselves."

Our plan was to provide a variety of options so that we could then make pound cakes specifically suited to her tastes during any subsequent meetings. As for tea, we had chosen blends that nicely paired with each particular topping.

"It is important that you ask Professor Solange what her preferences are during the tea party," Rihyarda said, going on to list a number of other things I would need to bring up as well. "Do you have the topics memorized, milady?

You cannot use your diptych today, so an apprentice scholar is going to accompany you to record the conversation."

Philine was standing with us. This would be her first job as a scribe, so she was looking much more nervous than I was. Hartmut had been teaching and helping us during our practice sessions, but it was possible we might one day go somewhere no men were allowed to go. Most tea parties didn't require a scholar standing by and taking notes on the conversation, but we were going to be scheduling the measuring today. Plus, I was intending to ask Solange for her opinion on my collection of knight stories.

...Well, that was the explanation we had given, at least. The actual reason was to give Philine some experience working as a scholar and so that she could write down Solange's reactions to things as per Brunhilde's request.

"I imagine this will not be easy for you, Philine, but I trust that you will do a good job," I said.

"This is my first time holding such expensive paper. My hands won't stop shaking..." Philine replied. She had been given some of the failed workshop paper that I normally used for notes. It was completely unsellable, so repurposing it as such was much less wasteful, but she clearly wasn't considering that.

"Paper and ink are necessary for writing things down, so I suppose you will just need to get used to it. I could lend you my diptych, but those not used to writing in wax will struggle to keep their notes an appropriate size and identify which words to prioritize."

Diptychs needed to be small enough to be carried in one hand, meaning there wasn't much writing space on them. For that reason, it was better for Philine to get used to writing on paper.

"This is an incredibly important job," Brunhilde said. "The notes you record at this tea party will inform how we spread our trends in the future, and how we find ways to catch the attention of those from other duchies."

"Oh, don't frighten her like that, Brunhilde." I couldn't help but giggle as I saw Philine hugging her paper, tears forming in her eyes. Everyone who was tense about the tea party loosened up a little at that.

All of my retainers were accompanying me to this tea party. Rosina was coming as well, but as the tea party was being held in an office connected to the reading room, it would be up to Solange whether she actually performed. Either way, it would be rude of me not to bring a musician at all.

“Am I forgetting anything...?”

I did one final check before leaving the dorm. Rihyarda had with her a cart, on which were all the sweets and tea we needed for the tea party. Brunhilde looked me over to make sure my clothes were neat and my hairpin properly positioned, while Philine made sure she had all her writing materials. Hartmut and my guard knights had seen us go through this process several times already, so they just glanced at each other and shrugged.

Wilfried, seeing me pointing around as I checked everything over, shook his head. “If Rihyarda says you’re ready, that means you’re ready. I’m less worried about you forgetting something and more worried about whether you can socialize properly,” he said, his concern clear in his voice. Rihyarda had spoken to him about my key weaknesses—namely that I tended to lose sight of everything when books got involved, and that I was missing two years of important life experience—so he was even more worried than I was about my two upcoming tea parties.

“Wilfried, everything is going to be fine. We have already created a list of non-book-related topics for me to discuss.”

“I think you’ve got it in you to succeed, but don’t let your guard down.”

“I won’t. Rihyarda’s going to be with me, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

The sweets and tea were prepared, and come third bell, we were on our way.

“Welcome, Lady Rozemyne,” said Solange.

“Thank you ever so much for inviting me, Professor Solange. I have very much been looking forward to this.”

We were guided into Solange’s office, where the table and chairs used for registering students were arranged in a manner appropriate for a tea party. There was Solange and a woman who seemed to be her attendant.

As Solange and I greeted each other, our attendants swiftly began making the necessary preparations for the tea party. Hartmut was telling Philine where she should put the ink and how she should take notes. Meanwhile, my guard knights divided themselves into two groups, with one guarding my back and the other guarding the door.

“Milady’s here.”

“No reading books now?”

Schwartz and Weiss entered the office from the work space in the library. They looked at me with wide, golden eyes and tilted their heads.

“Indeed. I am having a tea party with Professor Solange right now. We are going to be deciding some things about your new clothes, so keep up the good work in the meantime,” I replied.

“We will.”

“New clothes.”

I gave the two shumils some more mana, and then they returned to the reading room, their heads bobbing as they walked. Solange watched with a smile.

“Erm, Professor Solange... If you are concerned about the reading room, I would not mind you leaving the door open.”

“Oh no, Lady Rozemyne. There are few visitors today, and I am more concerned about the aroma of sweets and tea drifting into the reading room,” Solange replied with a chuckle before closing the door behind Schwartz and Weiss.

“What shall we do about music? Do you think the noise may leak into the reading room?” I asked. Ivory buildings tended to excel at dampening sound, but the door itself was made of wood, which was hardly soundproof.

Solange looked at Rosina and her harspiel and fell into thought for a moment. Then, her blue eyes crinkled in amusement. “She’s going to play those unique songs you composed yourself, yes? I would certainly like to hear one. I do not get to participate in other tea parties, so it has been a long time since I have felt

such excitement," she said with breathless restraint.

I glanced over at Rosina. "In that case, my musician shall perform for you a song that I was planning to debut at my tea party with the music professors. It is dedicated to Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom, so I believe it would be perfect for the first performance to be here in the library."

Solange widened her eyes. "Oh? Would that truly be acceptable?" she asked, cautiously looking at my retainers.

I nodded with a smile; it wasn't like I had promised the music professors anything. *My original lyrics were in praise of the library, after all.*

My retainers, who knew that I had thought up the lyrics in my excitement to visit the library, all struggled to remain stone-faced as they tried to contain their laughter.

"In that case, please do play the song after we have had our tea," Solange said.

Rosina sat down in a chair that Solange's attendant had prepared for her, and then readied her harspiel such that she could play the second she was instructed to. Rihyarda began pouring the tea, while Brunhilde laid out the pound cakes and decorative toppings on plates.

Solange looked at the pound cake before her, and then at all the supplements, blinking in surprise all the while. "What is this, Lady Rozemyne?" she asked. "I have never seen sweets quite like this."

As expected, pound cake was considered an unusual sweet in the Sovereignty. I could already see Brunhilde's amber eyes sparkling as she analyzed Solange's reaction with keen interest.

"It is pound cake, a sweet that has quite recently become popular in Ehrenfest. You may find it is a little different from Sovereign sweets, but I hope you like it nonetheless," I explained. I could imagine that someone used to the excessively sugary foods served in the Sovereignty might find pound cakes somewhat bland. "You can add cream and jam of your choosing. We have plain cream, rutreb jam, honey, and rumtopf."

"Rumtopf...? Is that another Ehrenfest specialty?"

“The fruits are steeped in wine to preserve them. You may have something similar, but in Ehrenfest, we call it rumtopf.”

Solange looked over the finely chopped rumtopf and repeatedly nodded to herself. As it turned out, in her home duchy, they would steep highly acidic fruits like lemons in honey to preserve them for the winter.

“I would suggest taking a bite of your pound cake without any toppings first, and then pairing it with whatever takes your fancy,” I said, taking a bite of my sweet and sipping my tea.

Solange sipped her tea; then she brought a small piece of pound cake to her mouth. I watched on with interest, highly curious to see what a Sovereign noble would think. She swallowed, and then a smile touched her lips.

“The light flavor is quite nice,” she said, “and the mouthfeel is pleasant.”

So much butter was used in the making of a pound cake that nothing about it could really be described as “light,” but the clumps of sugar the Sovereignty dared to call sweets were evidently so intense that even pound cake seemed to have a subtle taste in comparison. I was aware that the Sovereignty also served tea that was rather bitter. I, on the other hand, was serving a softer kind that paired nicely with our sweets.

“You may add jam and honey if you feel the pound cake is not sweet enough,” I said, taking a demonstrative bite with each of the prepared toppings before piling cream and rumtopf onto the rest of my pound cake.

“Ah, so I can experiment with different combinations... I am excited to see what effect they have on the taste,” Solange said as her attendant started adding a touch of cream and jam to her pound cake. She took a bite with each, then broke into a smile. “I feel as though I could eat this forever,” she concluded. The sweets served in the Sovereignty were all exquisitely crafted, but even Sovereign nobles could only handle one or two in a single sitting.

Solange ultimately took a liking to honey and jam the most; as expected, the plain pound cake just wasn’t sweet enough for her. Perhaps she and the other Sovereign nobles would rather the pound cake be made with honey in the first place, rather than them having to add it on themselves.

“You always wear hair ornaments of that unique style, Lady Rozemyne. Have they also become popular in Ehrenfest?” Solange asked. “I haven’t seen any other Ehrenfest students wearing them before now.”

“My personal seamstress makes them,” I replied, gently touching my hairpin. “I first debuted them to the Ehrenfest nobility during my baptism, and ornamental flowers are now used to decorate not just one’s hair, but one’s clothes as well. This trend has not yet spread too far though, as they are quite difficult to make.”

Hairpins were essentially being monopolized by the Gilberta Company. They had been in production for several years now, but it wasn’t particularly accurate to say they were widespread.

“They look very cute,” Solange said. “There are many girls even here in the Royal Academy who are curious about them.”

I had brought all of my hairpins with me to the Royal Academy and was wearing a different one each day to demonstrate all the available colors. It seemed that my becoming a walking advertisement had paid off.

“My adoptive father has said that if our hairpins attract enough interest, they will be mentioned at the next Archduke Conference.”

The adults didn’t want us kids making significant business deals on our own, so as students, the most we could do was market our products. We would show them off at tea parties, hand out a few for free, and emphasize their good points. The actual buying and selling would be settled among the archdukes at the Archduke Conference.

“I am certain they will be deemed worthy of discussion,” Solange said. “Never before have I seen three-dimensional flowers on a hair ornament, and your glossy hair will only draw more attention to them. Might I ask what your secret is?”

“I use something called rinsham when washing my hair in the bath. It has spread like wildfire among the women, and I am hoping it can become a primary export for Ehrenfest, which currently lacks any exports of note. Aub Ehrenfest is striving to create a variety of original products to reinvent our duchy, and I wish to do my part as an archduke candidate by helping spread

them to the best of my ability.”

The conversation settled down as we ate the sweets, and I used that opportunity to have Rosina play harspiel. A high note resounded through the air as she plucked the first string. Then, she began playing the song dedicated to Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom, singing in her graceful voice.

Alas, my library anthem has turned into a religious hymn...

Rosina had completely erased the word “library” from the lyrics after I entrusted them to her, but Solange listened quite happily nonetheless, her blue eyes brimming with tears as she enjoyed the song dedicated more or less to the patron deity of libraries.

“Splendid, Lady Rozemyne. There are hardly any songs dedicated to Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom. I am moved beyond words,” Solange said.

“I am glad you are enjoying it, Professor Solange.”

There were a great number of songs dedicated to the King and Queen gods, the Eternal Five, and the Goddess of Art. There were also many dedicated to the God of War, used to boost the soldiers’ morale, but there were very few dedicated to the Goddess of Wisdom.

Once the performance was over, it was time to discuss the measuring for Schwartz and Weiss’s new clothes. I wanted to get through this part quickly.

“Professor Solange, might I ask what time is most convenient for us to come measure Schwartz and Weiss? The sooner, the better, I imagine?”

“If you were to prioritize my circumstances, sooner would indeed be better... More and more girls have been visiting the library to see them. It truly takes me back to how things used to be...” Solange said with a warm smile. It seemed that the two shumils had also been popular attractions in the library long ago.

“Where would you like us to measure them? I was thinking we could do it here in the office, if taking them outside the library is not ideal.”

“Schwartz and Weiss have many expensive feystones, and they are equipped with a number of protective charms to prevent any potential thievery,” Solange replied. “It would be best to measure them in an environment you can manage

carefully as their master.”

Just the thought of taking Schwartz and Weiss out of the library made me nervous, but if Solange was saying it was my responsibility as their master to take them into my care, I would have to accept that she was correct.

“So I can bring them to the Ehrenfest Dormitory?”

“Yes, of course. You are their master now. Please create appropriate new clothes for them both.”

“The truth is, I have several potential designs already. Which do you think would suit them most? At the moment, I intend to dress Schwartz in male clothes and Weiss in female clothes. It is already decided that they will wear flower ornaments just like me, as well as committee armbands, but...”

I glanced at Lieseleta, who promptly produced the organized collection of clothing designs. Solange accepted them, and then broke into a smile as she looked them over. “These are all very cute. I simply ask that you take care not to give them too many accessories,” she said.

Back when Solange had just started working as a librarian, the first change of clothes Schwartz and Weiss received from their new master had apparently included hats, brooches, and accessories galore. They were even given billowing sleeves to match those of their master, simply because it made them look especially cute.

“However, their hats would fall off whenever they were trying to work, and their billowy sleeves would knock the large golds being handed over as deposits onto the floor,” Solange explained. “It was quite the mess.”

“Oh my!”

“Even so, Schwartz and Weiss made no attempt to remove those accessories. We arranged for new outfits to be made as soon as possible, but until they were finished, we had a librarian dedicated solely to watching over them. Ever since that incident, it has been customary to have their sleeves go only to their elbows.”

My perspective on Schwartz and Weiss’s new clothes changed completely once I realized they also needed to be practical. The designs we had were very

much focused on cuteness, meaning they would probably need to be adjusted.

“Speaking of which, Professor Hirschur mentioned that Schwartz and Weiss can only be touched by their master. Will it be safe for others to measure them?”

“They can be touched by those who have their master’s permission. That said, be careful whom you give that permission to; those who can touch Schwartz and Weiss can also steal or damage them.”

“I see. In that case, I will take the utmost care.”

Especially knowing what Professor Hirschur is like...

We decided on taking Schwartz and Weiss to be measured three days from now, and with that settled, I changed the subject by taking out my collection of knight stories.

“I am in the process of collecting the stories told by minstrels, by mothers to their children, and so on. You have seen many books, Professor Solange, and so I would very much love to hear your opinion on this,” I said, handing over the stack of several dozen sheets.

Solange blinked in surprise, and then started to look over the stories. Her expression was serious, though her smile never faltered. “It must have been difficult to gather this many stories. How in the world did you manage it...?”

“I had a lot of assistance. Children are raised on stories, so just asking them to write down what they remember can reap significant rewards.”



I couldn't exactly say that I had baited children into gathering stories for me in exchange for learning materials, so I simply smiled and hoped that she wouldn't dig any deeper.

"Do you think there's a market for stories like these?" I asked.

"Who can say...? They are stories that children would no doubt love, but adults and older students in the Academy might prefer stories of another kind."

"It certainly is time that we start thinking about books for adults. I will discuss this matter with Aub Ehrenfest."

I was currently making picture books with Kamil in mind, but to establish a culture of reading for fun in the Royal Academy, I needed more mature books for the older students. My first thoughts were to evolve the knight stories into more specialized forms, having some with detailed fight scenes based on the feybeast data we had started to accumulate, some with hints on how to successfully play ditter mixed in, and some for girls that focused on romance.

As my mind raced with ideas, Solange finished reading the knight stories and returned the manuscript. I snapped back to reality and accepted it; then I handed it to Lieseleta, who was standing at the ready behind me.

"There certainly are many unique things in Ehrenfest, don't you agree?" Solange commented.

"This is my first time leaving Ehrenfest, so I am not certain what is considered unusual outside our duchy, but if a Sovereign noble such as yourself says there are many strange things, then I suppose there are. What exactly do you consider strange?" I asked, wanting her opinion to help inform how Ehrenfest should market its goods.

Solange looked up at my hair before responding. "The product that makes one's hair glossy, the hair ornaments, the sweets... There are many strange things. But what I am most curious about is the paper your apprentice scholar is writing on. Am I correct to assume it is not regular parchment?"

"Indeed. Parchment is made using animal skin, but not this paper. We are in the process of establishing its production as a major industry within Ehrenfest. What makes it special is that, unlike parchment, it can be mass-produced. My

hope is that everyone knows about it by the end of this term."

I was doing my best to preach the virtues of plant paper, as was the extent of my role. It would then be down to Sylvester to negotiate business contracts during the Archduke Conference. He wanted to know how much resistance we might face, and while we were now informing people of the new plant paper and ink, we were still keeping printing a secret.

"This new paper is cheaper to produce than parchment, but as it must be written on with a special type of ink, it is not remarkably cheap yet."

"Oh? A special type of ink?"

"Yes. The ink used on parchment can be used on our new paper, but for the sake of long-term preservation, the new type is ideal. For simple notes and the like, however, either type will do," I explained, noticing her interest.

"My goodness!" Solange exclaimed, looking at me with wide eyes. "You use paper for notes?!"

"I receive damaged paper from Aub Ehrenfest's workshops, which I then use for a variety of purposes."

Fran, Rihyarda, and the others had also initially been taken aback by the idea, stating that it was a waste, but since I kept using it for notes anyway, they all eventually grew used to it. Honestly, it had been so long since someone had expressed surprise about my plant paper that Solange's reaction caught me off guard.

"Official contracts are still written on parchment, so this new paper is primarily used in place of wooden boards," I said. "You would free up quite a bit of space on the bookshelves if you were to replace the boards with it."

"What a delightful suggestion. The lack of shelf space has always been a big problem for us."

"If you wish, Professor Solange, I could give you a few sheets. Normal ink will last on them for several decades."

I gave Solange a few sheets, which she poked and prodded with great interest. She was more interested in the plant paper than the sweets or my

hairpin, but just as I realized this, fourth bell rang. Solange glanced up from the papers to look at her attendant, who gave a slight nod.

“Yes, Lady Solange. It is time to end the tea party.”

If we didn’t return to the dormitory soon, my retainers would be late for their afternoon classes. The attendants delicately but speedily cleaned up while Solange and I exchanged farewells.

“To think that fourth bell came so quickly... It seems that Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time has woven today’s threads with exceptional speed and grace,” I said. “I regret having to leave so soon, but I must depart.”

“It has been a long time since I enjoyed myself so thoroughly,” Solange replied. “You have my gratitude, Lady Rozemyne.”

“It certainly was a productive tea party. I learned many important things about Schwartz and Weiss today. I imagine it might be a struggle to find the time, but I would very much like to meet with you like this again.”

“I suppose I shall eagerly await next year, when you no doubt finish all your classes early again.”

I was pretty satisfied that Solange had enjoyed her first tea party in quite a long time. My retainers had their own opinions concerning what people would think about Ehrenfest, but we didn’t have the time to talk it all over right now. We hurried back to the dorm, leaving the discussion and detailed reporting for later.

Tea Party with the Music Professors

My plan was to go back to the library in the afternoon, but my retainers wouldn't allow it, since discussing the tea party and planning for the next one was apparently more important. I ultimately relented when they said that if we finished our preparations this afternoon, I could spend all of tomorrow reading to my heart's content.

"It seems that Sovereign nobles are used to sweets made with an abundance of sugar. Perhaps it would be wise for us to provide especially sweet honey pound cake for the music professors," I suggested.

Brunhilde nodded. "In that case, I would recommend pairing it with another kind of tea."

We were holding our little meeting in the dormitory common room with Wilfried, his retainers, and all those who wanted to gather information for their own purposes.

"Professor Solange had some reaction to the rinsham and flower ornaments, but she seemed most interested in the plant paper," I said.

"Plant paper, huh? We can't use that stuff as freely as you do," Wilfried muttered. "We know that we need to be marketing it as a product of our duchy's new industry, but we don't get how to do that."

"I think it should be enough for us to use plant paper when transcribing books in the library. Students from other duchies will notice that we are using a different type of paper. Plus, we know from what Professor Solange said that she is in contact with other professors, so word should spread quickly," Philine said, basing her assumption on the notes she had written.

I added that an important part of our plan was calling it "new paper" rather than "plant paper," partly to avoid revealing the method used to produce it. I also told the others that we shouldn't talk about printing and explained my reasoning behind this decision.

Hartmut took this opportunity to mention several things he had noticed. “It seems that professors doing research have a responsibility to record at least some part of their findings for the library. Many write them on scrolls to avoid the tedious work that bookbinding entails, but if they knew of our new, cheaper paper, they might buy it instead.”

Oh yeah... Professor Solange did mention something like that. Maybe we could sell folders or binders already filled with paper for convenience? Those would surely be a lot easier to record information in than big, clunky books. I took out my diptych and swiftly wrote down my idea for a new product.

“Lady Rozemyne, what are you writing?” Hartmut asked. “I am recording this conversation myself, if you recall...”

“Do not mind me, Hartmut. I am simply writing down ideas for new products.”

“Why are you inventing new products in a meeting about a tea party...?” Wilfried muttered.

“I always carry my diptych with me, because I never know when I’ll have a good idea,” I replied. I needed to note them down then and there or else I would most likely forget them.

“Your diptych certainly does seem convenient...” an apprentice scholar said.

“Would you like me to introduce you to the Plantin Company when we return home? The diptych is simply made from wax poured into a wooden frame, so if you are happy to go without engravings, you can buy them for exceptionally cheap.”

Several other apprentice scholars also leapt at the offer, their interest well and truly caught. Plant paper may have been cheaper than parchment, but it was still expensive enough that it couldn’t be spared for notes and memos.

“Putting aside how we will use the information gained from this tea party to better plan for future tea parties... We settled on a date to measure Schwartz and Weiss, so we will need to inform Professor Hirschur. Rihyarda, please take care of that.”

As Rihyarda left the room to send out an ordonnanz, Brunhilde moved the

discussion back to the upcoming tea party. “The music is going to be a challenge. You will surely be asked many questions about how your songs were composed.”

“Am I really prepared for that...? I only know the practice songs I was instructed to learn. Furthermore, I have barely socialized, so I know little of what music is commonly played.”

“Your musician will know, so that should not be a problem. The true issue is that, from what I have heard, Lady Eglantine will be attending the tea party alongside the professors.”

I tilted my head; the name sounded somewhat familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it. “And who is that...? I assume she’s an archduke candidate from a powerful duchy, but I can’t quite put faces to names yet.”

“Lady Eglantine is indeed an archduke candidate—one from the greater duchy of Klassenberg,” Brunhilde explained. “She is a sixth-year honor student who has been selected to play the role of the Goddess of Light for this year’s dedication whirl. For this and many other reasons, she is often compared to the goddess herself.”

I immediately recalled the girl at dedication whirl practice who had been way better than everyone else. “Ah, she is a skilled whirler, correct? I was moved when I saw her perform during practice.”

I certainly didn’t see her presence as an issue; in fact, I was looking forward to her coming. Just as my mood was starting to rise, however, Hirschur burst into the common room. Her purple eyes were gleaming with anticipation.

“Lady Rozemyne, the date for the measuring has been decided, yes?!”

“It has been scheduled for three days from now to best accommodate Professor Solange.”

“Three days from now... We should go in the morning then, since I’ve got classes to teach in the afternoon,” she said, the sharp glint in her eyes now downright terrifying.

“Just to be clear, Schwartz and Weiss are already drawing much attention, and there is a risk of them being stolen. In order to prevent their theft or

destruction, I will allow only my attendants to touch them."

"I suppose that is reasonable. I'm sure just looking at them will satisfy me enough."

"Guard knights, I ask that you create a tight formation around Schwartz and Weiss on the day and ensure that those from the other duchies do not touch them," I said, shooting Hirschur a deliberate glance. She had moved to the Sovereignty, so that meant she was prohibited from touching them as well.

Cornelius, having understood my intentions at once, casually waved a hand and said, "As you wish."

Once again, Brunhilde was doing my hair and clothes. I was feeling a bit better about the tea party now that I had already experienced one with a Sovereign noble. I wouldn't really need a scholar with me for today, but Philine was coming anyway just to get used to the environment. She would be presenting the sheet music to the music professors, which contained the Mestionora lyrics and was handwritten by Rosina rather than printed.

"Philine, please prepare ink and paper along with the sheet music. My retainers must always carry writing utensils, regardless of the time or place. It would be problematic if you found yourself needing more space than a diptych provides, do you not think?"

Philine nodded. She then started preparing writing utensils with a small smile.

Today we would be bringing pound cake made with honey, which had a much more apparent sweetness than the plain version, coupled with the same toppings we had served during my tea party with Solange.

"Shall we go?" I asked. "There is no need to be so nervous, Rosina."

I could tell that Rosina was deathly afraid. She was covering it up pretty well, but I had known her long enough to recognize the emotion hidden in her slightly stiff expression.

"Even we feel anxious attending tea parties with the professors we see in our classes, Lady Rozemyne, so it is only natural that a musician would feel nervous in this situation," Brunhilde said.

That made sense, especially considering that this was a tea party with the music professors. Their interest in my songs also meant their attention would predominantly be on Rosina, my personal musician. A former gray shrine maiden was going to be performing for professors of the Royal Academy; the pressure must have been intense.

We left at third bell, making our way to the third floor of the attendant building where the music professors had their rooms.

"Where is Professor Hirschur's room, then?"

"Hers is on the third floor of the scholar building. She is supposed to be staying in the Ehrenfest Dormitory, what with her being our supervisor, but her tendency to get absorbed in her research, plus the frequency with which her brewing creates foul smells and disruptive sounds, means she has been staying in a room for assistants since her schoolgirl days," Cornelius explained. "Eckhart told me all about it."

And it seemed that Eckhart had heard about it from Ferdinand. It was probably best for Hirschur to be staying in a specialty building if she was prone to causing that much of a disturbance.

Brunhilde guided us to the room where the tea party was being held. There we found three music professors, Eglantine, and—for some reason—Anastasius.

Nobody told me the prince was going to be here too!

I reflexively turned to look at Brunhilde, whose amber eyes were opened wide in shock. It seemed this was a surprise for her too.

One of the professors noticed our reaction, their eyes awkwardly flitting between Anastasius and me. "Upon hearing that Lady Eglantine would be attending today's tea party, Prince Anastasius requested to join us. We do apologize for the sudden change in plans, Lady Rozemyne, but we pray that you understand."

"Yes, of course. I am honored to be graced with Prince Anastasius's presence."

My face had twitched for a second, but I still deserved an award for not

letting my true feelings slip and shouting, *"Why the heck would he show up at a tea party he wasn't invited to?!"* I would have much preferred there being no royalty here, since this only increased the stakes of any potential missteps.

"Here you are, Lady Rozemyne."

Pauline, my music instructor, gestured for me to sit on a particular chair at the circular table. The seating alternated between students and professors, meaning there was a professor on either side of me. It was honestly a great boon to have some cushioning between the prince and me.

I greeted the prince and the professors before heading to my seat. Eglantine watched me with her bright orange eyes narrowed in a gentle smile. Her wavy golden hair was braided in an elaborate half-up style that made me doubly understand why others were comparing her to the Goddess of Light.

"Lady Rozemyne," Eglantine said. "You greeted me during the fellowship gatherings, but this is our first time properly speaking. I am very much looking forward to your compositions. In fact, I have very much been looking forward to this tea party on the whole." She was a student dedicated to the arts, and it seemed that she had asked to join the tea party upon hearing that I was attending to demonstrate my music.

"I too have wanted to speak on more leisurely terms ever since I saw your dedication whirl, Lady Eglantine."

"You are familiar with Lady Christine, yes? She graduated three years ago, but she was a master of the harspiel. I attended many tea parties with her," she said, intentionally bringing up a name from Ehrenfest for my sake. I naturally couldn't tell her that I had never met Christine in my life.

"As you may know, I tragically spent two years asleep, so I have had very little contact with Christine. My personal musician, however, was once among her favorites. Christine even said she would have taken her into her service had I not already done so myself."

"Oh my. For Lady Christine to have wanted her as a personal musician, she must truly be talented. Perhaps it is just me, but it feels like many talented musicians come from Ehrenfest. May we listen to one of your songs now?"

At Eglantine's encouragement, Rosina went to the chair that was prepared for her and then glanced my way. I returned a smile from my own seat, at which point she took a deep breath and readied her harspiel. Everyone's eyes were now on her.

"I composed these songs myself, but it was Ferdinand and my personal musician Rosina who arranged them for the harspiel," I said. "Rosina, please begin with the song dedicated to Leidenschaft the God of Fire."

"As you wish, Lady Rozemyne."

Eglantine listened to Rosina's playing with rapt attention, as did Anastasius. The professors were similarly watching with great interest.

Yup. My Rosina sure is amazing.

While everyone's eyes were on Rosina, the attendants swiftly began preparing the sweets and tea.

"That was splendid. Rosina certainly is an expert player. I can see why Lady Christine took a liking to her," Eglantine said when the performance came to an end. Rosina gave a bright smile, happy to be showered with praise alongside the one she used to serve. "May we leave the playing today to her? I would like to hear more of these songs."

Anastasius and the professors nodded in agreement. Brunhilde and Rihyarda had told me in advance that their goal here was to have their own musicians learn the new songs by ear. After we had gone, these musicians would try to write out the sheet music from memory.

There was surely a world in which we kept the songs to ourselves to increase their value, but Ehrenfest students were already playing them during practical lessons. Plus, considering that the prince was here, it was best for us to put all our cards on the table in the hope of establishing more lasting connections.

"Rosina, it seems that everyone is enjoying the music and wants to hear more," I said. "I suggest playing the song for the Goddess of Wisdom next."

Rosina gave a natural smile and again readied her harspiel. Playing her first song had made her a lot more comfortable, and soon enough, her high notes were reverberating through the air once more.

“Oh goodness! My apologies, but I’ve neglected the tea,” the host professor said with embarrassment. She took a sip of tea and then bit into one of the sweets before having them distributed among her guests. I took a bite of the pound cake I had brought before recommending it to the others.

“This is pound cake made with honey, and you may enjoy it with any combination of these toppings,” I explained.

“Looks like something of a poverty dish,” Anastasius said curtly upon seeing the pound cake. It certainly didn’t look as fancy as most Sovereign sweets, but I was confident that the taste was much better.

“Oh my!” Eglantine exclaimed. “It may look rustic, but the flavor is quite delicious. Perfectly sweet and pleasant to eat. I very much like it.”

“Rare for you to compliment a sweet like that,” Anastasius said, popping a bite into his mouth and mulling things over. His only reaction was a sniff, but I noticed he was quick to reach for another mouthful; the pound cake was evidently to his liking.

As the tea party continued, it became clear that Anastasius preferred his pound cake with rumtopf piled atop it. “I’m more about this stuff,” he noted. My guess was that the flavor of the wine beat out the sweetness.

In conclusion, Sovereign men will probably like rumtopf pound cake the most.

Rumtopf used plenty of sugar and expensive wine—framing it that way would probably make others a lot more willing to embrace it. The professors liked the honey pound cake as well, commenting that the sweetness was just right.

In Ehrenfest, it was the kids who loved the honey pound cakes, while adults leaned more toward pound cake made with shredded apfelsige and tea leaves. There seemed to be a big difference in terms of preferences here.

“Lady Rozemyne, your hair is absolutely lovely,” Eglantine said. “It is the color of the darkest night, as though you have been blessed by the God of Darkness himself.”

“And yours is as radiant as if you were blessed by the Goddess of Light, Lady Eglantine. It shines like the sun and is simply dazzling to behold.”

“Oh my, what clever praise. But my hair does not shine as glossily as yours does. What in the world are you using?” she asked.

The professors leaned forward to hear my answer. “All of the girls from Ehrenfest certainly did have shining hair during the advancement ceremony,” one said.

“Does Ehrenfest have some kind of secret product?” asked another.

This tea party was suddenly feeling less like my one with Solange and more like a gathering with Elvira’s gang. The professors all appeared to be about as old as my mothers, and they wore the same anticipatory expressions I was already so used to seeing. I explained rinsham to them, just as I had with Solange, and mentioned that it would soon be sold as a specialty of our duchy.

“I see... So it is not yet on sale,” Eglantine said with a disappointed sigh, so let down that she didn’t even offer a polite, *“I am looking forward to it.”*

“Sell some now,” Anastasius suddenly demanded, fixing me with a glare.

Um... Excuse me?! What am I supposed to do in this kind of situation?! I don’t even know how much “some” is, and I don’t want to do anything that’s going to cause lasting business problems down the line!

For one, Ferdinand thoroughly checked all of my financial dealings. Even stealthily giving some rinsham away for free couldn’t be done lightly, since a tea party was considered an official platform. Such a gesture was no different than making an offering to the royalty, meaning I would need to prepare a sizable amount of top-quality product; I shuddered to think how people would react if word spread that I’d given them my half-finished bottles.

“I-I can give no reply on my own authority,” I stammered. “As this has the makings of a business deal, I must ask that you at least acquire Aub Ehrenfest’s permission.”

“Prince Anastasius, please do not bully the first-year. You know that business transactions may be conducted only at the Archduke Conference,” Eglantine chided. This rule was in place to prevent people from bullying those of a lower status into bad business deals or just outright stealing from them.

“But you want it for your graduation ceremony, right? It’ll be too late by the

time the Archduke Conference comes around," Anastasius replied, causing Eglantine to wince slightly. It seemed that he had hit the nail on the head. He wanted the rinsham for her sake.

"If you would not mind, Lady Eglantine, I am more than happy to share a little of what I am currently using myself," I said after some thought. "I, erm... I admittedly do not have very much, so it truly will be just a little."

Eglantine's face positively lit up with joy, but Anastasius gave a blatantly displeased frown. "You. Tiny one," he said. "How come you're offering some to her when you refused me just a moment ago?"

"Lending a half-used bottle of rinsham to an archduke candidate is simple enough, but to sell or even offer some to royalty, I would need to prepare a vast amount of very high-quality product, Your Highness. That is much harder for me to do on my own."

"You sure are bold for someone so tiny," Anastasius remarked. By this point, I had no idea what he thought of me. "That will have to do, then. Rozemyne, make a song dedicated to the Goddess of Light before Eglantine's graduation. I shall buy it from you."

What the heck...? Where is this coming from? Someone please put this guy on a leash.

I couldn't even begin to fathom the connection between our rinsham conversation and this sudden request for a new song. The professors saw my confusion and nervously looked between Anastasius and me.

"Prince Anastasius," one said, "I believe it would be difficult to compose an entirely new song before the graduation ceremony."

"This is the Saint of Ehrenfest we're talking about here—making songs for the gods is her specialty. Surely she can manage," Anastasius replied, the steely look in his gray eyes practically ordering me to comply.

A song for the Goddess of Light, hm...?

I glanced over at Eglantine, who was giving me a worried look. She immediately came to mind whenever I tried to picture the Goddess of Light, so a song focused on her beauty could probably double as a song dedicated to the

goddess.

“Professor, may I borrow that table over there?” I asked.

“You may, but...”

“Philine, prepare some ink and paper. Rosina, prepare to write.”

My retainers had seen me compose songs before, and so they immediately knew what I was about to do. Rosina moved her seat, and with Philine’s help, the scene was arranged in no time at all.

“You do not need to arrange the entire song here, but please do record the primary melody,” I said.

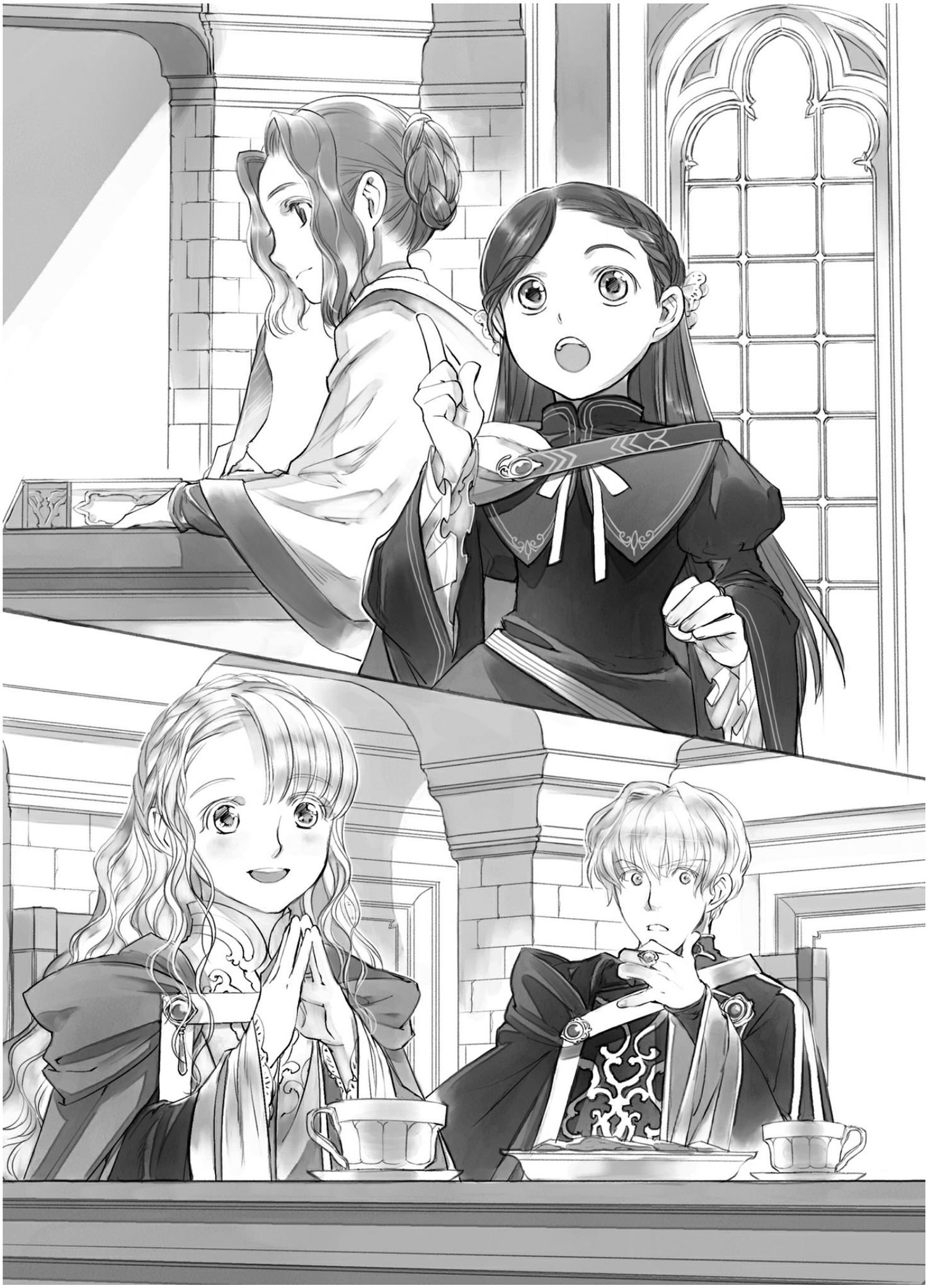
“As you wish.”

“Tralalala...”

I started humming the melody out loud, which Rosina repeated on the harspiel and recorded. It wasn’t a very long melody—only several verses in total—so the process was over relatively quickly. Such was the power of not arranging the entire song then and there.

“Will that do for a melody?” I asked. “From here, we will arrange it so that it sounds more elegant on harspiel and write lyrics that are suitable for the Goddess of Light. These stages will take a bit more time, however.”

“Rozemyne, you...” Anastasius trailed off, stunned. Eglantine, meanwhile, let out an awed gasp. There was an unmistakable sparkle in her eyes.



“What a lovely song...” she said. “I could feel the presence of the gods melting into my heart.”

“I composed it with thoughts of you, Lady Eglantine. You have been my Goddess of Light ever since I first saw you whirl,” I replied. I was embarrassed to have said it aloud, but I wanted to praise her as best I could.

Eglantine flushed red with embarrassment. “I am glad you are a girl, Lady Rozemyne. Had a man improvised such a wonderful song for me, my heart might have been stolen,” she said with a giggle.

All of a sudden, Anastasius stood up. “Rozemyne, give that song to Eglantine. I don’t care for it. It is miserable,” he snapped. And with that, he walked out of the room.

The blood drained from my face. He had told me to make a song for him and then almost immediately called it miserable.

Oh no! Talk about the social blunder of a lifetime! I’m screwed!

“Whatever shall I do? It seems I have angered Prince Anastasius...” I muttered in a daze, my eyes fixed on the door Anastasius had just strode through.

Eglantine gave a troubled smile. “I would not say that was anger, exactly. Fear not, Lady Rozemyne; I shall calm him down. Professors, do forgive me, but I too must leave early.”

“Of course, Lady Eglantine. We will leave the rest to you.”

Eglantine and her retainers swiftly exited the room, chasing after Anastasius. The professors shook their heads calmly and sipped their tea, clearly not very bothered, but I was paler than ever.

“Professors, I deeply apologize for making a mess of your tea party,” I said.

“Oh, there is nothing for you to worry about. The prince only acted that way because he is jealous of your interaction with Eglantine,” Pauline said.

“Indeed. There is not much more to it than that. We are much more concerned about hearing more of your musician’s harspiel playing.”

“But...” My eyes darted from the professors back to the door, but Pauline

merely shrugged.

“Lady Eglantine will resolve things once she catches up to him. The prince is always doing everything he can to earn her attention, so he may even be grateful for what you’ve done here today; after all, you have afforded him an opportunity to speak with her alone.”

“You may be a bit too young to understand this,” began another professor, “but this was all a strategy of sorts on his part.”

The professors proceeded to explain the circumstances, telling me this information under the unspoken assumption that I would mostly keep it to myself. Eglantine was apparently the youngest daughter of the third prince, who had died in the civil war, and she had become an archduke candidate of the greater duchy Klassenberg after being adopted by her grandfather Aub Klassenberg. This adoption had taken place before her baptism, so most people were completely unaware she was a bona fide princess.

The current king had won the civil war in large part due to Klassenberg allying with him. Whoever could win the heart of the girl who was both Aub Klassenberg’s adopted daughter and a former princess would certainly take an enormous step toward securing the throne in the future. Thus, both Anastasius and his older brother, the first prince, were desperately doing whatever they could to earn Eglantine’s attention.

“However, it seems to me that Prince Anastasius’s desperation does not come entirely from wanting to be king...” Pauline mused. “Seeing him reminds me of Aub Ehrenfest’s days in the Royal Academy.”

“Lord Sylvester was certainly a hard worker. I am glad that his efforts ultimately paid off,” one of the other professors added with a chuckle.

This was my first time hearing anyone call Sylvester a hard worker. My eyes widened, which earned me amused smiles from the professors as they started to reminisce about the past.

“He did absolutely everything he could to escort his current first wife during the graduation ceremony. It was quite the sight to behold.”

“Yes, seeing him was enough to warm the heart. The problem was that they

were two years apart in the Royal Academy. That is quite a significant gap, you see."

What in the—?! Details, please!

I eagerly leaned forward, as did my retainers. We were all dying to know more. The professors exchanged glances; then they gave mischievous smiles.

"Saying too much might make the aub's life somewhat harder moving forward, so we shall spare you the details. If we are to discuss Ehrenfest matters, perhaps it would be wiser to talk about Lord Ferdinand."

"Indeed. Oh, how we all despaired when he hit puberty and his voice changed. He was such a beautiful singer," another said.

After talking a bit about Sylvester's past, the conversation shifted to more legends about Ferdinand, which remained our topic of discussion until the tea party eventually came to an end.

Measuring Schwartz and Weiss

Today was the day we would be measuring Schwartz and Weiss. The plan was to leave for the library at third bell, and then bring the two shumils back to the dormitory. The girls who had desperately been trying to pass their written classes in time had all narrowly managed, and now they wore exceptionally bright smiles, both excited for the measuring and glad to be free from those lessons.

"Just the thought of Schwartz and Weiss visiting the Ehrenfest Dormitory is making me tremble with excitement," one girl said.

The girls were going to be doing the actual measuring today. It was apparently normal for noble girls to pick up sewing as a hobby, making bits of clothing for their pets and the babies of relatives as training to be good wives in the future. I had personally been slacking on my bridal duties, so I was far from being a sewing expert.

I-It's not like I skip practice, okay? I'm just two years behind everyone else because of my coma. Nobody could say that's my fault. Though it is true that I would rather spend my time reading books than waste it on trying to be a better wife in the future.

"Lady Rozemyne, I understand your excitement, but please stay focused," Rosina said while I was practicing harspiel in the common room. Lieseleta and the others were preparing for Schwartz and Weiss's arrival with giddy enthusiasm. I personally hadn't a clue where or how the measurements needed to be taken. Measuring humans was straightforward enough, but giant shumils were something else entirely.

Hirschur and some apprentice scholars were also with us, all gripping writing utensils. Hirschur's plan was to write down as much as she could about the magic circles engraved on Schwartz's and Weiss's stomachs; it seemed that magic tools created through hidden methods by the royalty of the past were filled with secrets and dramatic allure. To the apprentice scholars who

specialized in making magic tools, this truly was a heart-pounding event. It only took a single glance to see how excited all those in attendance were, regardless of their faction.

“Still, if you had new paper on hand, why did you not show me earlier?” Hirschur asked, pursing her lips in frustration while feeling the plant paper I had supplied her with to write about Schwartz and Weiss. She had apparently been informed by other professors and students that those of us from Ehrenfest were using some peculiar kind of paper.

“You would have seen it sooner if you came to the dormitory more often as our supervisor, Professor Hirschur. Lady Rozemyne uses it every day as a matter of course,” one of the apprentice scholars explained. Others expressed their agreement, adding that I had used plant paper to organize the first-years’ weaknesses to help them pass and that I was using it to record every conversation I participated in.

“I suppose it might be wise for me to live in the dormitory while Lady Rozemyne is attending the Academy...” Hirschur mused. “I am struck with the feeling that she will only continue to cause chaos.”

Wilfried nodded. “Yeah. If you ask me, the weekly reports you’re sending Father aren’t enough—Rozemyne does way too much each week to summarize in a single message. Really, you could start sending daily reports.”

The two went on to discuss this matter with very serious expressions. I personally didn’t think it was very accurate to say I was causing “chaos,” and I would rather Hirschur report on my activities as little as possible.

A short distance away from us, the apprentice knights, all clad in simple armor, were discussing security measures with straight faces. My guard knights had seen Schwartz and Weiss up close, so they probably knew even better than I did just how valuable they were.

“The feystones on their vests alone are valuable enough, but Schwartz and Weiss are the heirlooms of royalty,” Cornelius explained. “There will surely be a great number of people targeting them when we leave the library.”

“I do not believe our plans have been leaked to anyone, but we are aware that a number of archduke candidates have been ordering Professor Solange to

give them the two shumils," one of the knights added.

"Lady Rozemyne has instructed us to protect Schwartz and Weiss. We will yield to no one, no matter how high in status they are."

I had initially thought all this fuss over two magic tools was a little excessive, but after hearing the apprentice scholars talking about how rare they were, and the apprentice knights talking about the potential threat of nobles from other duchies, I quickly rethought that assumption. The danger was so apparent that even I, as someone who was regularly called oblivious and naive, believed we needed to do all we could to protect the two shumils.

I really want to join the others in focusing on Schwartz and Weiss...

Everyone was buzzing with the level of excitement one would expect right before a festival. I gazed around as I continued practicing the harspiel, wiggling in anticipation at the thought of mingling with the others, only for Rosina to interrupt me with a cough.

"The music professors even went so far as to praise your songs at the tea party, Lady Rozemyne. The least you can do is learn to play them yourself."

"I'll do my best..."

After being so generously praised at the tea party and asked to make full use of my ability to compose songs, Rosina was more motivated than ever. She had even asked me to increase the amount of time I spent practicing the harspiel, but I had declined; in my eyes, reading was still a much, much bigger priority.

I continued my practice under Rosina's watchful gaze until third bell eventually chimed. I let go of my harspiel at once and stood up, ignoring Rosina's sigh of exasperation, to focus on all the hopeful eyes that were now looking my way.

"Third bell has rung!" I declared. "Let us hurry to the library!"

"Everyone, take your positions," Wilfried ordered. "Those accompanying Rozemyne to the library and those staying behind to welcome them back, you know where to go. Be very careful here. Schwartz and Weiss are valuable magic tools."

Once everyone had gotten into their groups, we departed for the library with Hirschur at the lead as our dorm supervisor. I was in the middle of the group with the other girls. My attendants were standing closest to me, while the apprentice scholars circled us and the apprentice knights formed the perimeter.

“Good morning, Professor Solange.”

“Good morning to you as well, Lady Rozemyne. Oh my... I see you have brought many people with you today,” Solange replied, her eyes widening as she welcomed the Ehrenfest squad into the library.

“They’re here to guard Schwartz and Weiss. We wouldn’t want anything to happen.”

“Milady’s here.”

“Milady. Good morning.”

No sooner had I said their names than Schwartz and Weiss came toddling over. The mere sight was enough for Lieseleta to break into a broad smile and sigh about them being cute beyond words. It was clear to see she was missing her pet shumils back home, and I understood the need to fill the lonely void in one’s heart all too well.

“Schwartz, Weiss, you are going to be measured today so that we can make your new clothes,” I said.

“Measuring. Okay.”

“Lots of measuring.”

Schwartz and Weiss had come to understand a bit about measuring due to how many times they had changed masters and received new clothes. They hopped over to stand beside me.

“Lady Rozemyne, Schwartz and Weiss cannot leave the library unless they are with their master. Please take their hands before you leave,” Solange said. I did as instructed, having Schwartz take my right hand and Weiss take my left.

“Look over there!” came a voice. “That girl is holding hands with Schwartz and Weiss!”

“Is it not dangerous to touch the library’s magic tools?” said another.

Some girls had come to the library to see Schwartz and Weiss, and now they were watching me with wide eyes. This wasn't much of a surprise; Hirschur had mentioned that those who touched the shumils without their master's permission could end up being blasted away by mana. It started off as a light tingling sensation, but the longer one continued to touch them, the stronger the resistance grew. This was just a guess, but I could imagine Hirschur had found this out by holding on to them until the pain was unbearably agonizing.

"If you'll excuse us, Professor Solange, I shall return with Schwartz and Weiss when the measuring is completed," I said.

"Understood. Please do look after them."

We exited the library in the same formation as when we had arrived. So many people surrounded those of us in the center that we were pretty much invisible, but with the shut-in Hirschur gleefully leading the way and the lightly armored knights following close behind, our group drew a lot of attention from the other students. It wasn't long before their whispers reached my ears.

"Are those perhaps the library shumils? Why are they with Ehrenfest...?"

"I was not aware they could even leave the library."

"Yeah. I heard that you'd get blasted away by mana if you even tried touching them."

I was so worried about something happening that my heart pounded the whole way back to the dormitory, but in the end, we arrived safe and sound.

Wilfried sighed in relief, having been concerned enough to lend me half of his guard knights. "Looks like nothing happened," he said. "Right, let's start measuring. Everybody ready?"

It seemed that everyone was interested in Schwartz and Weiss, because every student who wasn't currently attending a morning class was gathered in the common room. I didn't mind them watching from afar, but I had warned them ahead of time that only my attendants were permitted to touch the shumils.

"Okay. Schwartz, Weiss, we will now remove your clothes. I permit Lieseleta, Rihyarda, and Brunhilde to touch you."

“Okay. Just three,” Schwartz said.

“They can touch,” Weiss added.

Lieseleta and Brunhilde removed Schwartz’s and Weiss’s clothes and started taking their measurements, which were then written down by the girls who had volunteered to help. They were quite clearly lending their aid as an excuse to get as close to Schwartz and Weiss as possible, but Rihyarda was standing watch to make sure nobody touched the shumils by accident.

“Lady Rozemyne, I cannot see the magic tools from here,” Hirschur griped as she strained to see Schwartz’s and Weiss’s stomachs. Her desk was positioned just far away enough that the girls crowding the two shumils completely blocked her sight.

I examined Schwartz and Weiss, who were now freed from their dresses and vests. As expected, there were elaborate magic circles on their stomachs.

“Wait just a moment longer, Professor Hirschur. I will send them your way once the measuring is complete,” I said. “In the meantime, I will allow you to look at these.”

I picked up the clothes that Lieseleta and Brunhilde had removed and took them over to Hirschur. Rihyarda was watching over Schwartz and Weiss, and the girls were keeping each other in check, so I saw no issue in taking my eyes off the shumils for a second.

“Only Professor Hirschur, Hartmut, and Philine can touch these clothes. Everyone else must be content with looking and nothing more,” I said while spreading the clothes atop Hirschur’s desk. The apprentice scholars squeezed together as they tried to get a closer look, but Hirschur speedily picked up and started to examine the clothing.

“It seems to me that the patterns on their dress hems and vests resemble magic circles,” I noted. “I have not seen many magic circles myself, however, so I am not sure what they do.”

The vests were embroidered with all sorts of colors, and each one seemed to form the outline of various magic circles. I personally didn’t recognize them, so I couldn’t provide much input, but maybe Hirschur could.

“Indeed, these are certainly magic circles. This part that appears to be the same color is actually using similar shades of string to obfuscate the circles, and this part breaks away midway through, producing incomplete and essentially meaningless circles. The ones that function properly are...” Hirschur trailed off, placing a finger and rubbing the feystone on her monocle. She then began tracing the magic circles with her eyes, one after another, while writing letters and designs on various sheets of paper. It seemed there really were a number of magic circles hidden within the complexly woven embroidery.

“Professor Hirschur, can you tell what the magic circles do?”

“Of course. While these feystone buttons are filled with mana, the magic circles will protect Schwartz and Weiss. To think someone could embroider circles with such complex patterns, while designing them to only be activated when necessary... This is extremely high-level magecraft. It’s beautiful!” Hirschur exclaimed. She was eagerly poring over the vests, but her excitement made me break out in a cold sweat.

“Um, Professor Hirschur... Could it be that I will need to provide the same embroidered circles and feystone buttons when making the new clothes?”

“Of course. You will naturally want Schwartz and Weiss to be fully protected,” Hirschur replied casually, raising an eyebrow at me as though the answer were entirely obvious.

“I was planning to have my personal seamstress make the clothes, but I cannot fathom a lower city seamstress being capable of embroidering magic circles. Where should I have them made? I must admit, no ideas come to mind.”

“The embroidering of magic circles is done not by commoners, but by nobles. I shall prepare improved versions of these magic circles for you. Finally, a challenge worthy of my talents... I shall not be beaten by my predecessors,” Hirschur said, her purple eyes gleaming as she burst into diabolical laughter. The surrounding apprentice scholars were watching in eager anticipation.

“Hartmut, copy down the magic circles on the hems exactly. Do not miss even a single line,” Hirschur instructed, having already begun to draw the ones on the vests.

Hartmut immediately started tracing a finger along the embroidered circles

on the hems. Philine picked up Weiss's dress and started sketching out the circles as well, but the fact she hadn't yet studied magic circles meant she found it a considerable challenge.

"I'm afraid that's incorrect," one of the apprentice scholars said as they watched Philine. "It's easy to mess up that part." Many of the other scholars were groaning to themselves, no doubt wishing they were the ones drawing the circle instead. Seeing their growing discontent, I decided to intervene.

"That is enough, Philine. Please spread out the dress so the other scholars can see it. Are any of you confident enough to draw the circle in Philine's place?"

"Leave it to me!" one called out.

Philine spread out the dress with slumped shoulders, disappointed that her job was being stolen, so I gave her a gentle pat on the back. "I have not yet studied magic circles either, so staring at them will do neither of us any good," I said. "Let us learn about them together through the process of making new clothes."

"Yes, Lady Rozemyne."

The apprentice scholars started copying the magic circles, all the while expressing their surprise that the configuration worked at all.

Hirschur glanced at the students as she turned over the vest she was working on, running her fingers over the embroidery and confirming what materials were used. "We will need to prepare thread dyed with mana to create the magic circles, and there are many things which must be crafted for the clothes," she said. "You will not be able to embroider them on your own, Lady Rozemyne, as you have not yet learned about magic circles. Given the years you spent asleep, I imagine you are also behind on your bridal training."

Her observation caught me completely off guard. As it turned out, the bridal training noble girls went through was also important for embroidering magic circles onto clothes and capes.

I've been looking down on bridal training this whole time, but it was that important all along?! Oh no! I'm so bad with my hands!

"It seems that people from all across Ehrenfest will need to unite to make this

outfit. It will be a good opportunity for you to learn about magic circles and tools," Hirschur said.

Schwartz and Weiss were magic tools made by royalty. Throughout history, their masters had freely used a combination of advanced technology and rare, expensive materials to ensure their protection.

"The first step is to gather the necessary materials... but luckily for us, we have Ferdinand on our side," Hirschur continued. "I believe he should have plenty for us to use. It is very convenient that he is your guardian, Lady Rozemyne; you would have been in for quite the adventure if you had needed to gather all the materials yourself."

Hirschur was making it sound as though I could ask Ferdinand for help and he would freely provide it, but things weren't that simple. Ferdinand never did anything unless there was something for him to gain from it.

"I cannot imagine Ferdinand giving us his materials so easily..." I said.

"Oh my. I assumed it was a matter of course that you would be bargaining for them by allowing him to see the magic circles in return. He spares no expense when it comes to learning about magic tools he is unfamiliar with. I was his teacher, so you can trust me when it comes to understanding how he operates."

Wow... When she puts it like that, it all makes sense. Especially the part about bargaining to make him bend to my will.

"Lady Rozemyne," Lieseleta called out, snapping me back to reality. "We have finished measuring Schwartz and Weiss."

I glanced over at the throng of girls surrounding the two shumils. "Professor Hirschur, it seems they are done."

"Could you have Schwartz and Weiss come to us? There is no place for me to write over there."

Schwartz and Weiss came hopping over the moment I summoned them. They looked just like real, living shumils when they were clothed, but now that they were naked, one could see all the parts connecting their limbs and such. These connecting parts made them look more like stuffed animals, and their torsos

were covered in golden embroidery.

“Oh wow... Their stomachs truly are covered in magic circles,” I observed.

“Please place them on the table,” Hirschur said. “I cannot transcribe the circles otherwise.”

Rihyarda picked up Schwartz while Brunhilde and Lieseleta worked together to pick up Weiss. The instant both shumils were on the table, Hirschur leaned forward so that her face was mere inches away from the magic circles. The gleam in her eyes was genuinely kind of scary.

There were magic circles on the shumils’ stomachs, of course, but also on their backs and rear ends. They seemed extraordinarily elaborate. We had Schwartz and Weiss stand up on the table, raise their arms, and so on, while Hirschur and the other apprentice scholars copied down the patterns on them as best they could. The next thing we knew, there came the chiming of a familiar bell.

“That’s fourth bell. Let us all take a break and have lunch,” Rihyarda said, clapping her hands to bring everyone away from their work. Since I was under instruction not to let Schwartz and Weiss out of my sight, I made sure they were dressed, and then took them by the hands before walking to the dining room. Hirschur was going to be joining us today. Her seat was beside mine.

“Their clothes are normally made by Sovereign archnobles, so this task will undeniably require the assistance of all those in Ehrenfest,” Hirschur reiterated. “I believe it would be wise for you to seek the help of Aub Ehrenfest as well. This burden is much too large for mere students to bear alone.”

“I never thought making clothes for magic tools would end up being such a big deal,” Wilfried mused with a frown. “Alright. I’ll contact Father.”

The conversation ended there, prompting Hirschur to pick up her cutlery and start eating. “What exactly is this?” she asked, gesturing to the bowl sitting before her.

“Cream stew. Isn’t it nice having something warm to eat in the cold winter?” I replied, looking at the meal the chefs had made with guidance from Ella and Hugo. Just seeing the steam billowing from the bowl was enough to make me

feel warmer, and it was even packed with vegetables, making it delicious and healthy as well.

“I’m referring to the flavor, not the dish itself,” Hirschur clarified. “Since when has Ehrenfest cooking been able to produce such an advanced taste? This is not the stew I remember.”

“Since about three years ago. It only took you this long to notice because you haven’t eaten in the dormitory for ages. All the other students knew about it, and they have been looking forward to the dormitory’s food every year.”

Hirschur nodded, silently ate her stew for a while, and then suddenly looked up. “I really am starting to think I should move back into the Ehrenfest Dormitory.”

This sudden announcement came as a surprise, not so much because of the announcement itself, but because Hirschur was framing something so ordinary that all the dormitory supervisors from other duchies were already doing as such an important decision. It was with that notice that lunch came to an end.

The magic circle transcribing continued in the afternoon. Schwartz and Weiss were once again stripped down, but the magic circles around their torsos were exceedingly complex; even the apprentice scholars of the higher grades had to throw their hands up in the air in defeat, despite having been able to read the magic circles on the shumils’ clothes just fine. Hirschur alone was tearing through ink and paper with still-gleaming eyes.

“I was aware that she’s eccentric, but it seems she has the skill to back it up. I personally have high grades in this subject, but these circles are completely beyond me,” Hartmut said, shrugging his shoulders and adding that they were too old for him to understand their code. “The most I can work out is that they run on magic circles connected to Light and Darkness. I would guess that only someone with both those attributes can use them.”

In other words, no matter how well Hartmut came to understand the circles, he wouldn’t be able to make his own Schwartz or become its master, since he lacked the relevant attributes.

“But you, Lady Rozemyne, have both attributes.”

“I suppose so, since I did successfully become Schwartz’s and Weiss’s master.”

Hirschur, upon finishing transcribing all the magic circles around the shumils’ torsos, furrowed her brow and looked over her drawings. “This is not enough. These circles are filled with gaps,” she murmured.

“I imagine they would not draw all the magic circles on the surface level where everyone can see them,” one scholar suggested.

“Naturally,” Hirschur replied. “Even I make sure to hide the results of my research.”

While Rihyarda and the others were dressing Schwartz and Weiss again, Hirschur and the apprentice scholars butted heads in their simultaneous rush to peer at the copied magic circles, all the while discussing how to fill in the gaps as best they could.

“As expected, there is much I will only be able to learn by dissecting them...”

“Professor Hirschur, don’t get any closer to Schwartz and Weiss,” I said. The eyes of every girl in the room sharpened at the implication of the two precious shumils being dissected.

Hirschur flashed an annoyed frown at the wave of murderous looks; then she shrugged and stood up. “I will think of ways to improve their protective magic circles. You may all return Schwartz and Weiss to the library.”

With that, Hirschur strode back to the scholar building.

Something tells me Professor Hirschur wouldn’t actually survive living here in the dorm...

“Schwartz, Weiss, you’ve both done good work today. That must have been very tiring for you. Let us return to the library.”

“We don’t get tired.”

“We’re fine, milady.”

I stroked their forehead feystones, poured mana into them, and then took Schwartz and Weiss by their hands. An instant later, the door to the dormitory burst open. Angelica came rushing in, having apparently finished her written lessons, with one hand on Stenluke so that she could draw him the very instant

it became necessary. She looked over us with a grim expression.

“Be on your guard, Lady Rozemyne. Professor Hirschur’s departure has alerted those from the other duchies that the measuring is complete. I saw several students gathering to ambush us on our way out, and it’s very likely they intend to twist our arms rather than talk peacefully. Be prepared and resolved to fight at any moment!”

Tension shot through the room like a lightning bolt. Wilfried glanced over at his guard knights, and then at me. “Rozemyne, take my guard knights with you!” he shouted. “Everyone, protect Rozemyne and the others with all you have! I’ll wait here so that I don’t interfere with your mission!”

At this order, all his guard knights except one joined our party.

“Girls and scholars without the strength to fight, stay in the dormitory—you will only get in the guards’ way,” Cornelius said. “Apprentice knights of the higher grades, take their place.”

“All other apprentice knights will guard the dormitory!” Wilfried instructed. “Members of other duchies can’t come inside, but don’t let your guard down!”

“Which attendants here are both able to fight and have permission to touch Schwartz and Weiss?”

The members of my party were reselected to minimize the number of people who would need to be protected during our upcoming mad dash to the library, and then the apprentice knights who were wearing normal clothes put on their light armor. Out of all my attendants, Rihyarda alone was permitted to join, since she was capable of picking up me and the shumils and sprinting to the library if necessary. Everyone else was going to be staying behind.

“Right. Here we go!” Cornelius exclaimed. Just as he attempted to leave the dorm, however, I rushed to stop him. He gazed at me with a look of utter confusion, at which point I turned to all those gathered.

“Everyone, please kneel for a moment,” I said. “I shall give you the blessing of Angriff the God of War.”

I had blessed the Knight’s Order more than enough times by now, but the apprentices didn’t really understand what I meant; they merely furrowed their

brows with confusion and glanced around at each other. Angelica, who was at the front of the platoon, was the only one who immediately rushed over to me, knelt, and then quietly hung her head.

“Thank you, Lady Rozemyne.”

One by one, Cornelius, my other guard knights, Wilfried’s guard knights, and the older apprentice knights all followed Angelica’s lead and dropped to their knees. They formed rows with me at the center, which resulted in me being surrounded by apprentice knights. I poured mana into my right hand and produced my schtappe, since it was the easiest way to control my mana, and then raised my schtappe in the air and used my mana like always.

“O God of War Angriff, of the God of Fire Leidenschaft’s exalted twelve, I pray that you grant us your divine protection.”

Blue light shot out of my schtappe and rained down upon everyone. The apprentices looked up at me, blinking in surprise as though this were their first time ever seeing a blessing.

The Battle for Schwartz and Weiss

“You should be able to fight more easily thanks to my blessing. Remember, however, that we must not strike first under any circumstances,” I said, looking around the room. “All we need to do is defend Schwartz and Weiss until we reach Professor Solange at the library. We are not fighting because we want to—we are fighting simply to protect what Ehrenfest has been entrusted with. Keep this stance in mind.”

It was important that we didn’t act first so that we could make excuses later if anything happened.

Angelica and Traugott both leaned forward slightly, as if preparing to jump out and attack in an instant. “Lady Rozemyne, can we attack anyone who attacks us first?” they asked.

“Do not leave the formation on your own. Our highest priority is getting Schwartz and Weiss back to the library safely; making any moves that are not necessary in realizing this goal will mark you as disappointments of guard knights. Act with the knowledge that Lord Bonifatius shall judge those who are unable to protect their charges as failures.”

“Ngh... Understood.”

I was aware that Lord Bonifatius had trained the absolute heck out of all the guard knights who had failed to protect Charlotte and me, and those guard knights had endured two years of intense training while I was asleep. Angelica and Traugott stiffened up the moment I spoke Lord Bonifatius’s name—both of them seemed to have experience being scolded by him on a daily basis.

“Milady. Not enough mana,” Schwartz said. “Need more mana.”

“Hm? But I just gave you some...” I replied, thinking back to a second ago.

The two shumils patted their clothes. “No. Our clothes. Protect. Fight.”

As requested, I stroked their buttons and filled them with mana. The magic circles woven into their vests lit up for a brief moment before fading again.

“Stronger now, milady. We protect you.”

Schwartz and Weiss were the treasures of the library; I was supposed to be protecting them, not the other way around.

“In any case, let’s go,” Cornelius said. “Don’t let your guards down.”

We all exited the dormitory, prepared to whip out our schtappes at any moment. Cornelius and Leonore were at the front, since they were the fastest thinkers among the archnobles and were best suited to negotiate if we made contact with the enemy, while the more ruthless Angelica and Traugott were kept in the center near me. I held Schwartz’s and Weiss’s hands while I walked, fully surrounded by tense apprentice guard knights.

“Think of this as treasure-stealing ditter,” I said. “We just have to protect Schwartz and Weiss on our way to the library. It’s not about fighting—it’s about protecting. Just don’t make that mistake.”

I was honestly hoping there wouldn’t be an attack at all. We passed through the center building with the auditorium, turned south, and then approached the hall connecting to the library. That was when I saw a bunch of capes flash through the crowd, sporting four different colors in total.

Wait, what?! It’s not just one duchy?!

There were only thirty of us from Ehrenfest, but it seemed there were about one hundred people standing before us. At the very front of the crowd were students wearing blue capes, signifying that they were from Dunkelfelger, a greater duchy placed second in the rankings. I gasped and tightened my grip on Schwartz’s and Weiss’s hands. Not only were we facing several duchies, but one of them was a greater duchy—and not Ahrensbach, the greater duchy we had actually been worried about.

Cornelius stopped a short distance away from the students gathered in our path; then he stepped forward. “Lord Lestilaut. May I ask why you are blocking the hallway?”

Lestilaut was an archduke candidate. He stood in the middle of the hall with his arms crossed and his feet planted firmly on the ground. His build much more resembled that of an apprentice knight than an archduke candidate. He did not

even deign to answer Cornelius, instead responding with a dismissive sneer. The nobles from middle and lesser duchies standing behind him called out in his stead.

"That's our line!" one shouted. "What do you lot think you're doing?!"

"How disrespectful of you to claim those magic tools left by royalty as your own!" another added.

"We'll be taking back those big shumils!" declared a third.

From our perspective, these people were villains trying to steal away Schwartz and Weiss—but from theirs, we were the villains who had taken magic tools belonging to royalty. Some of our apprentice knights began to tremble slightly as they endured the shouts, which made Lestilaut break into a wide grin.

"Those magic tools are the heirlooms of ancient royalty, and they belong to the Royal Academy's library," he declared. "It is unthinkable for the archduke candidate of a mere thirteenth-ranked duchy to steal them from the library and attempt to make them their own! Return the royalty's magic tools to where they belong!"

The students behind Lestilaut cheered in approval, which caused the apprentice knights from Ehrenfest to falter even more.

"How rude!" I protested, pursing my lips in frustration. "We have not stolen them! I became their master through something of an accident, and so I brought them to my dormitory to fulfill a duty expected of my new position. I acquired Professor Solange's permission before doing anything!"

The moment I revealed that I had gotten permission to take Schwartz and Weiss, our opponents lost some of their momentum. "You have permission?" one of them asked. "So you didn't steal them?"

It was true that Lestilaut had numbers on his side, but he had gained them through supplying misleading information. He had most likely used his authority as a member of the greater duchy Dunkelfelger to whip these lesser and middle duchies into place so that he could strike at us.

Sensing the tremor running through his allies, Lestilaut theatrically flourished his cape and raised a fist into the air. "Regardless! For you to have become the

master of magic tools belonging to royalty in the first place is the peak of arrogance. And on top of that, you even brought them to the Ehrenfest Dormitory?! Considering that Professor Hirschur thought it necessary to abandon her practical lesson to supervise you, we can only assume those magic tools were highly at risk of getting either dissected or destroyed. Only a failure of a master would expose them to such extraordinary danger!”

Curse you, Professor Hirschur! I can’t believe she skipped her afternoon classes for this. That must be part of the reason why Lestilaut is so mad...

“If anyone must become their master, better they be from Dunkelfelger than the pitifully ranked Ehrenfest. Accept the transfer of your mastery and give them to me; then I will spare you from being accused of stealing the royalty’s magic tools. I very much doubt you wish to be accused of treason!”

Some of the apprentice knights near me echoed the word “treason” in hushed murmurs. There was visible doubt in their eyes; it was all too painful for members of the nobility to be accused of treason against the crown.

“You are right. I would not like to be accused of treason. Furthermore, I am completely fine with giving Schwartz and Weiss to someone who is willing to treat them in the way they deserve,” I said, looking at Lestilaut. It was true that I wouldn’t have become their master in the first place if there were still archnoble librarians in the Royal Academy. The ideal was for someone working in the library to become their master, not me.

“Lady Rozemyne...” Angelica began with a cautioning tone, but I shook my head to interrupt her and kept staring Lestilaut down.

Schwartz and Weiss were the property of the library, made to assist with the work that needed to be done there—one couldn’t simply do as they pleased with them just because they possessed an abundance of mana. If someone were capable of giving them more mana than I and was willing to join my unofficial library committee then I would be happy to transfer my position as master to them. I would need to return to Ehrenfest for the Dedication Ritual, so having someone to keep the ball rolling while I was gone was a very reassuring thought.

The guy in front of me, however, was clearly a musclehead; I couldn’t imagine

he was the type of person who would ever want to join any library committee.

“If you want Schwartz and Weiss, there are some things I must first ask you,” I said. “What do you plan to do upon becoming their master?”

“What do I... plan to do...?” Lestilaut repeated, crossing his arms. He clearly didn’t understand the reasoning behind my question.

“Allow me to rephrase: how often do you visit the library? How frequently have you been going there, and how many books have you borrowed thus far?”

“The library is no place for an archduke candidate, and so I have never been,” Lestilaut answered. “If we want books, we simply order apprentice scholars to take them out for us. What in the world are you saying?”

He had never once gone to the library—that alone was enough to disqualify him from becoming Schwartz’s and Weiss’s master. I shook my head, signaling that I was refusing his request.

“You are unsuited to serve as Schwartz’s and Weiss’s master. One must visit the library once every few days to supply them with mana, and one must give them a great amount so as to not trouble Professor Solange. Someone who has never visited the library before would surely fail in this regard.”

“I am unsuited...? What do you think you’re saying?”

“We are in the middle of returning Schwartz and Weiss to the library, and it is my duty as their master to protect them. I will not allow for the library’s magic tools to be stolen by someone who will not use them for their intended purpose. If you stand in our way, *you* will be the one accused of treason!”

“Watch your mouth!” Lestilaut barked, but I shouted right back without missing a beat.

“I shall protect Schwartz and Weiss, and I shall protect the Royal Academy’s library! No matter how much you insult me, nor how powerful of a greater duchy you belong to, I will show no mercy to anyone who attempts to steal these two shumils!”



Ehrenfest's apprentice knights glared with hostility at those blocking our way. Our duchy was vastly outnumbered, but by showing that we wouldn't back down even when facing a duchy of a much higher rank, we were able to make those of the middle and lesser duchies become more hesitant. They began looking for peaceful ways out.

"How are we supposed to tell who's in the right now?" one asked.

"I don't want to be accused of treason..." another said. "We should just ask the prince to make a judgment."

Those of the middle and lesser duchies all nodded to each other and started to disperse until, eventually, only those wearing blue capes remained. It seemed that Dunkelfelger was still determined to block our path.

"I would recommend that you move as well," I said. "We need to return Schwartz and Weiss to the library."

"You will not pass. I am their rightful master. Hand them over before you get hurt," Lestilaut responded, whipping out his schtappe and morphing it into a sword. Upon seeing that, all of our apprentice knights readied their schtappes as well.

"I refuse. As I said, you are not suited to serve as their master."

"Capture that brat, and the shumils!" Lestilaut roared. He swung his sword, causing a ball of mana to come rushing our way.

Cornelius instantly chanted "*geteilt*" to create a shield, which successfully deflected the attack. "Angelica! Traugott! Pave the way!" he ordered. "Everyone else, ready your shields to block any attacks on our way to the library!"

"Understood!"

The instant Cornelius entrusted paving the way to our biggest hotheads, Angelica leapt forward with Stenluke in hand, followed at once by a broadly grinning Traugott. Angelica was moving at a tremendous speed thanks to her enhancement magic, and she easily soared over the heads of all the apprentice knights readying their shields.

“I’m so light! This is amazing! Let’s go, Stenluke!” Angelica cried, instantly reaching the front of our formation.

Angelica’s manablade had grown significantly and was packed with plenty of mana. She swung it around and mowed down our enemies with such blistering haste that I struggled to even make out the carnage; it was clear that she was dashing around, but it was hard to tell exactly what she was doing. Even so, two things were perfectly clear: she had completely mastered enhancement magic, unlike the Angelica I was used to—and she was blatantly much faster than everyone else.

“Excuse me, milady.” Rihyarda crouched down in front of me and then picked me up. Since I was still tightly gripping Schwartz and Weiss, they ended up hanging from her back, swaying around, and occasionally bumping into each other. “Take care not to let go of their hands.”

Once the group of knights started running with Rihyarda at the center, those of our enemies who had morphed their schtappes into bows launched an attack. A volley of arrows made from light rained down on us—more than we could manage with our current shields.

The second I thought to make a shield myself, I heard a sharp popping sound, as if something had just burst. An instant later, the archers all dropped to the floor. Nobody knew what had happened—neither I, nor they.

“What was that?!” came panicked cries from all over. It was then that I noticed that Schwartz’s and Weiss’s golden eyes, as well as the buttons on their clothes, were shining with mana.

“We’ll protect milady. Take their power. Toss it back.”

“Amazing! Amazing! Praise us, milady.”

“I would love to, but I can’t let go of your hands right now,” I replied. “Please wait until we’ve reached the library.”

If the charms on Schwartz and Weiss can reflect attacks from multiple enemies in a wide range all at once, they might be even more impressive than my ones from Ferdinand... He told me to always wear several at once so that I could deal with groups. Though on second thought, I guess Schwartz and Weiss have

multiple charms on them as well.

I nodded to myself, remembering how many feystone buttons they had.

“Charms from the royalty’s heirlooms...?!” cried a voice.

“Now! To the library!”

We rushed to the library amid the confusion, but just as the door came within reach, we heard a loud shout. “Cease! All present, sheathe your weapons!”

It was Anastasius, riding a highbeast, and with him were his retainers and those from the duchies that had dispersed who had gone to get him. Everyone immediately put away their weapons and knelt in the presence of royalty. I was set down by the door, at which point I knelt as well.

“I heard there was conflict on the Royal Academy grounds. What is the cause of this uproar?” Anastasius asked in a displeased voice. Lestilaut took this opportunity to state his opinion as fact: Ehrenfest had stolen the library’s magic tools that used to belong to royalty, so he was simply getting them back from us.

“Royal heirlooms...? Those shumils, I see. Your defense, Ehrenfest?”

“Yes, my liege. I received permission from Professor Solange to temporarily take Schwartz and Weiss from the library, so that I could complete a duty expected of all their masters. However, despite the fact we need to return them to the library as soon as possible, these students arrived to steal them from us. All we have done is protect the royalty’s magic tools from being stolen.”

Anastasius looked from me to Lestilaut, saw that we were glaring at each other, and then grimaced in annoyance. “Dunkelfelger! Ehrenfest! Summon your dormitory supervisors! I will hear the details of this matter in a nearby hall.”

“Prince Anastasius, may I ask to first return Schwartz and Weiss?” I said. “They are magic tools of the library, and their assistance is needed.”

“It is only logical for magic tools of the library to be returned to the library. You have my permission.”

No matter how our upcoming discussion went, Dunkelfelger couldn’t steal

Schwartz and Weiss away once they were back inside the library. It was my victory; I had protected them. I entered the library with the two shumils, Rihyarda and my guard knights following alongside us.

“Hello, Professor Solange. I have come to return Schwartz and Weiss.”

“Oh my. Lady Rozemyne. That was faster than I expected.”

“It went so quickly because we all worked together. Incidentally, Prince Anastasius has summoned me, and so I must leave at once. Please excuse me for being so hasty.” I then turned to Schwartz and Weiss and stroked their foreheads. “Thank you for protecting me,” I said, making sure to give them both plenty of mana.

Schwartz and Weiss were pretty drained, which was a surprise considering how much mana I had given them at noon. It just went to show how much mana they had used to protect me.

Having safely returned Schwartz and Weiss, I exited the library with a sigh of relief. My duty was now complete, and to be honest, I wasn’t all that enthusiastic about going to this discussion.

“Milady, you must not let your exhaustion show. We are dealing with an archduke candidate from a greater duchy; if you do not face them with dogged determination, you will end up swept into their plans.”

“So you say, but I have no idea what Lestilaut even wants from Schwartz and Weiss...” I noted. My response caused not just Rihyarda, but everyone present to balk; their expressions practically screamed, *“How is it not obvious?!”*

“A first-year archduke candidate of the thirteenth-ranked duchy became the master of two magic tools that cannot leave the library, can be touched only by their master, and require said master’s permission to be transferred to another person,” one student explained.

“Precisely,” another chimed in. “Who wouldn’t want to become the master of such magic tools?”

“There are that many people who want to aid the library...?” I replied. “That’s good to hear, at least.” Solange would really appreciate having that many people helping out around the library... Or so I thought, but everyone vigorously

shook their heads.

“Being recognized as the master of magic tools belonging to royalty is the same as being entrusted with their heirlooms—it is a great honor. I imagine they think that taking your place will be enough to earn them more favor from the royalty.”

I really didn’t feel like handing Schwartz and Weiss over to someone with that kind of mindset.

“Milady, please speak at the discussion knowing that there are vast gaps between your understanding and the understandings of others.”

“Right...”

By the time we arrived at the hall, there was already a row of students wearing blue capes kneeling before Anastasius. Rauffen was in attendance as well, standing beside the prince; it seemed that he was Dunkelfelger’s dormitory supervisor, which was a perfect match now that I thought about it.

We joined the others kneeling in front of Anastasius. After a moment, one of the prince’s attendants received an ordonnanz; then they frowned with worry. “It seems that Professor Hirschur is too busy with her research to come...” they said.

“Hmph. Looks like Ehrenfest has been abandoned by their supervisor,” Lestilaut said with a snort. He was clearly mocking us, but we couldn’t even get angry about it. Why? Because he was right. All we could do was glance at each other and shrug.

“This is normal in Ehrenfest, since Professor Hirschur basically never comes to the dorm, and it’s impossible to contact her once she begins her research. If only we had a better dormitory supervisor. One who was a lot more serious...” I muttered with exasperation, earning a light glare from Anastasius.

“If you want to change your dormitory supervisor, give the Sovereignty someone who will do a good job. We have only been unable to change your dormitory supervisor because Ehrenfest has nobody fit to become a Royal Academy professor.”

“That makes sense... I suppose, then, that Professor Hirschur will remain our

dormitory supervisor for quite some time.”

Ehrenfest was currently suffering from a serious shortage of manpower; anyone skilled enough to become a Royal Academy professor or Sovereign official was someone we would rather keep in Ehrenfest to help us.

“Still, I need your dormitory supervisor here,” Anastasius said. “Rozemyne, can you pull a trick of some kind to summon her?”

“I believe I can,” I replied. “Rihyarda, your ordonnanz?”

Rihyarda produced an ordonnanz, at which point I spoke my message.

“Professor Hirschur, this is Rozemyne. Please come to the hall at once. If our dormitory supervisor does not arrive soon, ownership of Schwartz and Weiss shall be transferred to another duchy, and you will be unable to continue researching them,” I said. Then, once the ordonnanz had disappeared from the room, I smiled at Anastasius. “She should be here soon.”

Just as I predicted, Hirschur appeared at the hall in the blink of an eye. She arrived so quickly, in fact, that I could only assume she had flown over on her highbeast. Wearing an impassive expression, she knelt in front of Anastasius. “Ehrenfest’s dormitory supervisor, at your service. Has something happened?”

“Yes. First of all—Rozemyne, explain to me how this whole mess began. My understanding is that those magic tools lacked a master and could not be touched. How did you manage to circumvent this?”

“I was so overjoyed about registering at the library that I prayed to the gods, which turned my mana into a blessing that brought the shumils back to life,” I explained.

“Are you mocking royalty?!” Lestilaut barked. “Do not lie to our faces!”

His response was to be expected—nobody believed me at first. Those back at the dorm hadn’t assumed I was lying when I told the story, but even they struggled to accept what had happened.

“I have told no lies, but that is the extent of my knowledge on the situation,” I said. “Please ask Professor Solange for details; I am sure her input is worth far more than mine.”

“Indeed. That much is true,” Anastasius replied, nodding in agreement despite seeming unconvinced by my claims.

The prince’s response appeared to annoy Lestilaut; he started talking about how we Ehrenfest students had tried making the magic tools a part of our dorm, and claimed that they had simply moved to stop that from happening.

Anastasius raised an eyebrow, and then he turned his gray eyes to me. It was clear to see that he wasn’t going to blindly believe what Lestilaut was saying.

“I have no intention of making Schwartz and Weiss my belongings,” I noted. “If someone worthy of them wishes to be their master, I will hand them over at once.”

“Enough lies!” Lestilaut snapped.

“Silence, Lestilaut. I am speaking to Rozemyne right now,” Anastasius said, silencing the outburst with a simple hand wave. This was the perfect opportunity for me to complain to the royalty about the state of the library and ask for new librarians.

“Prince Anastasius, I ask that you return some archnobles to the library so that they might serve as Schwartz’s and Weiss’s masters. Professor Solange is a mednoble and cannot maintain them both at once. I am only temporarily serving as their master because she is struggling to finish her library work alone. Please send someone from the Sovereignty to help so they can take the position of master from me. That is the fastest solution to this problem.”

“I see...” Anastasius replied, nodding with a conflicted expression. “It is my opinion that you speak well and true, but your proposed solution is not quite feasible at the moment. If a temporary master is enough to provide those magic tools with life, that should do for now.” There was evidently a reason the librarians couldn’t be sent back to the library right away.

With Anastasius having decided that things should stay as they were, Lestilaut smoothly stepped forward. “In that case, Prince Anastasius, I ask that you allow someone from Dunkelfelger to serve as the tools’ temporary master. I believe that I am much better suited to the role than someone from the Thirteenth.”

“Schwartz and Weiss have no need for a master who never steps foot in the

library," I interjected. "Whoever becomes their master needs to visit the library at least once every three days."

As Lestilaut and I once again glared at each other, Rauffen stepped forward with a suave grin. "Prince Anastasius, might I suggest we settle this through a game of ditter?" he asked, launching straight into a passionate tirade about why this was the perfect way to decide which one of us would make the better master. From his point of view, surely nobody who lacked the power to protect heirlooms of royalty could be trusted to serve as Schwartz's and Weiss's master. Dunkelfelger merely needed to prove they had the strength to beat Ehrenfest and earn the magic tools fairly.

"Would that not be unfair, considering that Dunkelfelger always wins the Interduchy Tournament...?" Anastasius asked.

"In this case, Ehrenfest would only need to guard the tools; they wouldn't need to attack us," Rauffen replied. I honestly wasn't able to say whether that was enough to count as leveling the playing field.

"I suppose Ehrenfest lacking the strength to protect the magic tools would pose a problem... Very well. Your duchies will play ditter in the knight building's stadium, with the winner being entrusted with Schwartz and Weiss," Anastasius decided.

And so, we had no choice but to obey. We stood up to head to the stadium.

"Hmph. You managed to scrape by earlier, but it won't happen again," Lestilaut snarled under his breath as he passed me. "Don't think you have any chance of winning." He eyed me with nothing but condescension, like I was lesser than him, and so I did not respond, instead just returning his gaze in silence.

"Lady Rozemyne, you must not lose this!" Hirschur said, grabbing me by the shoulders and fixing me with a hysterical stare. The fact she had actually started to talk about her "precious research subjects" indicated that she was maybe a bit too honest for a noble. There was no doubt in my mind that the only things she cared about here were their magic circles.

"...I won't lose. I have no intention whatsoever of allowing someone who cares not for the library to become the master of Schwartz and Weiss."

Not to mention, when it comes to charms, I've most likely got just as many as those two shumils do...

With that thought, I quietly placed a hand on my arm, gripping one of the charms that Ferdinand had given me.

Treasure-Stealing Ditter

"Alright, this is gonna be a game of treasure-stealing ditter!" Rauffen announced. "We've been playing nothing but speed ditter for a while now, so I'm pretty pumped. Back when I was young..."

Rauffen had evidently deemed our walk to the knight building the perfect opportunity to launch into a speech. He really was excited about this, and from what I could tell, he wasn't invested in Dunkelfelger winning at all—he just wanted to enjoy a good game of ditter. Despite seeming like something of a meathead, he was ultimately the dormitory supervisor of a greater duchy, so manipulating events in his favor like this was probably rather common. Or maybe he hadn't even considered the idea that Dunkelfelger might lose.

While I was thoughtfully watching Rauffen, Hirschur gave a small shrug. "It is quite clear that Rauffen is dying to play ditter with you, the infamous disciple of the great Ferdinand," she commented. "He was stunned to see you so frail in the Farthest Hall, but with treasure-stealing ditter, you can show your talents as a tactician. I imagine he hopes to see whether Ehrenfest will pose a threat at this year's Interduchy Tournament."

Rauffen was intensely passionate about the ditter played during the Interduchy Tournament, so it made sense that my reputation had caught his interest.

"It sounds to me like Professor Rauffen's intentions here are far removed from the actual problem at hand," I observed.

"That is correct. I imagine he does not care in the least whether Lord Lestilaut becomes those magic tools' new master; his priority is seeing how strong Ehrenfest is, and in turn, how strong you are. There are only a few students who know your mana compression method in the Academy this year, but the immense growth they have displayed on top of our duchy's stunning written grades has caused quite a stir among the professors."

I could feel all the looks the Ehrenfest knights were giving me, and their gazes

were agony. I couldn't deny that I'd given everyone a slight push and a bit of an incentive, but their high grades were ultimately the result of their own efforts—they barely had anything to do with me at all. What I was more concerned about was Rauffen enthusiastically demanding a rematch after we beat him.

"I get the feeling that Professor Rauffen will start being quite a pain in the neck if we win this. Should we lose on purpose?" I asked.

"Lady Rozemyne! What are you saying?!" Hirschur shouted. "You have to win! Lord Lestilaut will steal Schwartz and Weiss away otherwise!"

Oof. I see Professor Hirschur gets just as heated when her research is involved.

The goal here was to win, but I didn't want to win in a way that stood out too much. We had a blessing up our sleeves, but the knights hadn't yet formed anything resembling a proper battle strategy. Would it really be that easy for us to win a game like treasure-stealing ditter, which was all about outwitting your opponent and catching them by surprise?

Hm... A game about outwitting one's opponents, huh? No wonder Ferdinand dominated it.

I desperately searched my memories to see if any of the tactics mentioned in Ferdinand's reference documents would work here. I was still lost in thought by the time we reached the stadium.

It's so huge!

We were standing in a circular stadium about as big as a baseball field, designed for highbeasts to be flown around inside. I was initially convinced this was an open-air venue—a cloudy gray sky stretched out overhead, and motes of snow floated down toward us—but I couldn't actually feel any wind, and it looked as though the snow was hitting against a transparent ceiling of some kind.

A hallway had taken us directly from the main building to the stadium, leading to an area that I assumed was where the audience would normally gather. That was just a guess on my part, however—unless one was standing at the very front, it certainly wouldn't be the most convenient place to watch the game from, since the seating wasn't sloped or arranged in steps as I was used to. The

actual playing field was much lower than where we currently were, and I could see that there were large circles drawn here and there.

Rauffen stopped and turned around. He looked over the apprentice knights from both duchies, his expression lively, before opening his mouth to speak. “I’m gonna explain treasure-stealing ditter now. Pay close attention, since it’s not the same as the ditter you spend most of your time practicing.”

According to this explanation, teams had to first and foremost hunt the feybeast that would serve as their treasure. Defenders would need to weaken the feybeast for their own safety, but not so much that the feybeast could easily be stolen by the attackers. A team was considered defeated when its feybeast died, so it was crucial to master the art of weakening feybeasts just enough that they were manageable.

Each team would take the captured feybeast serving as its treasure back into its territory. From there, one had to repel attacks and protect their treasure while simultaneously invading enemy territories to either defeat or steal others’ feybeasts.

“Right. Let’s decide on the team size, based on whichever duchy has fewer knights. Ehrenfest, how many do you have?” Rauffen asked.

“Twenty-five,” Cornelius replied in an instant. Rauffen nodded in response and then instructed Dunkelfelger to select twenty-five knights.

“This is already unfair,” I muttered. “Dunkelfelger are getting to pick their best players. We don’t have that luxury, since we’re playing with everyone we have.”

Cornelius shrugged. “The same method is used in the Interduchy Tournament; that’s why lesser duchies with fewer people rarely ever win. Still, there’s a downside to them picking their best people—it means the apprentices of greater duchies who never get chosen don’t ever get a chance to prove themselves in the Royal Academy. It’s hard to say which situation is worse.”

Excellent grades were naturally important, but so was one’s performance in the Interduchy Tournament—not only did it have a huge influence on who the Sovereignty selected to join them, but it also impacted what job one was given back at home upon coming of age. Students who weren’t even given the

opportunity to demonstrate their worth were in hot water without a doubt.

"Next, we'll decide territories," Rauffen said. "In actual treasure-stealing ditter, each team is positioned around its respective dormitory, but we can just divide the stadium into halves for this. The second and fourth feybeast areas can be your territories. Take your feybeasts there."

Rauffen pointed at the circles on either end of the stadium. From what I understood, these circles were important for when feybeasts were created during normal practice. They also served as magic circles—when a hunted feybeast touched one, it would no longer be able to leave the area.

"We'll also implement a time limit for this game," Rauffen continued. "Dunkelfelger wins if they can kill or steal Ehrenfest's feybeast within the allotted period. Ehrenfest wins if they can outlast the time limit, or if they manage to kill or steal Dunkelfelger's feybeast. Naturally, either team will lose if they accidentally kill their own feybeast."

Feybeasts turned into feystones when they were killed, and a dead feybeast would instantly settle the match. Victory could also be secured by capturing the enemy's feybeast alive, which involved taking it from their territory into one's own, but this was so unnecessarily hard to accomplish that nobody even bothered to attempt it.

"That's everything. Any questions?" Rauffen asked, looking over the knights.

I shot my hand up. "Professor Rauffen, can we use feystones and magic tools when playing ditter? Could we use a feystone to make a barrier, for instance?"

"Absolutely. Back in the old games of treasure-stealing ditter where all the duchies played at once, using magic tools was par for the course. Games sometimes lasted long enough that teams needed to rely on rejuvenation potions, especially if someone got hurt."

"I see. Thank you ever so much."

It wouldn't surprise me if a certain High Priest hid tons of magic tools all over himself.

I pressed a hand against the leather pouch hanging from my waist, confirming that there were rejuvenation potions and feystones inside. It was at that

moment that Rauffen suddenly looked up, as if coming to a sudden realization.

“Wait... Hold on. Are you planning to play too?! You’re a first-year archduke candidate—not even an apprentice knight! Have you got a death wish or something?!”

Those from Ehrenfest had likewise not expected me to participate. I heard a variety of cries telling me it was too dangerous, that I should simply sit out and watch, and that fighting was best left to the knights.

“This is a battle for Schwartz and Weiss; it would be unthinkable for their master not to get involved,” I said.

“Oho! I admire your spirit!” Rauffen declared. “You should play too, Lord Lestilaut!”

Lestilaut glared at me angrily. It seemed that he had intended to spectate the match rather than actually take part, but my own involvement was forcing his hand.

“Alright. The game will begin when the next bell rings,” Rauffen said. “I’d recommend you spend the time until then working on a plan.”

It was decided that Ehrenfest would use the circle closer to where we currently stood, while Dunkelfelger would use one at the far end of the stadium. Without missing a beat, Dunkelfelger’s knights jumped onto their highbeasts and flew to their territory. Once they were gone, Cornelius scolded me for my recklessness, and then we began our strategy meeting.

Games of treasure-stealing ditter began with each team hunting its chosen feybeast, so the first matter to discuss was naturally which feybeast we were going to hunt. Weaker feybeasts were easier to capture but could also be eliminated in an instant by the opposing team, whereas stronger feybeasts were more resilient but harder to capture and more likely to attack those in the team busy defending it.

“We should hunt a relatively weak feybeast for this game,” I said.

“How weak, exactly?” Leonore asked, tilting her head. Strength was such an abstract concept that I struggled to find the right words, but I tried to describe what I was looking for as precisely as I could.

“Weak enough that it will not pose much of a threat once restricted with bands of light from a schtappe, but not so weak that it might die while being bound. The smaller, the better too.”

“But why? Dunkelfelger will easily kill a feybeast that weak!” Traugott protested, but I dismissed his argument with a wave of my hand.

“There’s nothing to be concerned about. Once the feybeast is bound and thrown into my highbeast, our opponent will struggle to even lay a hand on it,” I explained.

The inside of my highbeast was filled with mana, and Ferdinand had said that I would be safe as long as I was inside. Attackers couldn’t break Lessy without overwhelming my mana with their own, and I wasn’t too worried about that; I doubted there were many apprentice knights in the Royal Academy who could overwhelm the mana of an archduke candidate with mana as compressed as mine.

The apprentice knights widened their eyes in surprise after hearing my plan.

“That’s just...” Cornelius trailed off.

“Is it not cowardly for us to hide our feybeast somewhere they cannot attack it?” Traugott asked.

“Why would it be?” I retorted. “Professor Rauffen said we have to keep the feybeast within our circle, but he said nothing about highbeasts being forbidden from use.”

“Of course they’re not forbidden! Fighting on highbeasts is a fundamental part of ditter!” Traugott declared. It was precisely for the reason he had stated that nobody could complain about me hiding the treasure within my own highbeast.

“I will simply be riding my highbeast. There won’t be any problems as long as I stay within our territory, correct?” I asked, but my question was met with nothing but dazed stares from the apprentice knights. “What is the problem with giving the treasure absolute protection? The rules of the game state only that we must protect the feybeast and keep it alive. Furthermore, Dunkelfelger may use the same strategy on us.”

“Absolutely not. No normal person would think to use their highbeast to store a feybeast,” Cornelius shot back. He had a point there, especially considering that the apprentice knights didn’t even have drivable highbeasts to begin with.

“You are all acting as though storing our treasure in my highbeast will make it invincible, but that is absolutely not the case,” I argued. “There are ways Dunkelfelger can still succeed; we are simply relying on the situation being so abnormal that they struggle to realize them.”

I gazed across the knights as they continued to blink in surprise, trying to encourage them to think on their own. They needed to protect my highbeast with its potential weak points in mind, but they were evidently struggling enough that I decided to provide a hint.

“Angelica, do you recall our victory conditions?”

“Defend our feybeast until time runs out, or defeat our opponent’s feybeast. Was there something else...?”

Cornelius raised his head, seeming to have had a sudden epiphany. “Or *steal* our opponent’s feybeast,” he added. “Are you warning us that they might attempt to steal your highbeast with the feybeast inside?”

“Exactly. It is entirely probable that they will capture my highbeast the same way it was captured two years ago, though it is an abnormal enough approach that I am unsure they will realize it straight away.”

“The moment they do though, you yourself are going to be in danger,” Cornelius said with a pained expression.

“Regardless of whether we win or lose, I will be safe as long as I remain in my highbeast. Even during the incident, I would have most likely been safe had I stayed inside Lessy and not tried to get out.”

“Still. I do not wish to put you in danger.”

I couldn’t help but sigh at Cornelius’s obstinacy. “The very reason for strategizing is to outwit one’s opponent and catch them off guard. A head-on engagement with no greater plan is no fight at all. Dunkelfelger already has a strength advantage, since they were able to choose their knights; the only way for us to even the playing field is by outwitting them. Exploit absolutely every

weakness you can without restraint, surprise them time and time again, lay traps for them to walk into, and—ultimately—secure the best possible result for yourselves. You will never become as cold and calculating as Ferdinand if you only ever attack your opponents head-on without any trickery."

It was at that moment that I had my own mini revelation. "Hm... Actually, never mind. It just occurred to me that we do not need more cold, calculating individuals," I said, backpedaling at once. I knew deep down that nothing at all good would come from more people I knew acting like Ferdinand.

Cornelius chuckled. "Judging by the plots you are cooking up here, you are taking more influence from Lord Ferdinand than anyone," he observed. The surrounding apprentice knights all nodded in agreement.

Wait, what...? Am I that evil now?

"To summarize, Lady Rozemyne: you want to move the treasure to as secure of a location as possible while we focus on defense?"

"I believe that would be wise."

If we could win without ever having to go on the offensive, then that was unequivocally the best option. The apprentice knights here also seemed to lack any ideas more complex than charging together in a group to win by force, so this would be good defensive practice for them.

"You are so used to playing speed ditter that you do not have much experience playing defensively, correct? Guard knights who can only fight on the offensive simply will not do," I warned. My eyes rested on Angelica and Traugott in particular—they pretty much embodied the concept of "offense is the best defense."

"Judging from the prior ditter games I have studied, Dunkelfelger excels at using coordinated teamwork to defeat their enemies with swift, targeted blows," I explained. "They are likely to heavily prioritize offensive maneuvers here, especially considering the time limit. We will win if our defense lasts, so they are going to be desperate to break through at all costs."

"I agree," Cornelius said.

"Their attacks will intensify as time decreases. This is when their defense will

be at its weakest, and it is then that we will attack. You need only hold out until then."

Most of the apprentice knights were nodding along in agreement... but not Traugott. On the contrary, he had finally lost his patience.

"Focusing on defense is not how the game is meant to be played. It is not real ditter. I want to go all out and attack with everything I have!"

It seemed that Traugott was so used to playing speed-focused ditter, which was all about killing feybeasts as quickly as possible, that he lacked the patience to remain on the defensive. I couldn't deny that I was effectively pulling the rug out from under the apprentice knights, so I decided it might be wise to give them some way to blow off steam.

"Traugott. If you can remain patient, I will give you an opportunity to go all out."

"Lady Rozemyne, please give me the same opportunity! I want to fight the feybeast too!" Angelica exclaimed not even a moment later. She was just as eager to show off.

"Very well, then. I shall make preparations for you also. Cornelius, please support them both."

"...Understood," Cornelius replied. He looked at the two knights already pumping themselves up, and in an instant his expression became tired and withered. He was the only one here who could drag them back to our territory if they ran off.

"If we are to give you such an opportunity, however... I will need someone who is good at throwing weapons," I said. "Is there anyone here who could throw rocks, or perhaps javelins, into the enemy territory?"

"Yes! Me!" Judithe exclaimed, shooting up her hand. "That's my specialty! Am I going to get an opportunity to show off too?!"

I gave a brisk nod and decided to take her up on the offer. "Very well, Judithe. I will ask for your help in this. You will need to ride with me in my highbeast."

"Absolutely!"

I resumed speaking to all the knights. “In this game, we need only protect our treasure, so we shall focus entirely on defense at the start. Here, patience is essential. Think of this as practice for fighting defensively, and focus on blocking the attacks of our opponents. That is not to say you should simply ready shields and wait, however—a good offense does indeed make a good defense, since eliminating foes prevents them from making future attacks. The key is to remain in formation and not rush into enemy territory alone. Fight as one.”

“Yes, ma’am!” the knights replied in unison.

We separated into groups, with some preparing to leave to hunt the feybeast and others remaining behind in our territory. It was not long before fifth bell chimed, signaling for the hunt to begin. Knights from both Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger wasted no time in taking to the skies on their highbeasts, though Judithe and Leonore were staying with me in our duchy’s territory.

“Lady Rozemyne, do you think we can defeat Dunkelfelger?” Leonore asked quietly, watching as the highbeasts took flight.

“I am approaching this with the intent to win. Do you think we will lose, Leonore?”

“We have never beaten Dunkelfelger before, so I find it hard to imagine us winning this time...”

“You have only ever lost at speed ditter. This is treasure-stealing ditter, and our opponents are equally inexperienced with it. We have a chance to win.”

Worst-case scenario, I could just brute force a victory by encapsulating both myself and the feybeast in Schutzaria’s shield. I had absolutely no intention of allowing us to lose; I just wanted it to seem as though the knights had played a bigger part in our victory, to avoid drawing any unnecessary attention to me.

“The game will start once both teams have brought their feybeasts into their territory, correct?” I asked.

Judithe smiled and then shook her head. “It started when the bell rang. We’re playing it now.”

I glanced around the stadium, stunned. I could see Lestilaut and several apprentice knights hanging around Dunkelfelger’s territory, but they weren’t

really doing anything. They merely seemed to be waiting for the feybeasts to be brought back.

“If the game has already started, why are we not attacking each other...?”

“What’s the point in attacking their territory when they don’t yet have a feybeast?”

“Well, could one not theoretically attack the knights as they’re bringing it back?” I asked. They would surely be weary from the fight, they would be traveling with a dangerous feybeast in tow, and their guard would almost certainly be down. It seemed to me like the perfect opportunity.

“Lady Rozemyne, would that not end the match before the competition has even begun?!”

“Judithe, what in the world are you saying? You told me it had already begun barely even a moment ago.”

Leonore blinked in surprise several times. “You are quite right, Lady Rozemyne. That was quite the blind spot,” she said.

As it turned out, the apprentice knights were only experienced with practice games of ditter, during which they waited for the professors to prepare the feybeasts before the starting signal was given. Leonore noted that the knights had never played a game of treasure-stealing ditter that included the feybeast-hunting stage, and so it hadn’t occurred to them that they could act so soon.

“The notes Cornelius received from Lord Eckhart about ditter strategy did mention how to stay on guard during the feybeast-hunting segment. In short, it must be normal in treasure-stealing ditter to disrupt one’s opponent while they are hunting their feybeast and attempting to bring it back to their territory,” Leonore said.

Judithe listened silently, her head tilted in confusion.

“Lady Rozemyne, let us rethink our plans,” Leonore continued, already considering ways to strike the enemy territory. “We cannot attack now as we do not have enough knights, but shall we attack the moment they return?”

“I would rather attack their camp now, but I suppose that would run the risk

of us being caught in a pincer movement by their returning knights."

"Indeed. Our combat potential is lower than theirs, and they have no doubt left some of their best knights behind," Leonore agreed. It would be much too risky to attack them now considering that we didn't know when their knights would return from hunting their feybeast.

"Rather than attacking their feybeast, I suggest we launch an all-out surprise attack on Dunkelfelger's returning knights. We can secure an early victory if we kill the feybeast there," I proposed. We had a much higher chance of success launching a surprise attack on the tired knights lugging back their treasure than we did attacking their empty territory.

"What happens if we don't manage to kill it though?" Judithe asked, worried.

Leonore smiled gently. "Nothing at all. We will simply return to prioritizing defense as we agreed during our strategy meeting."

The knights from Ehrenfest were the first to return, which came as no surprise given that we had decided to hunt a fairly weak feybeast. They had a fetze—the evolution of a zantze—bound with bands of light.

"Are you lot really settling for a tiny feybeast like that as your treasure?" jeered the apprentice knights from Dunkelfelger who had stayed behind in their territory. "A few measly mana ripples could probably kill that thing."

While watching our opponents out of the corner of my eye, I produced Lessy and made him roughly the size of a family car. I tossed the bound fetze onto the back seat before shutting the door.

Okay. Perfect.

"Wh-What the...?! Is that her infamous highbeast?!" came shocked cries from the enemy camp. I turned my attention from them to my own knights, who were all trying to avoid making eye contact with their surprised opponents, unwilling to confirm that this was indeed their leader's highbeast.

"There has been a change of plan, everyone—we will now be launching a full-on surprise attack when the enemy returns with their feybeast," I said. Leonore then took a brief moment to describe what Eckhart had written in his notes.

“In other words, we failed to grasp how to properly play treasure-stealing ditter.”

“Does this mean we can go all out?” Angelica asked.

I nodded. “Killing the feybeast is of course our goal, but I want you to fly high into the air before descending on the enemy’s territory to prevent them from dispersing. Make sure you have a clear path behind you so that you can return at once if the surprise attack fails.”

With that, we divided into offensive and defensive groups; we needed at least some defense to counter a potential attack on our own territory during our raid. Everyone then changed their schtappes into weapons and climbed onto their highbeasts, pretending to take defensive stances while in reality preparing to attack.

“Dunkelfelger might not even falter from our surprise attack, so do not let your guards down under any circumstances,” Cornelius said. It was a strict warning to Traugott, who, despite having said that he understood, really did not look as though he understood at all.

“Angelica. Traugott. You must follow Cornelius’s orders without hesitation,” I said, fixing them both with firm glares. “Return to our territory as soon as he tells you to. Should either of you prove unable to do as instructed, consider this the last ditter game you will ever play.”

The two exchanged looks, and then they nodded.

Dunkelfelger appeared to have chosen what was at least theoretically considered the best feybeast for this particular game. Even from a distance, I could see its large shape floundering within a net of light.

“Not yet,” I said. “Wait until they get closer.”

The knights returning with their treasure steadily descended to cheers of approval from their teammates. “A schnefeld!” one apprentice cried. “Good job! Perfect!”

Schnefelds seemed to be regarded as the easiest feybeast to capture in treasure-stealing ditter. They had resilient hides and were relatively docile, at least as far as feybeasts went. From my perspective, they looked somewhat like

slightly smaller, rockier hippos.

"...Okay. All their knights are there. We won't be attacked from behind," Angelica said, enhancing her sight to count all the knights before turning to look at me.

I preemptively raised my hand, and then—

"Now!"

The surprise attack began.

Cornelius and a power-enhanced Angelica immediately took point. They were using other knights' highbeasts as stepping stones to jump through the air, saving themselves from having to expend mana on their own highbeasts. Angelica leapt ahead of Cornelius with a long-bladed Stenluke in hand, moving in an arc before plummeting down upon the Dunkelfelger knights transporting their feybeast. Her eyes were on the schnefeld and the schnefeld alone.

"Whoa! What the...?!" came the confused, panicked cries of our enemy. Angelica's one-woman assault had caught them entirely by surprise, and she ripped apart the net containing the feybeast with her manablade, freeing it from captivity.

"Falling! Backup!" she called, turning in midair after inflicting some degree of damage to the target. Unlike during the kidnapping incident, however, she wasn't plummeting to her death—she easily produced her highbeast while enhanced, swiftly flew back above the enemies, and then jumped down again, strengthening her attacks with the force of gravity.

"Hyaaah!" Cornelius yelled, striking apprentice after apprentice. His opponents were entirely focused on Angelica's sudden appearance, which had given him the perfect opening to launch his own sneak attack.

"Leonore, check the enemy's territory!" I shouted, watching the battle in the sky with narrowed eyes. She replied at once.

"The enemy is destabilized. Several knights guarding the territory are getting on their highbeasts to provide aid."

"Right! Prepare your bow! Judithe, continue observing the enemy territory!"

“Understood!”

Leonore transformed her schtappe into a bow, nocked a mana arrow, and then glared up at the aerial clash with me. Our plan was to fire a volley that would not only signal our retreat, but also stall any enemies who attempted to chase our fleeing knights and intimidate any others from joining the pursuit.

“Leonore, shoot when you feel it is time to retreat.”

“I will do my best.”

Having entrusted Judithe with watching the enemy territory, I started focusing on the battle as well. Dunkelfelger were stuck trying to transport their feybeast, meaning they needed to leave some knights to protect it. This resulted in them having fewer knights on the attack and made them a far less adaptable force. On top of that, Ehrenfest had the divine protection of Angriff the God of War. We were clearly at an advantage here.

“How is Ehrenfest this strong?!” the knights on the receiving end of our surprise attack sputtered. It seemed they had assumed they would effortlessly seize victory, since their duchy was ranked much higher than ours.

Uh huh. Uh huh. That’s right.

I nodded in satisfaction, appreciating how well my strategy had worked... but Ehrenfest’s dominance did not last.

“Do not falter! Defensive positions! Protect the treasure!” barked an older student among the Dunkelfelger knights—one who was likely used to taking command.

In the blink of an eye, the Dunkelfelger knights organized themselves back into position. Some blocked attacks with shields, others rewove the net used to carry their schnefeld, some launched counterattacks... Each person had a clear grasp on the role they played, so the panic from the surprise attack quickly subsided.

“Half of you, return to our territory with the schnefeld! The rest, keep up the counterattack while gradually moving to rejoin us!” the older student continued.

The knights replied with a crisp “Yes, sir!” as some began making their way back to their territory. Our surprise attack had ultimately been a half success: we had managed to stun Dunkelfelger and disrupt their formation, but they were so well-trained that a single bark from a superior officer had put them right back into place.

I guess they don’t win the Interduchy Tournament every year for nothing.

I had no choice but to applaud our enemy’s excellent teamwork, but also sigh in disappointment at our own. Even I could see that Ehrenfest’s coordination was embarrassingly bad in comparison.

Our teams are like night and day.

My blessing meant that the Ehrenfest knights were stronger than usual, but they were working almost entirely independently of each other. For that reason, the moment Dunkelfelger began hardening their defenses, Ehrenfest stopped doing any real damage at all. Cornelius and the still-enhanced Angelica were going to town, but they were the only two actually having much of an impact. We had a huge potential advantage here, but not the teamwork to properly realize it.

“Lady Rozemyne, the enemies are not coming this way, but more and more of their defenders are leaving to join the attackers as their treasure approaches their territory!” Judithe shouted.

Dunkelfelger were fighting at half strength while they defended their treasure, yet we were still doing barely any damage to them. Once they had the treasure secured and could go all out, they would wipe us out in an instant.

Leonore glanced my way before firing the arrow calling for a retreat. It arced through the air, then exploded noisily above our knights.

“Retreat!” Cornelius ordered, spurring the Ehrenfest knights to immediately start falling back.

“Support them with arrows!” Leonore yelled.

Several more Ehrenfest knights readied their bows and unleashed a volley of mana arrows as both groups returned to their respective territories, clashing slightly in the process. There was one knight, however, who abandoned the

concept of coordination entirely to continue his assault. I furrowed my brow in frustration just as Cornelius barked for Traugott to retreat.

Traugott unwillingly rejoined us, looking very annoyed.

The wounded and those lacking mana drank rejuvenation potions to recover. I would have liked to launch a follow-up attack to prevent Dunkelfelger from having the same opportunity to recuperate, but it was hard to imagine Ehrenfest ever having the coordination to accomplish such a feat.

“Our apprentices are weak...” I observed. “I had thought that students in the Royal Academy would show at least a fraction of the coordination I’ve seen from the Knight’s Order, but I see that was a foolish assumption.”

The teamwork the Knight’s Order had shown when hunting the trombe and the Lord of Winter indicated that they at the very least knew what they were doing.

“I truly cannot believe our knights are so unable to cooperate. As much as I would like to blame speed ditter for this, Dunkelfelger has thus far shown excellent teamwork skills. The knight commander has my sympathy; I will not envy him when he has to train this many new recruits from the ground up.”

“What would you know, Lady Rozemyne?!” Traugott shouted. “You didn’t even join the battle!”

“It is because I watched from afar that I can speak with such confidence, Traugott. Consider how much you are throwing our entire command hierarchy into disarray by ignoring an order to retreat.”

Traugott frowned, anger blazing in his eyes. “I saw no point in falling back. I can still go on.”

“Of course you can. And that is important, because the game is not yet over. It would not do for you to tap out this early on.”

“Then let me fight. Don’t shame me with retreat.”

I widened my eyes in surprise, having not expected him to be this much of a concern. I didn’t know what was making him so angry and discontent, but his desperation was making him run in circles.

“As I have said, a fight is more than just blindly charging one’s enemies. Observe your surroundings carefully and—”

“I know that already!”

“I hope for your sake that you do... The enemy will now be taking us seriously. This is where our defensive battle truly begins, and it will be your last opportunity to prove that you are capable of proper teamwork.”

Both sides seemed to finish healing at the same time. We exchanged tense glares, watching each other carefully as Dunkelfelger took on an offensive position and Ehrenfest went on the defensive. Our opponent had no openings—they must have been on guard against another surprise attack—while our formation would most likely break down the second another battle began and Traugott broke away to fight on his own.

Thiiis isn’t good...

Angriff’s blessing wouldn’t be of much use if our formation crumbled; the most it would do was delay our inevitable defeat. My aim had been to give the Ehrenfest knights at least a little experience fighting defensively, but I doubted they would be able to do much better than they had during the surprise attack.

“Judithe. Leonore. To me.”

I jumped into my highbeast with them both—though Judithe climbed into the passenger seat with great trepidation—and took a light-yellow feystone dyed with my mana out from a leather pouch. It had once taken the appearance of an ordinary crystal, but it had since been pared down with a brewing knife to about the size of a piece of candy. I took one of the ultra-nasty rejuvenation potions I had received from Ferdinand and poured a few drops onto the feystone’s surface.

“Judithe, when I give the signal, I want you to hit the schnefeld with this.” I gave her the feystone, but she merely tilted her head at me, unsure what it was. “This is the second part of our surprise attack. I will give the signal when our defenses begin to crumble, so be ready.”

I would fly to the edge of our territory when that happened, and then have Judithe leap out onto her own highbeast and throw the feystone. I explained to

her how to go about doing that while demonstratively opening and closing Lessy's side door.

"Okay. But couldn't we just do it now and win easily...?" Judithe asked, prompting Leonore to nod in agreement.

"Yes, we likely could," I said, "but it would be the worst possible outcome for Ehrenfest to win through my plans without struggling themselves or realizing how lacking they currently are."

"What do you mean? Isn't winning a good thing...?"

In this case, it would have been better for us to lose and allow the better players to claim victory; after all, defeat provided an important opportunity to analyze one's performance and determine the reason for the loss. It was best to remind our knights that their coordination was pathetic, and that they lacked experience with defensive combat. Had we not been playing with Schwartz and Weiss on the line, I would have merely sat back and allowed Ehrenfest to lose. Given that this wasn't an option, however, I just wanted to win the fight itself, while still reminding them how much further they had to go with their own training.

"You and Leonore were both watching the surprise attack as well, yes? You will now see from within my highbeast what happens when the situation is reversed, and we are the ones on the defensive. Observe carefully and compare Dunkelfelger's defensive coordination to our own, and then consider the significance of what you have seen. Fight while thinking at all times about what you can do to become stronger."

"We will," they replied with determined nods.

With that, the highbeasts began moving. Dunkelfelger started their advance, and then Ehrenfest moved in turn. The two teams glared at each other in the air while fighting to get as high up as possible, and then one of the Dunkelfelger knights suddenly broke forward. Several knights from Ehrenfest shot up to pursue them.

"Ah, no! Don't send that many people after a single knight!" Judithe cried in a panic. Dunkelfelger had left some of their knights behind to guard their treasure, which meant Ehrenfest was at something of a numerical advantage,

but that was still too many knights to send after a single opponent. Naturally, that weakened a part of our team's defenses, meaning we were struggling from the very moment the actual fight began.

"That is not where their primary fighters are! Go back to Cornelius!" Leonore cried, cradling her head in agony at being unable to warn the knights of their poor coordination and all the gaps in their defenses.

It was more than apparent how little experience Ehrenfest had when it came to defensive combat, and the highly coordinated Dunkelfelger was dominating the battle as a result. Ehrenfest had only even survived for this long due to my blessing—their desperate fight continued with almost zero coordination. The only ones working together at all were Cornelius, Angelica, and those who served Wilfried, since they had all been trained for their guard knight positions. But that was only seven of our twenty-three knights up there; it was only natural that Dunkelfelger's best would soon destroy them.

"Aah! Traugott! Where are you going?!" Judithe cried.

"Lady Rozemyne... Is it just me, or is the entire defensive line flying increasingly higher?" Leonore asked.

"Yes, and that is exactly what our opponents are hoping for. I expect an ace squad of their strongest knights will soon charge across the ground toward us," I said, pointing at the enemy territory. The Dunkelfelger knights left behind to guard the treasure were assuming an offensive formation, with only a few staying on the defensive as guards for Lestilaut and the treasure. "Did you not learn this tactic in your written lessons, Leonore? I read about it in books and saw how it functions in gewinnen. We will lose for sure if we let things continue as they are."

"I did. I did, but..." Leonore trailed off, wearing the frown of someone who was for the first time experiencing something they had only ever read about. It seemed she had never actually connected the content covered in her lessons to any real-world situations.

Judithe, in contrast, had yet to even start her knight course, meaning she lacked the necessary context to talk about strategizing. She was simply aghast at the battle she was witnessing. "Lady Rozemyne, is now the time to be acting

so casually?! They're about to be on top of us! We're going to lose as soon as they attack!" she yelped.

"I suppose we should make our move now then. Remember what I told you."

Just as predicted, the enemy knights who had been watching the aerial fight on their highbeasts began racing this way to launch a direct attack. Once they were right between our two territories, I started to drive Lessy straight toward them at the edge of our territory.

"They've noticed us!" one of the enemies cried.

"They're planning something! Get back to base!" shouted another.

Having noticed my Pandabus, the approaching Dunkelfelger knights abruptly turned around and started retreating back to a defensive position.

"Judithe! Shoot the stone above its head!" I called. "Hurry!"

"Understood," Judithe replied. She jumped out once we were at the edge of our territory, got on her own highbeast, morphed her schtappe into a slingshot, and then finally shot the stone.



The feystone soared through the air faster than our opponents could retreat on their highbeasts. It followed a smooth parabola before heading straight for the head of the schnefeld, just as planned.

“They fired something! Block it!”

“What do you mean ‘something’?! Where is it?!”

The feystone was small and moving at an incredible speed, such that the knights from Dunkelfelger weren’t even sure what was flying toward them. The schnefeld, however, was evidently more perceptive. It opened its mouth wide and caught the feystone in one effortless motion.

“Lady Rozemyne! It ate the feystone!” Judithe shrieked, coming back to me with tears in her eyes. She was certain she had failed, but I met her with a smile.

“I was hoping for it to land nearby and be eaten, but this is even better.”

All of a sudden, the schnefeld started to grow in size several times over. It ripped through the band of lights binding it as it turned into a giant before our eyes.

“GRAAAH!” the hippo-like feybeast finally roared. It ended up around the size of a two-story building and started to rampage as though its calm just moments ago had been a complete ruse.

“What?! What?!” Judithe shrieked. She wasn’t the only one taken by surprise, however—our enemies began letting out shocked cries as well.

“The schnefeld has become giant!” one of the Dunkelfelger knights shouted. His comrades in the air stopped their attack and immediately rushed back to their territory; a rampaging schnefeld of such a great size posed a threat to Lestilaut the archduke candidate and the knights who had stayed with him.

“What in the world was that, Lady Rozemyne?!”

“A ruelle fruit dyed with my mana,” I replied. “They’re well-suited for mana rejuvenation, which also conveniently means they turn feybeasts into giants.”

It turned out that the purple ruelles gathered on the Night of Schutzaria had restorative properties; one could eat them like candy to recover their mana.

Ferdinand had given some to me to use in the event that I ran out of mana to activate my charms, considering how much mana the enhancers all over my body were already using.

“Why would you ever do something like this...?” Judithe asked.

“So that Dunkelfelger can no longer hold back against their schnefeld. Still, Ferdinand never fails to impress. To think his ultra-nasty potion would taste and smell so bad that even a feybeast would be left floundering.”

It was much riskier to contain feybeasts of such great size and strength, which made them ill-suited to serving as treasure. Dunkelfelger had no choice but to start fighting the rampaging schnefeld as they would in a game of speed ditter. My plan had merely been to make the feybeast large enough that trying to contain it was not even viable, but the result was even better than expected—Dunkelfelger were no longer able to pay us any attention at all.

“Do not just laze about; begin healing at once. Angelica, Cornelius—drink these potions,” I instructed, snapping the Ehrenfest knights out of their daze while handing Angelica and Cornelius two vials containing Ferdinand’s improved potion. “Our next attack needs to be at full strength, so I want you both to recover all of your mana.”

“Understood!” Angelica replied. “Ngh... But it smells so bad...”

“Ferdinand brewed it himself,” I noted. “It really is impressive, both in terms of its effectiveness and its taste.”

Angelica and Cornelius each drank their potion with a grimace. They groaned and clapped their hands over their mouths mere moments later, their eyes squeezed shut, but it seemed they had somehow managed to keep the concoctions down.

“Just what were those?!” Cornelius yelled, tears in his eyes.

“Rejuvenation potions, with an improved flavor that Ferdinand generously worked very hard on,” I replied.

“What do you mean, ‘improved flavor’? That was vile!”

“You will understand just how kind Ferdinand truly is if you try the original,

but do you have what it takes to attempt that? How courageous are you feeling today?" I asked, holding up a vial of the ultra-nasty potion I had dripped onto the feystone earlier.

Cornelius hurriedly shook his head, and then he looked at the giant schnefeld. "That potion was extremely effective at restoring my mana, I must admit, but what are you planning to make us do?" he asked with a guarded expression.

I smiled confidently. "Turn your schtappe into a sword and fill it with as much mana as you can, preferably until it begins to spark. Then, once the enemy has weakened the schnefeld, finish it off with a single blow. Father and Eckhart are able to do this, so I am sure you are as well."

Cornelius blanched, already feeling the pressure. "I can try, but... I've rarely ever done that before. And an all-out attack such as that will leave me defenseless until I can recover my mana. Is that acceptable?"

"Fear not, I have more potions from Ferdinand. You can just blast away and be ready to drink more. If we do not finish this here, Ehrenfest has no chance of winning. Surely you recognize by now how terrible our knights are at cooperating."

Cornelius nodded with a bitter frown.

"You say that you now have as much mana as Father, and I am placing my trust in that. It seems to me that an attack is best done while plummeting down toward your target—that is what I have learned from watching both Ferdinand and Father."

"Where did you see them use an attack like that...?"

"I have accompanied the Knight's Order on feybeast hunts several times in the past for religious purposes," I said. I had seen them use the attack during the trombe hunt and the Spring Prayer ambush, so that much was true; I just wasn't planning to disclose how many times I had seen it, or where.

"Angelica, please protect our territory from the shockwaves of Cornelius's attack. Face the schnefeld directly and produce mana just as Cornelius does."

"Understood," Angelica said with Stenluke in hand, having recovered from the potion's nastiness.

“I will go too!” Traugott declared.

“No,” I replied curtly. “You stay, Traugott.”

“But why?! Are you saying I’m weaker than them?!”

That certainly is part of the reason... I thought to myself. Traugott was indeed several degrees weaker than Angelica and Cornelius, but he was so obsessed with strength that I couldn’t imagine it was worth telling him this now.

“No. I am saying it is dangerous for an uncooperative knight incapable of following orders to participate in this. You are useless where it counts. Stand down.”

“What?!” Traugott exclaimed, his blue eyes widening with surprise. I simply turned my back to him, instead getting ready to send Angelica and Cornelius on their way.

“The two of you must deftly time your attacks together. Keep a careful eye on one another,” I said.

“Understood.”

Cornelius soared up into the sky to prepare. Even from where I was below, I could tell he was already pouring his mana into the large broadsword in his hand. Angelica, meanwhile, had moved into position to protect me and was readying her manablade. Stenluke used that opportunity to instruct her.

“Master, if you plan to protect the master of my master and the territory, stand here. No, do not face that way. Move your right foot half a step forward. Hm... Yes, that should do. Ready me and begin pouring in your mana—use as much as you can manage.”

“Everyone else, ready your shields and prepare for the upcoming blast!” I called.

The apprentice knights all obeyed at once, turning their schtappes into shields. I gripped Lessy’s handles as tightly as I could and steeled myself, ready to endure the shockwave no matter how intense it was. Leonore, who was sitting in the back seat, looked up at Cornelius as if praying for his success.

Dunkelfelger’s knights were landing blow after blow on the schnefeld with

excellent coordination. Watching them fight made it clear why they were dominant in speed ditter, but the rules here weren't quite the same as what they were used to—killing the schnefeld would result in their loss, meaning they had to stop at just weakening the rampaging beast.

Cornelius arrived far above Dunkelfelger's knights as they fought with limited strength so as to not go overboard. He readied his loudly crackling sword, flipped his highbeast in midair, and then charged down while roaring "STAND BAAACK!"

Dunkelfelger's knights had been so deeply embroiled in their fight that they hadn't noticed Cornelius, and upon hearing his cry, they all stopped and looked up in shock.

"Retreat! Get on the defensive. Protect Lord Lestilaut!" one of our opponents' head knights ordered, having realized that the attack was coming at full power.

"I'm going too!" Angelica shouted, her eyes fixed on Dunkelfelger. She was filling Stenluke with mana, on the very cusp of unleashing an attack, but her manablade interjected at once to warn her that it wasn't yet time.

"GRAAAH!" Cornelius roared, swinging his broadsword and unleashing the huge quantity of mana he had stockpiled. A massive slash of radiant light, much like the ones I had seen so many times before, shot down toward the schnefeld.

"Now, Master!"

"HYAAAAH!" Angelica swung her manablade hard, sending a similar slash racing toward the schnefeld. Stenluke's timing had been perfect: Cornelius's attack resulted in a huge explosion and a rapidly expanding shockwave, which Angelica's attack then sliced right through, hitting the schnefeld with a second blow.

Despite their defensive formations, the knights from Dunkelfelger were barely able to remain upright, and several Ehrenfest apprentices were sent flying back with such force that they rolled along the ground. I gritted my teeth and endured the shockwave. Once it settled, the schnefeld was gone.

"Lady Rozemyne, I got the feystone!" Angelica cried in a bright voice, holding up the glittering feystone in her hand.

Rauffen, who had been watching the entire fight, cried out in awe. “Incredible! Ehrenfest wins!”

The Prince's Summons

"Good job! I love seeing surprises like that!" Rauffen exclaimed, excitedly rushing over once the game was decided. "All those surprise attacks really reminded me of Lord Ferdinand."

"Thank you," I replied, lowering my gaze. "However, I would not have won without executing such extreme strategies. I am in awe of the discipline and overall proficiency of Dunkelfelger's apprentice knights. They truly are quite something."

Rauffen looked over at our recent opponents, who were blinking at me with surprise. I smiled in particular at the apprentice who had taken command of the whole group.

"Even when a surprise attack caught them off guard while they were moving their feybeast, it took only a single bark from their commander for everyone to return to their allocated roles. On top of that, when the schnefeld unexpectedly grew and Cornelius launched a full-power attack, that same commander instantly moved to protect the Dunkelfelger archduke candidate, ensuring his safety even when the explosion was so close. Ehrenfest would have been capable of neither such feats."

Had our knights worked together as well as those from Dunkelfelger, I was sure we would have won during our first surprise attack.

"The coordination and cohesion you displayed was truly a sight to behold," I continued. "Today's game has made it painfully clear that the training of our knights needs to be adapted, in the hope of us one day reaching your level. I pray that your success continues, so that Dunkelfelger may be an example for all to follow."

The commanding apprentice from Dunkelfelger broke into a smile. "It is an honor to receive such praise from an archduke candidate. We too learned much from this game, as it was nothing like playing the kinds of ditter focused only on hunting feybeasts. We look forward to a rematch against the knights you have

trained.”

“...I will simply be informing the knight commander of this, and I do not plan to play a game of ditter like this again, but I will do my best to raise our ranking at least somewhat higher during the Interduchy Tournament,” I replied with a vague smile, mostly ignoring the request for a rematch. My plan was to dump the duty of training the apprentices on the Knight’s Order and then leave it at that.

“Ah. Finished already, I see. Who won?” Anastasius asked, walking over. He had been attending lessons, so he hadn’t been able to watch.

“Ehrenfest did, Prince Anastasius.” Rauffen started to fervently describe the match, but Anastasius silenced him with a wave.

“There being a winner is all that matters,” the prince said. The sky was already getting dark, and nobody had time to hear such an extensive summary. “Dunkelfelger were the ones who suggested this match. You have no complaints, I imagine?” he asked Lestilaut.

“None at all. They won, and so I will stand down,” Lestilaut replied, kneeling before the prince and announcing that he would leave Schwartz and Weiss alone. I sighed in relief, which made him glare at me. “I saw with my own eyes your string of vile plots, however. I will never accept that you are a saint.”

After that remark, Lestilaut strode away.

Anastasius grimaced. “Did you pull some form of malicious trickery during a game of ditter?” he asked, looking down at me.

“I may have used a few devious plans, but whether they can be described as ‘malicious’ depends on the person, I imagine.”

I was willing to do whatever it took to protect the library, so I personally didn’t care about what Lestilaut had said. Not once had I even claimed to be a saint, so as far as I was concerned, him rejecting my legend actually worked in my favor. Too many people were falling victim to the disinformation campaign.

“I suppose it does not matter. Rozemyne, come to my room tomorrow at third bell, as master of the library’s magic tools. I have things to discuss with you and Solange.”

“Understood.”

We promptly dispersed after Anastasius had given me his invitation. He watched with wide eyes as Hirschur flew back to her research lab or wherever she was headed, perhaps seeing a drivable highbeast for the very first time. I watched his surprise out of the corner of my eye while returning to the dormitory.

“How did you end up playing ditter?! Explain, Rozemyne!” Wilfried yelled with tear-filled eyes the very moment the dormitory door closed behind us. “Rihyarda sent an ordonnanz midway through to say what was going on, but I only had one guard knight with me, so I couldn’t even leave the dorm! I was suffering here the whole time you were playing!”

Not having much else to do, I explained how Dunkelfelger had been camped out in front of the library, how our encounter ended up turning into a game of ditter, and how Anastasius had summoned me once the match was concluded.

“A summons from the prince...? Let me get this straight—you measured Schwartz and Weiss, fought back an ambush, played a game of ditter, and now received a summons from a prince, all on the same day?! How am I going to report this much news to Father?!”

“Oh, that reminds me,” I noted. “In your report, could you inform the knight commander that I think he should review the training the apprentices currently receive?”

“Wait, Rozemyne. Save that for later. We’re talking about you right now. What in the world did you do to receive a summons from Prince Anastasius?” Wilfried asked. I was more interested in him asking Karstedt to readjust the apprentices’ training regimen, but it seemed this matter took priority.

“It’s about Schwartz and Weiss. Prince Anastasius said there are things he needs to discuss with Professor Solange and me.”

“...Alright. As long as you don’t have an angry royal shouting you down.”

After dinner, we gathered the apprentice knights who had participated in the

ditter game for a performance review. Some were just happy to have beaten Dunkelfelger, while others were still struggling with how different treasure-stealing ditter was than the types they were used to, but they were all surprised when Leonore and Judithe explained what they had realized watching the battles from afar.

"We defeated Dunkelfelger today not by our own strength, but through Lady Rozemyne's schemes," Leonore said. "We deserved to lose, and I believe we have much to learn even when playing speed ditter."

We proceeded to discuss organization in battle, and the weak points of various feybeasts we had learned about. This truly was the realm of the apprentice knights, and so I had my male guard knights stay with Leonore and returned to my room with Angelica and Judithe in tow. I was exhausted from everything that had happened, and my summons from the prince was to take place tomorrow; the sooner I bathed and climbed into bed, the better.

"Oh? Where is Rihyarda...?" I asked. Lieseleta and Brunhilde had prepared my bath and moved to start bathing me when I returned, but in an unusual development, Rihyarda was nowhere to be seen.

"She is absent for the moment," Lieseleta answered, albeit hesitantly. "She has spent the entire day with you, so..."

It seemed that Rihyarda would normally take care of all sorts of minor errands while I was attending my classes or reading in the library with my other attendants, but there hadn't been time for her to do these things today. She had never mentioned them to me before either... It seemed attendants were always busy in their own ways.

After such an eventful day, it wasn't long before I was fast asleep.

It was the day of my meeting with Anastasius. Rihyarda told me to bring at least one gift to improve the prince's mood, and so I asked Hugo and Ella to bake two pound cakes first thing in the morning—one made with rumtopf mixed in, and the other made with honey. Anastasius had previously said that he liked the rumtopf, and I was generously throwing in the honey pound cake for him to share with Eglantine.

I practiced the harspiel with Rosina while arranging the song dedicated to the Goddess of Light until second-and-a-half bell. I then had Brunhilde assist me in preparing for my summons before finally leaving for the prince's room at third bell.

"Incidentally... where is Prince Anastasius's room?" I asked.

"I have never been there before, but I do know where it is," Brunhilde replied as we exited the dormitory. We headed to the same hallway as usual, but instead of turning toward the auditorium, we went in the opposite direction, toward where the lower-ranking duchies were. The evenly spaced doors continued even after the numbers ran out, and it wasn't until we approached the very end of the hallway that we came across an especially large door in front of which stood a guard.

"We are from Ehrenfest the Thirteenth," Brunhilde said. "Lady Rozemyne has arrived at the summons of Prince Anastasius."

The guard checked our brooches and capes before opening the door, allowing us through. Waiting inside was an old man who was the spitting image of a butler.

"We have been waiting for your arrival, Lady Rozemyne."

As it turned out, we were now in the prince's villa, and this old man was his head attendant. We were guided to the parlor at once, where we found Solange drinking tea with an elegant smile on her plump face. Anastasius was sitting across from her.

I directed my attendants to deliver the pound cakes we had brought, and once we had exchanged greetings, I took the seat that was offered to me.

"Clear the room," Anastasius ordered.

Our retainers stepped out at once, leaving only the three of us and some of Anastasius's retainers. We briefly exchanged small talk over the sweets, but the prince's expression then tightened out of seemingly nowhere.

"About the library's magic tools," he began. "As Ehrenfest won the battle for them, you will be considered their official master for the duration of your stay at the Royal Academy."

“‘The battle for them’? Were you attacked by Ahrensbach?!” Solange exclaimed, holding a hand over her mouth in shock. I was more taken aback by the duchy she had so suddenly named.

“Ahrensbach? No, it was Dunkelfelger who came for her,” Anastasius said, sounding a bit confused.

“Oh my. I see. My apologies. I only jumped to that conclusion because I received frequent visits at the library from a young Ahrensbach lady who quite incessantly asked how she could become Schwartz’s and Weiss’s master,” Solange said, sounding a little embarrassed.

My heart lurched in my chest. “Ahrensbach” was not a name I had expected to come up here.

“So another duchy may be getting involved...” Anastasius said. “How inconvenient. In any case, why did Rozemyne even become those magic tools’ master? I had someone investigate the situation, and there are no records of a student ever taking up that position.”

“Lady Rozemyne’s prayers reached Mestionora,” Solange intoned, which caused the prince to furrow his brow.

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“Schwartz and Weiss returned to life because Lady Rozemyne prayed to Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom. Her prayers reached the gods,” she explained, but that didn’t tell the prince anything. He looked at me for details, and while I was well aware of what he wanted, I had little more to add.

“I am afraid I do not know the details myself,” I admitted. “I simply prayed to the gods while overjoyed at finally being able to visit the library, and... *ahem*... my mana became a blessing that flew out of me. The next thing I knew, I was registered as Schwartz’s and Weiss’s master.”

“Even your description is incomprehensible,” Anastasius sighed. He shook his head again before glaring at Solange. “How have masters been decided in the past?”

“The previous master would select a successor and give them permission to touch Schwartz and Weiss, whereupon the successor would touch the feystones

in the two shumils' foreheads and register their mana. For Lady Rozemyne to have registered her mana with them through only a blessing is a sign of Mestionora's own intervention."

"...I see. That is enough."

It seemed that Anastasius had abandoned trying to understand the situation at all. I had most likely done something very abnormal, so anyone who hadn't seen it happen for themselves would probably never understand.

"I too was selected to be Schwartz's and Weiss's next master by my predecessor, but I could not keep them moving on my own," Solange admitted. "I am able to touch them, and I believe I am offering mana just fine, but it seems the most I can do is maintain the power of their charms."

Even though she had known they would not move, Solange had diligently continued offering up her mana to the library's valuable magic tools so that they would not be stolen. "Could it be that your mana lacks Light and Darkness, Professor Solange? One of my scholars mentioned that one needs both attributes to become their master," I suggested.

"Why would they know that?" Anastasius asked, staring at me in surprise.

"Every new master needs to give Schwartz and Weiss new clothes. In order to fulfill this duty, I brought them both from the library to the Ehrenfest Dormitory to be measured."

"Could you not have just measured them in the library?"

"I thought the same, but the professor said that would not be ideal." I glanced over at Solange, who slowly nodded in agreement.

"Schwartz and Weiss end up defenseless when their clothes are removed, since those very same clothes are protective charms. It is therefore tradition for their masters to handle the measuring and fitting of clothes on their own. I would have liked to have given permission for this to be done in the library, but..." Solange paused for a brief moment, her face clouding over. "As I am a mednoble, there are many students who could simply enter the room against my will. And while Lady Rozemyne is an archduke candidate, Ehrenfest is only ranked thirteenth. Considering that Dunkelfelger or Ahrensbach—the second-

and sixth-ranked duchies, respectively—can simply force their way into the room, I could not allow the measuring to be done in the library."

Considering that Dunkelfelger had indeed ended up using force, one could say that Solange's concerns were well-founded.

"I see," Anastasius said with a nod. "But how did you know about the attributes, Rozemyne?"

"When we removed Schwartz's and Weiss's clothes to measure them, we discovered many magic circles on their torsos. They are why Professor Hirschur abandoned her afternoon classes."

Anastasius frowned. "She may be an excellent researcher, but as a teacher...?" he muttered. As much as I wanted to say that we Ehrenfest students were suffering the most with her as our dormitory supervisor, I really wasn't so sure.

"The magic circles embroidered onto them seem to be exceptionally old," I explained. "Professor Hirschur and the apprentice scholars with her said that Schwartz and Weiss likely wouldn't have moved for someone without both Light and Darkness attributes." I then went ahead and added that Hirschur had described the magic circles as incomplete and full of gaps, meaning there might have been other conditions as well.

"You might have avoided all that fighting if you had mentioned this to Lestilaut. I believe he lacks Darkness," Anastasius noted.

"Perhaps, but this is information that I learned through a personal investigation after removing their clothes. I did not want to say anything that the library might have been keeping secret."

I was simply following the golden rule of not saying anything that didn't need to be said. As a noble, it was essential to know what information could be shared and what had to be kept under wraps.

"All this aside, Lord Lestilaut is not keen on visiting the library, so he would never be suited to serve as Schwartz's and Weiss's master," I continued. "They need to be given mana once every three days or so, and nobody who wants them solely for the prestige will ensure that."

“Oh my. You do not have to shoulder the burden alone, Lady Rozemyne. If there is another noble with the proper attributes, you would surely have an easier time with them serving as a master alongside you,” Solange suggested, looking at me with concern. “In the past, there were three Sovereign archnobles handling Schwartz and Weiss. I can only imagine how hard it must be for you to support them alone. Perhaps the young woman from Ahrensbach I mentioned before has the proper attributes?”

In my eyes, however, nothing was worse than someone from Ahrensbach being a match.

“I did think it was unusual how often they need replenishment...” I commented. “The previous librarians must have filled Schwartz and Weiss with an immense amount of mana for them to have moved on their own for a full year. It was likely a process done over a considerable time span, but still—the amount must have been staggering.”

Solange gave a sad smile, lowering her eyes to the floor. “That would be because the three librarians brought themselves to the verge of death while filling them with mana before leaving their posts.”

“‘To the verge of death’...?” I echoed, my eyes widening at how drastic that sounded.

Anastasius let out a sigh. “The librarians were connected to archnobles who supported the first and fourth princes. That is why they cannot return.”

It was only then that I realized the three librarians who had entrusted Schwartz and Weiss to Solange hadn’t just been moved to work somewhere else—they had climbed the towering stairway, nearly killing themselves to fill Schwartz and Weiss with mana in one final act of dedication. I pressed my lips together into a flat line.

Solange nodded. “We are unlikely to receive any replacement librarians for quite some time, which leaves us with only your goodwill to keep Schwartz and Weiss active for the moment, Lady Rozemyne.”

“But... Schwartz and Weiss are heirlooms of royalty. Is that not enough reason to secure help?” I asked. “They must be valuable and culturally important.”

Anastasius raised his chin, turning his head slightly to one side. “More magic tools were shut down after the civil war than I can count. The Royal Academy’s library is not the only place suffering as a result, and there are more essential tools out there that take priority.”

I could guess the number of magic tools that had stopped working was roughly equivalent to how many nobles had been executed. The civil war had taken place a long time ago, far from Ehrenfest, and yet even I could feel its repercussions.

“I doubt we have the resources to send any workers capable of supplying the library’s magic tools. If you want them to keep functioning then you will need to keep filling them with mana out of the goodness of your heart,” Anastasius explained with another sigh. “This would be much simpler if only you weren’t an archduke candidate.”

Had I not been an archduke candidate, I would have become an apprentice scholar in my third year, and then moved to the Sovereignty as an apprentice librarian, settling this matter entirely. But archduke candidates all played crucial roles in their own duchies, so outside of marriage with royalty, they were never moved to the Sovereignty. It was a rule decided long, long ago to prevent skilled and powerful successors from being sucked into the Sovereignty.

“Since you are an archduke candidate, we cannot entrust them to you in full,” Anastasius elaborated. He then went on to explain that making me the official caretaker for Schwartz and Weiss would result in the two shumils becoming Ehrenfest property, which would earn us even more impassioned complaints from the other archduke candidates. “You are simply a helper providing assistance out of goodwill. Is that clear?”

“Yes, my liege. In that case, I shall do what I can to help with the running of the library.” I was more than willing to help out with mana contributions; my goodwill for the library was certainly in no short supply.

Upon hearing my promise to help, Solange gave a warm smile. “I thank you ever so much, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Solange, you may leave. Rozemyne, you will stay for now,” Anastasius said.

“As you wish. If you will excuse me...” Solange respectfully knelt, said her

goodbyes, and then exited the room.

“What is this about...?” I asked.

“One moment,” Anastasius replied. He fell silent, searching for words while I drank tea and ate sweets. His princely visage from before was nowhere to be seen; he now gave off the impression of an everyday man thinking about the woman he liked.

To be honest, I didn’t want to talk to Anastasius about romance. I had already infuriated him during the tea party with the professors; I certainly didn’t want to mess up again. Without Eglantine here to restrain him, one wrong move could spell the end of me.

And yes, this is definitely going to be about Lady Eglantine. Just let me go already...

My perhaps traitorous thoughts were interrupted by Anastasius hesitantly beginning to speak. “Rozemyne, I expect Eglantine to invite you to a tea party.”

Eglantine was a beauty who could only be described as the Goddess of Light reborn. She had a gentle demeanor, was pleasant to talk to, and possessed serious talent for whirling. Attending a tea party with her sounded positively delightful, especially considering that she was an archduke candidate for Klassenberg. Considering that it was a greater duchy with more influence than Ahrensbach, an association with her would massively benefit Ehrenfest, and none of my guardians would complain about us bonding. I definitely needed something to smooth over the lectures that were no doubt on the way for all the incidents I had already caused.

“A tea party with Lady Eglantine would be lovely.”

“Right. And so... could you, *ahem*... ask her what her intentions are?” Anastasius asked. He looked up at me with a lighter expression than before, as though he were mentally patting himself on the back for having finally choked out the words.

“Her intentions for what?”

“Y-You... What...?” The prince wavered as he was stunned into silence by my response, looking at me with eyes that demanded to know how I could possibly

be so oblivious. I could tell it was crucial that I explain my situation to him, otherwise I would just risk making him properly mad.

“My two years spent asleep mean I have socialized far less than one might expect, so I do not quite understand subtle turns of phrase as easily as most others. I am also unable to ask my retainers what you might mean, since they are not here.”

“Speak of this to no one!” Anastasius snapped. “I cleared the room exactly so that none of your retainers would know about this!”

“Then please tell me what exactly you wish for me to ask. I am admittedly feeling a great deal of shame after having exposed my ignorance to none other than a member of the royal family.”

We were both embarrassed here; there were few greater failures to a noble than being forced to admit that you could not do something.

Anastasius cradled his head, as if agonizing over having to elaborate, but he ultimately glared at me with an embarrassed look. “I want you to ask her about her future plans—especially who she plans to have escort her during the graduation ceremony.”

Now that he mentioned it, I seemed to recall that the two princes were both battling for Eglantine’s heart; after all, she was an important piece in securing the throne.

To think Lady Eglantine has to make such a heavy decision. She has my sympathy.

“Perhaps you should make this request of someone more socially adept,” I said. *Then you wouldn’t have needed to embarrass us both.*

Anastasius just glared at me. “Do you really think I have not already done that? She has always said only that she wishes for more time to think. But we are graduating this year, so time is running out. It seems to me that Eglantine might lower her guard around you, considering that you look so young and she took such a liking to you after just one tea party.”

I really, really doubted that the archduke candidate of a greater duchy would ever lower their guard just because someone looked young. Men in love sure

looked at the world through rose-tinted glasses—they saw everything exactly as they wanted to see it.

"I do not know how she will answer, but I do not mind asking her the question..." I conceded.

"Yes. Good."

It's not like I could turn down a request from a prince anyway. Ugh... This might end up being a real pain in the neck.

Rihyarda's Wrath

Two days had passed since Anastasius summoned me. He had said that Eglantine would probably invite me to a tea party, but she hadn't yet approached me, and I couldn't imagine it was going to happen anytime soon; things were probably on hold until she finished her classes and socializing season began.

I spent my time leisurely visiting the library, where I would top off Schwartz and Weiss with mana and continue working toward my goal of reading every single book available. Brunhilde, Philine, Judithe, Leonore, and Cornelius were accompanying me there today.

After seeing how terribly uncoordinated the Ehrenfest apprentice knights were during our game of treasure-stealing ditter, Leonore and Cornelius had rethought their plans and were now discussing the most efficient methods for defeating feybeasts. Fighting the Dunkelfelger knights directly rather than indirectly through speed ditter had apparently shown them just how big of a difference there was between our duchies.

As a second-year who hadn't yet started taking knight courses, Judithe struggled to keep up with strategy-related discussions, and it was for this reason that she had merely been assigned to guard me in the near-empty library. Leonore and Cornelius, meanwhile, spoke privately and transcribed books in a nearby carrel. It was almost as though they were on a date of sorts, so I couldn't help but silently cheer on Leonore as I read through my books. Philine was sitting in a carrel right next to mine, desperately transcribing as quickly and accurately as she could manage.

Before I knew it, the light signaling that the library was about to close shone, dyeing the pages of my book a rainbow of colors. "It's time to go," Brunhilde informed me, and shut the book in my hands. I sighed.

"Milady. Day's over."

"Borrow books, milady."

“Yes, I know. Brunhilde, I wish to borrow these books; please go through the necessary steps with Schwartz. Weiss, here are the keys to the carrels.”

The life I had secured since finishing all of my classes was complete heaven, and every day was bliss. I could read in the library all the way till closing time and then borrow anything I wanted to continue reading in the dormitory.

“Lady Rozemyne, I finished transcribing all the books about feybeasts today,” Leonore said on our way back to the dormitory. She then went on to say they had discovered some unexpected weaknesses of certain feybeasts, speaking with a bright smile on her face.

Cornelius nodded. “With this information in mind, I plan to carefully read the reference books Eckhart lent me about coordination in battle. I would also like to return to Ehrenfest briefly to see the commander, so that I can ask how the Knight’s Order works together when hunting especially strong feybeasts.”

“Students can return to their home duchy after finishing their classes, correct?” I asked. “I wish you luck with completing all yours soon.”

Karstedt was incredibly busy at this time of year, having to deal with the Lord of Winter and guard Sylvester during his socializing as an aub, but winter socializing still meant every noble in Ehrenfest was gathered in one place. Talking to the knights of previous generations who had played treasure-stealing ditter would be plenty productive, or maybe drill instructors who were used to beating coordination into apprentices.

Leonore repeatedly nodded as she listened to my thoughts. “I always wondered what purpose written classes served, if any, but I would never have thought they were so directly connected to proper coordination,” she said. “I imagine that in the days when everyone played treasure-stealing ditter, students would more fervently beat strategies into their heads and work together to come up with ways to trick their enemies.”

Cornelius had told me before that speed ditter didn’t involve much coordination or strategizing because of the nature of the game—victory could be secured simply by having everyone charge the feybeast and beat its head in—so he was having a grand time thinking up plans. It seemed that Leonore shared this enthusiasm; there was a big smile on her face as she laughed and

shared glances with him.

Yes! Yesss! Bonding like this is what I want to see!

I grinned at Cornelius and Leonore, which Brunhilde quickly noticed. “Are you providing Leonore your support, Lady Rozemyne?” she asked in a subtle whisper.

“Oh, no. I am not getting involved. It seems Cornelius is quite popular with the ladies, and it would not do for me to cause an unnecessary stir.”

Since I was both an archduke candidate and Cornelius’s sister, openly supporting Leonore would more or less lock her into place as his future wife. It wasn’t something to be done so carelessly; I hadn’t spoken with my family about which of my brothers they planned for Angelica to potentially marry, nor was I aware how Cornelius felt about all this.

“I see. That is a relief. Nothing will tear retainers apart faster than favoritism,” Brunhilde replied with a small smile. She made a good point—I had admittedly been planning to support Leonore after talking things over with my family, but maybe it was wiser for me to do nothing instead.

When we entered the Ehrenfest Dormitory, Rihyarda was shouting so furiously that her voice was clearly audible from the entranceway. “That’s enough out of you, Traugott!” came a roar from above, indicating that she was lecturing him in his room.

Brunhilde and I exchanged glances. Neither of us had ever heard Rihyarda shouting this loudly before.

“What in the world did Traugott do...?”

“I’m afraid I do not know,” Brunhilde replied. “Shall we first go to your room and get you changed for supper? We can ask Hartmut whether he knows anything later.” It was better if she avoided going to the second floor where the boys stayed, so this was for the best. Hartmut had attended classes this afternoon, but those had ended before the library closed, so he probably knew at least something.

“Very well. In the meantime, Cornelius, could you go investigate and inform Rihyarda that we are back?”

“You wish for me to interrupt when she is shouting *that* sharply, Lady Rozemyne?” he asked with a grimace, pointing up at the ceiling. We could no longer make out Rihyarda’s exact words, but it was clear that her lecture was ongoing and no less fierce. It would take a great deal of courage to walk straight into the lion’s den.

“You do not need to enter abruptly, but surely you can knock and inform them it is time for supper.”

“I suppose...”

Come supper, Angelica, who was completely exhausted from her afternoon classes, presented me with a letter. It was an invitation to a tea party from Eglantine, which Angelica had received during her written classes from one of the Klassenberg candidate’s apprentice attendants.

“I thank you ever so much, Angelica. Brunhilde, may I ask you to compose a reply?”

“Certainly. What shall we bring her as a gift?” Brunhilde asked. She started to rack her brain, while Cornelius thought about who would serve as my guard knights.

“Lady Rozemyne, I want to join you as a guard,” Angelica said. As she had not yet finished her written classes, however, she was not included among the candidates.

“I would very much like that, Angelica. That is why I pray that you demonstrate as much excellence in your written classes as you did during our game of treasure-stealing ditter,” I replied.

Angelica’s shoulders sank, eliciting a chuckle from Cornelius. “She has already passed a third of her written classes, which speaks volumes to how hard she is trying. As expected, your presence here is having an enormous impact,” he said.

It seemed that Angelica was working a lot harder than she had done during the two years I was asleep; in fact, she was trying so much harder that everyone in the knight’s course was notably relieved.

“I can only imagine how much Father and Mother would rejoice if they heard Angelica of all people has already made this much progress,” Lieseleta said with

a tearful smile. “We will never be able to repay this debt to you, Lady Rozemyne.”

Angelica was certainly doing better, but she was still a long way away from passing her remaining classes. Vigilance was key. Perhaps preparing a reward for her was wise.

“Angelica, how would you feel about me offering to teach you an additional step to my mana compression method if you finish all your written classes before I must return to Ehrenfest for the Dedication Ritual?”

“There’s another step?!”

Both Angelica and Cornelius widened their eyes in surprise.

“I succeeded in developing a fourth step during my mana compression class.”

“Say what?! So there are more than three now?! You didn’t tell me anything about this!” Wilfried complained. Surprised murmurs were already spreading through the dining hall.

“Eugh. Why did my parents have to be from another faction?” one student grumbled. “When will I get to pick which faction I want to be in?”

This reaction made it blatantly clear how simply being from a different faction could put one at a massive disadvantage, and several apprentice knights started cradling their heads as they realized that an even bigger gap would soon be opening up between them and the others. These concerns were understandable, considering how those with rapidly growing mana capacities were already leaving them far behind.

“It is only natural that children who have not yet come of age are considered to belong to the same faction as their parents, and with the Veronica faction having been the main political power just a few years ago, our current situation was always inevitable. It is pointless to bemoan past decisions, but with that said, I shall do all that I can to assist those who wish to change factions.”

“Is that true, Lady Rozemyne?!” The children of the former Veronica faction looked up at me with wide eyes. I did my best to return a very saintly smile; this was a big chance to get this generation’s children under my wing.

“We use contract magic when teaching the mana compression method, but I will consult Aub Ehrenfest about potentially teaching all those who wish to know, even if this means altering the contents of said magic contracts. I can make no immediate promises, but I shall do everything in my power to make this happen, so please continue your efforts without fail.”

“Understood!”

The faces of the former Veronica faction children lit up at this new goal to work toward. I was exceptionally concerned about the satisfied smile I saw Hartmut giving me out of the corner of my eye, but no matter.

“Wilfried, this is the year you must prove yourself. Stay cautious and ensure that the competency you have shown so far extends to your socializing as well,” I said.

“Right,” he replied. “I won’t make the same mistakes again.”

“Lord Wilfried and the rest of us are working harder by the day. You will surely approve of our efforts,” one of his retainers assured me. They were all nodding to each other, bound together stronger than ever before.

Meanwhile, Angelica was clasping her hands together in front of her chest while gazing at me with puppy-dog eyes. “I can do it, Lady Rozemyne! I just need a chance!”

The sudden change from how devastated she had seemed just a second ago was dramatic. Her blue eyes now shone with enthusiasm, while her cheeks were flushed with excitement; had she not elaborated that she wanted more mana to improve her enhancements and make Stenluke stronger, she could have easily been mistaken for a girl deeply in love.

...Now that I thought about it, obtaining Stenluke was the very reason Angelica had fought against her fear of studying in the first place, and she had also dedicated mana to him on a regular basis. One could say she already was a girl deeply in love—a girl deeply in love with her manablade.

Sweet, sweet Angelica... If only you had a few more brain cells...

“Lady Rozemyne, if you are going to teach Angelica the new step, should you not teach your own brother also?” Cornelius asked, his dissatisfaction clear on

his face.

I chuckled. “I will only teach her if she finishes her classes before I return for the Dedication Ritual. It will most likely be impossible for her.”

While I was using this to motivate Angelica, I was due to return to Ehrenfest in less than three weeks. It was quite the unreasonable task as far as I was concerned, since she had only managed to complete a third of her classes in the three weeks prior to this point, but Cornelius shook his head.

“Look at that expression. Do you really expect her not to succeed when she has the same sparkle in her eyes as you did when the library was on the line?” he said, looking between Angelica and me. “The two of you are exactly alike when it comes to charging blindly ahead to accomplish your goals.”

It seemed that Cornelius was already convinced Angelica would succeed no matter what.

“Ngh... Okay. I will teach all of my retainers the fourth step, but only if Angelica passes... *and* we successfully raise our duchy’s rank to twelfth or higher during the Interduchy Tournament.”

“Alright!” Traugott said, clenching his fists with a wide smile. Hartmut, meanwhile, raised his eyebrows.

“If you are going to say all your retainers rather than just your guard knights, then as an apprentice scholar, I will need to work with the apprentice knights to the best of my ability. Cornelius, come to my room later; I have compiled a list of the most common feybeasts used in past Interduchy Tournaments, as well as how to defeat them. It is not exhaustive, but it should prove helpful.”

“You have my thanks, Hartmut.”

Brunhilde gave an agreeing nod, a sharp glint in her eyes. “We apprentice attendants will also need to put our heads together in preparation for the Interduchy Tournament. I am quite looking forward to the next one.”

With that, dinner came to an end.

“Milady, may I borrow a moment of your time?” Rihyarda asked with an expression that conveyed no emotion whatsoever. “There is something

important I must discuss with you.”

With how intensely Rihyarda had been shouting at Traugott earlier, I had assumed she would be prickly as heck to him at dinner, but she had remained calm the entire time. She truly was a master of controlling her emotions, which was exactly why I nodded without feeling all that doubtful.

“Of course. Will my room do?”

“I would like for all of your retainers to hear what I have to say, milady. For that reason, I have secured a room on the first floor.”

I glanced around at everyone sitting at my table. They all nodded, except for Traugott, who was frozen in place with wide eyes.

“Grandmother, I...” he began.

“Shall we go?” Rihyarda interrupted, staring Traugott down with an expression that left no room for debate before leading the way. The tension that hung in the air between the two of them was palpable.

Hartmut was walking slightly ahead of me. I reached out and gently tugged on his cape to get his attention. “Do you know what’s going on?” I whispered.

“Of course I do. Rihyarda has been furious for three days now,” he replied with a thin smile. I could sense anger coming from him as well, and judging by where it seemed to be directed, he seemed to be on Rihyarda’s side.

What in the world did Traugott do?

We arrived at a small meeting room a short way from the common room, there for students to speak more privately without having to venture up to the gender-separated floors. Some rooms were normally assigned to a particular faction, but as almost everyone was just using the common room this year, such restrictions hadn’t been applied.

Upon entering the room, I sat on the chair offered to me by Rihyarda. Lieseleta and Brunhilde stood on either side of me, with my guard knights standing next to them. Hartmut, as a scholar, sat down with ink and a wooden board to do something with Philine, who was taking the seat beside him. I wasn’t really sure what. Maybe they were going to record the conversation?

Traugott had not been allowed to stand with my guard knights. Rihyarda had dragged him here by the arm, and she hadn't let go even now that we had arrived. She looked across my retainers with the utmost severity before opening her mouth to speak.

"Lady Rozemyne, please release Traugott from his duties as your retainer."

"What?!" I cried out in unison with my two nearby attendants.

In contrast, my guard knights merely responded with grimaces. I could guess they had more or less expected this, since none of them seemed at all surprised; Hartmut, who had definitely known what was going on, did not even blink.

As for Traugott, the blood drained from his face, and his expression became one of abject despair. He looked as though he had never expected such a request to be made by his own grandmother, which was completely understandable—it was an immense dishonor for a noble taken on as a retainer to be released from duty, so much so that it brought shame to one's entire house. It was hard to imagine Rihyarda wishing such disgrace upon her own grandson.

"Rihyarda, what in the world happened...?"

"Nothing that you are unaware of. You were present for the incident that spurred my wrath, and it should be obvious why I am stating this. Please do pay more attention to your surroundings and observe the behavior of your retainers with a more critical eye," she replied sharply.

"Yes, of course! I will be more careful from now on!" I exclaimed, sitting up straight in an instant. A momentary brush with her anger had been enough to shake me to my very core.

"Traugott is not fit to be your retainer, milady. I suggest you relieve him of duty at once," Rihyarda repeated, going on to explain that his words and actions during our treasure-stealing ditter match had completely disqualified him from the role. I certainly hadn't considered it appropriate behavior, but she had evidently deemed it unthinkable and unforgivable.

"But he is your grandson, is he not?" I asked. "You recommended him

yourself. Relieving him of duty is surely too harsh."

"I did indeed recommend him, since Traugott wished for the position and Lord Bonifatius had asked me to include more archnobles among your guard knights. I do love him as a grandmother, but I am your head attendant first and foremost, and you do not need a retainer who will act against you."

It seemed that it was precisely because Rihyarda loved Traugott as a grandmother that she had scolded him so harshly and told him to quit on his own terms. It was marginally better for him to willingly resign than for me to label him a failure and fire him myself.

"Every retainer has his or her own motivation for serving the one they have chosen to serve, milady. It is for this reason that I did not protest Traugott wanting to serve you specifically to learn your mana compression method. What mattered was his attitude toward his work."

Brunhilde had said that she wished to serve me because she wanted to play a role in the introduction of new trends. Lieseleta had resolved to serve me to repay her gratitude for my saving her older sister Angelica from failing her exams and dishonoring their entire house. Hartmut wanted to accelerate the growth of my saint legend, while Philine was interested in gathering stories with me. Rihyarda and Angelica were serving me as per an order, and while Cornelius already came from a family that universally served as guards for the archducal family, he had to my knowledge personally requested to guard me as my older brother.

In short, everyone had a reason for becoming one of my retainers, and it wasn't important what that reason was. Rihyarda had concluded that the only thing that mattered was whether a retainer did their job well and prioritized the needs of the one they served over their own desires.

"However, Traugott does not have it in him to properly serve another; his attitude makes him entirely unsuited to being a servant. As your head attendant, I cannot allow such a disloyal individual to be recognized as your retainer."

It seemed that Traugott held genuine disdain for me. My poor health and weak body had earned me his scorn, which, according to Rihyarda, was only

made worse by the fact we were supposed to be cousins through Karstedt.

“It is an embarrassment, especially when Cornelius, despite being your brother, has been so perfect at distinguishing between public-and private-appropriate behavior!” she declared.

Rihyarda had apparently spent the past three days demanding that Traugott quit on his own terms before his complete lack of obedience and reluctance to serve caused yet more problems. He had made no such move despite this, and so Rihyarda had yelled at him again today. That explained the shouts we had heard upon entering the dorm.

Incidentally, despite having been told to quit just minutes before dinner, he had tried ingratiating himself with me the moment he heard there was a fourth step to my mana compression process. That had infuriated Rihyarda, driving her to give up on convincing him to quit on his own and instead advise that I fire him.

“It is beyond shameless to focus only on what one has to gain, showing no intention whatsoever of aiding the person one has sworn to serve. Not even my own grandson deserves kindness anymore!” Rihyarda barked. “Ehrenfest nobles have a duty to serve the archducal family and protect the duchy. What have your parents taught you, Traugott? How were you raised to have ended up like this? This is pathetic!”

As much as Rihyarda was pushing me to fire Traugott, the decision was ultimately in my hands. “Traugott, do you intend to serve me well and true?” I asked, turning my eyes to the apprentice knight who was turning whiter by the word.

“Yes! Please, allow me to continue as your retainer!” he cried, the desperation apparent in his eyes. Rihyarda’s eyebrows shot up in response.

“Traugott intends to resign the very moment he learns Lady Rozemyne’s compression method,” Hartmut said, narrowing his orange eyes ever so slightly with a thin smile. His frank declaration made Traugott flinch and stunned Rihyarda into complete silence, but after gazing across my retainers, he continued nonetheless. “He told me he has no intention to serve a ‘bizarre’ girl so weak that she once collapsed from a single snowball, so frail that she falls ill

at a moment's notice, and so single-minded that she burdens everyone in her quest for the library. If not for the compression method, he would have rather served Lord Wilfried."

"What?! Be silent, Hartmut! You said you would keep that a secret!" Traugott shouted in disbelief, but Hartmut merely laughed him off with cold eyes.

"Oh, did you truly think anyone would keep such a secret without a magic contract to bind them? Remember that I am Lady Rozemyne's retainer; it is my natural responsibility to tell her what she needs to know to make an informed decision."



As the two boys glared at each other, Rihyarda bristled with sheer anger. “Traugott, you are just... just unbelievable! This goes beyond you being an unsuitable retainer! You are rotten to the core!” she shouted.

I crossed my arms as I pondered the situation. I naturally understood why everyone wanted me to fire Traugott, but not what was going on in his head. For one, why was he so determined to learn my mana compression method, especially to the point that he was willing to put aside his distaste for me and (albeit half-heartedly) play the role of a loyal retainer. It was hard to imagine that firing him outright was actually the best thing to do.

“I would like to speak privately with Traugott. May I ask that you all clear the room?” I said, presuming that he wouldn’t want to speak in front of anyone else, but Rihyarda instantly shot me down.

“That is unacceptable! You must not be without guard knights when discussing the firing of a knight! What would you do if Traugott were to fly into a rage?! Consider the situation more carefully!” she exclaimed.

When I scanned the room, my guard knights were all nodding in agreement. “But surely there are some things he will not want to say in front of others,” I remarked.

“That is why sound-blocking magic tools exist. They will allow you to speak privately, even with guard knights,” Rihyarda said. She shook her head, making a point to note that a noble would normally fire their retainer without asking for more details, but placed sound-blocking magic tools in front of us nonetheless.

“I wish to hear your thoughts on this, Traugott. If you are willing to speak to me, pick up your magic tool.”

Traugott complied, albeit with a harsh frown.

Traugott's Thoughts

"Why do you desire my mana compression method so much?" I asked, but Traugott maintained a silent frown. "I am often told to make decisions on matters only after consulting all parties involved. Thus, rather than relying entirely on the opinions of others, I am interested to hear your own thoughts on the situation. If you have nothing to say, that is fine with me also, but I will simply be forced to rely on the words of others."

Traugott met my gaze. "I want to learn the mana compression method because I want to get stronger," he shot back with a visible snarl, like he was annoyed at me for asking something so obvious. Everyone's eyes sharpened, despite the fact they couldn't even hear what he was saying.

I sighed. "Traugott, if you cannot even keep a straight face, Rihyarda will tear you to shreds no matter what I say."

Traugott sucked in a gasp, exhaled, and then put on a sober expression. I did the same; after all, he wasn't the only one with a room's worth of eyes on them. My retainers were watching to see how I treated Traugott, considering that I was the one he had sworn to serve.

I need to ask his opinion and then base my decision on that, but...

To be honest, I really did not care whether or not Traugott stayed as my retainer; I barely spent any time with my male guard knights, and Cornelius was far more trustworthy. It was at Rihyarda's recommendation that I had taken him on in the first place, and our lack of any substantial interaction gave me no real incentive to want to protect him. I was trying to view this as objectively as possible, but as both Rihyarda's and Bonifatius's grandson, I didn't want him to be punished too harshly.

I might not care about him, but that's not reason enough to ignore him.

I turned my gaze to Traugott, who looked back at me with searching eyes, maintaining an intense stare. There was a brief pause before I spoke again.

“Allow me to expand on my previous question: why do you wish to become stronger?”

“Because Cornelius and Angelica got stronger after learning your compression method,” Traugott replied. In retrospect, he certainly had always seemed really focused on them both, but why was that?

“I will ask again: why do you wish to become stronger? Angelica and Cornelius sought strength because they regretted having allowed me to fall into danger and wanted to become guard knights fit for my service. What drives you? And what will you do with that strength? Do you wish to serve Wilfried, as Hartmut said?”

Wilfried’s retainers shared a tight bond, as they had continued to serve him even after he was no longer guaranteed to become the next archduke. Considering that all new retainers were carefully vetted as a precautionary measure, it was hard to imagine Traugott would manage to secure a place in his service after leaving mine.

Traugott visibly gritted his teeth. “I wish to serve no one. I want to become the knight commander, like grandfather.”

“By ‘grandfather’ you mean Lord Bonifatius, correct?”

I wasn’t sure why Traugott would mention Bonifatius here and not Karstedt; considering his age, it was hard to imagine he had seen Bonifatius work as the knight commander all that often. Perhaps he had seen him do something incredible as a kid, and now that mental image was getting more and more embellished as the years went on. Either way, I now knew that Traugott’s end goal was Bonifatius. His blood was thick with the muscle-headed, strength-seeking nature of his forebears.

“I want to lead the Knight’s Order like grandfather and hunt dangerous feybeasts while protecting the duchy. To make that happen, I need to be stronger than anyone in Ehrenfest.”

“You certainly would need to be strong to become a knight commander,” I agreed casually before blinking in realization. The Knight’s Order existed to protect both Ehrenfest and the archducal family; thus, it was traditional for its commanders to also serve as guard knights to the archduke. “Traugott, I believe

it won't be possible for you to be the knight commander without serving anyone, since the commander serves as the archduke's guard knight."

"Grandfather served no one when he was the knight commander. I want to be the same way."

I'm pretty sure he only managed that because he's a member of the archducal family himself...

I was more than familiar with Bonifatius's exaggerated tales of the past, having listened to them during more dinners than I could count since waking up from the jureve. If even half of these stories were true, he had led a dramatic and chaotic life—albeit not in the same way as Ferdinand. The Knight's Order was the only place that could really use his strength, and so he had served as the knight commander while supporting the previous generation's archduke.

It was due to the work Bonifatius did supporting the archduke that he hadn't served as his guard knight. From what I recalled, this was also true for Ferdinand when he had served in the Knight's Order. Children of an archduke could not become the retainer of an archducal family member, but as Traugott was merely an archnoble, this did not apply to him.

"Ah, Traugott. You see—"

"You may think it impossible for me, Lady Rozemyne, but there was a time when I was actually stronger than Cornelius. Grandfather told me I've got natural talent. If I'd learned your compression method too, I'd still be stronger now!" he declared, his fists balled tightly.

I really doubted that. He and Cornelius were of similar ages, but there was still a two-year gap between them, which was massive in the development of children and teens. Not to mention, Cornelius had been strong enough to serve as my apprentice guard knight even before learning my compression method.

Let me take a guess here: Grandfather only told Traugott he had more talent in an attempt to cheer him up and stir a rivalry, but Traugott took it completely seriously.

It was really, really hard to believe Traugott had actually been stronger at the time. My gut was telling me Cornelius had intentionally held back whenever

they were training together.

Bleeeh... I just want to end this conversation so I can go read the books I borrowed.

My interest in Traugott was waning fast, but he seemed excited to finally have an opportunity to discuss these things.

“I was stronger than him, but the moment anyone learned your mana compression method, they started making way too much progress. In the end, Grandfather became so focused on training the archducal family’s guard knights that he stopped having the time to train me personally,” he said, his voice dripping with vexation.

I did feel a little bad that Traugott had stopped getting to spend time with his beloved grandfather, but that was life. Intruders had managed to force their way into the castle with the support of nobles from our own duchy, kidnapping Charlotte and poisoning me into a coma—of course retraining the knights had become a top priority. It was hard to imagine that Bonifatius, as an experienced knight commander and the oldest member of the archducal family, would place his young grandson—who wasn’t even a guard knight—over the danger bearing down on Ehrenfest.

“I was always the closest to grandfather out of all his grandchildren, but at some point Angelica became his most beloved disciple, and everyone started saying Cornelius was the strongest and most mana-rich of us all. That should have been me in both places,” Traugott muttered. I could tell that Bonifatius had focused so intently on training the archducal family’s guard knights that he hadn’t even looked at anyone else.

“Grandfather already retired from the Knight’s Order. It is the duty of the higher-ups to train other knights, not his.”

“That’s why I wanted to become a guard knight!” Traugott shouted. His only desire was to earn Bonifatius’s approval; that was why he also wasn’t interested in serving Wilfried, whose future as the next archduke was no longer certain.

“Why did you choose to become my guard knight, then? If you had served Charlotte, you could have trained beneath Grandfather while I was asleep.”

“Charlotte is a girl, and so are most of her guard knights. There were only a few positions for male guard knights, and our connection was nowhere near strong enough for me to be chosen.”

Despite them being in the same faction, Traugott barely knew Charlotte’s attendants and wet nurses. To make matters worse, since he often became overexcited when playing with Wilfried in the playroom, the adults had determined he was a poor fit for Charlotte. Meanwhile, Rihyarda was my head attendant, and Bonifatius my grandfather; he had no choice but to aim to serve me instead, albeit against his wishes. Serving me also opened up the chance he might learn my mana compression method sooner than anyone else.

“Even Father went from praising me to treating me harshly once Cornelius grew stronger. I want more mana as soon as possible. I want to be stronger.”

“Your father is Father’s— *Ahem*. I mean, your father is Karstedt’s little brother, correct?” I asked. From what I remembered, Traugott’s father was the son of Bonifatius’s second wife and was married to Rihyarda’s daughter.

Traugott went on to tell me how his father had constantly been compared to Karstedt while he was raised, and that some of this bad blood was due to their mothers fighting. Karstedt was the son of a first wife as well as the knight commander, and while I couldn’t say for sure what Traugott’s father thought about that, it likely wasn’t good.

Despite all that, Bonifatius had seen Traugott training with Cornelius and then told him he had talent. This had made Traugott’s father happier than anything —he had praised Traugott with a smile, telling him to get even stronger to earn Bonifatius’s favor, which had ultimately led to our current situation.

In short, Traugott wants to be stronger to earn his father’s praise and Bonifatius’s recognition.

I understood the urge to work hard for the sake of approval, but the second I started to sympathize with Traugott, he ruined it all with a single line.

“Even a weak layknight like Damuel got decently strong with your mana compression, Lady Rozemyne. I would blow him out of the water.”

Um, excuse me...?

I crossed my arms, trying to contain my anger at hearing such brazen disrespect. It was true that Damuel was a laynoble, and that his mana capacity had once been so small that the girl he liked hadn't even seen him as a potential romantic partner, but he had worked hard to improve and dedicated himself to thinking up ways to fight more efficiently. In the end, he had become so skilled that even Bonifatius had praised him. Damuel fought using his head, unlike the apprentice knights here who charged ahead in the hope that their mana and stamina would win the day.

That's why Damuel is WAY more impressive than you, Traugott!

I valued Damuel so much more than Traugott that they were barely even comparable. Damuel was one of my oldest associates, and the guard knight I trusted most out of all my retainers. He had protected me from Shikza as best he could despite knowing I was a commoner, and when he had been assigned to guard me in the temple, he had put his life on the line and fought valiantly to protect me from the archnoble Count Bindewald. I would not forgive anyone who scorned him.

"Damuel made so much progress due to his own efforts. You have an advantage in that you are still an archnoble in your growing period, but there are few who have the determination to work as hard as he did."

"Pff. A laynoble can only do so much before they reach their limits. They are not even worth talking about."

Oh reeeally now?

The moment Traugott scoffed at Damuel, he was dead to me. I had said from the beginning that I didn't want there to be conflict among my guard knights, so I was completely uninterested in someone incapable of showing others even the least amount of respect. My retainers would do well without someone like him shamelessly looking down on Damuel and Philine solely for being laynobles.

Okay. Getting him to quit is the best outcome here.

Firing him myself ran the risk of damaging his entire house, and I didn't want to sully Rihyarda's and Bonifatius's names to punish their incompetent grandson. Not to mention, I didn't want him trying to get revenge or something either; I wanted to put him in a situation where he willingly resigned.

“I understand your position: You wish to become strong like Grandfather. You wish to earn the praise of your father. You wish to become stronger than Cornelius. And to accomplish all these things, you want my mana compression method,” I said.

Traugott’s feelings took on a much more forceful shape than mine, but he was still a kid desperate for his parents’ love. He wanted strength so much that he wasn’t even considering his surroundings properly. I was fully aware of this, yet my affections for him were nowhere near strong enough for me to even consider helping him grow as a person.

“Resign from your position as my retainer at once. In return, I will teach you my mana compression method.”

“Really?!” Traugott asked, his expression a mix of surprise and joy.

“Yes. I will teach you along with the others selected at the end of winter. However, you must earn the necessary money on your own and cause no further problems. These are basic rules that everyone has to follow, regardless of status or faction,” I said. Wilfried’s and my retainers were naturally having to follow them as well.

Traugott gave a firm nod, positively buzzing at the thought of attaining his dream.

“In that case, put the sound-blocking magic tool aside and announce your resignation to everyone,” I said, making a point to set down my own. He followed suit; then he looked around with a bright expression and made his declaration.

“I, Traugott, resign from my position as Lady Rozemyne’s guard knight.”

My retainers all shot me disapproving looks, unhappy that I was allowing him to quit rather than firing him as they had wanted. My guard knights looked particularly stern, while Rihyarda wore the most furious look of all.

Ignoring these reactions, I thoughtfully tilted my head. “Rihyarda, what paperwork must be done to finalize his resignation?”

“Wait just a moment, milady. A resignation would not be—” she began, her voice sharp, but Hartmut cut her protests short by holding out some ink and a

board.

“I believe he needs only write the general details of the resignation here, Lady Rozemyne.”

“I thank you ever so much, Hartmut. Now, Traugott, write here that you wish to resign from your position as my guard knight. That will put an end to all this.”

Traugott promptly did as he was asked. I checked what he had written, as well as his signature, before giving a nod.

“And now, Traugott, you are no longer my retainer. You are a simple apprentice knight,” I said. “You may return to your room now; I shall explain the rest.”

With that, Traugott swiftly exited the room, no doubt eager to avoid the piercing stare he was getting from Rihyarda. I could understand why, as the very moment the door closed behind him, her wrath exploded.

“Milady! What are you thinking?! You promised to teach him the mana compression method, didn’t you?! That is the only thing that would make him resign so easily!”

“You are correct,” I replied plainly, causing a stir among my retainers. Some questioned my decision, but none were more outraged than Rihyarda.

“Milady! Being so soft on those who fail you will only displease your other retainers!”

“Am I being soft? This seems like the perfect way to resolve everything.”

“How?!” Rihyarda demanded. The others seemed to be equally confused.

I sat up on my chair. “Let me make it clear that even after telling me his side of the story, Traugott did not endear himself at all. I do not wish for him to grow, nor do I really care whether his future is a pleasant one.”

“In that case, you should have been more harsh and—”

“It is precisely because I care so little for him that I want him out of my hair now and forever,” I said flatly, causing my retainers to blink in surprise. Hartmut in particular was now looking at me with great interest. “It would have been easy for me to fire Traugott—I had a reason and the authority to do so—but

such an action would simultaneously besmirch both Rihyarda and Lord Bonifatius. I do not care for Traugott, but I do not wish to dishonor those I do care for. If I am being soft on anyone here, it is on you, Rihyarda."

And not just Rihyarda—I didn't want Karstedt to be punished for not having trained an apprentice knight well enough, as he had been during the Shikza incident. Firing Traugott would most likely have more repercussions than I could ever imagine, but having him resign would contain the suffering to Traugott himself.

"Then why did you decide to teach him the mana compression method...?" Cornelius asked, narrowing his dark-brown eyes that he had gotten straight from Elvira at me. "Were you not teaching that only to those you can trust?"

I made sure to look Cornelius head-on as I gave my answer. "What do you think will happen to Traugott now that he has quit? I doubt he can serve Wilfried, and if serving Charlotte was an option, he would have become her guard knight while I was asleep. Furthermore, once Rihyarda has reported this incident, he won't even be able to serve Melchior."

"That is true. You may have allowed him to resign, despite having more than enough reason to fire him, but it makes sense that he would not be allowed to take up any similar roles."

"Right now, his mind is entirely focused on the mana compression method, but the reality of the situation will strike him soon enough. His desired future is now inaccessible to him, and I imagine he will soon find just living here to be a considerable emotional burden," I explained.

Hartmut stroked his chin thoughtfully and nodded. "Given his behavior here, none of us will treat him as a friend. To make matters worse for him, we have been successfully consolidating the entire Ehrenfest student body around us over the past few weeks—including Lord Wilfried's retainers and the children of the former Veronica faction. In other words, Traugott is going to be excluded by everyone."

It seemed this was an easy future for my retainers to imagine. Traugott would struggle in the Royal Academy from here on out, and everyone knew it.

"If Ahrensbach or some other duchy were to exploit this isolation, we would

run the risk of an information leak," I explained. "It is even possible that, in his lust for power, Traugott would resent us in some bizarre way and wish for revenge. Thus, I am teaching him my mana compression method."

"I don't quite follow. How does that justify teaching him the mana compression method...?" Brunhilde asked, resting a hand on her cheek in confusion.

"It is bait to keep him in line. Traugott will need to behave properly until the end of the term before he can learn the compression method. After all, everyone must earn their own money and prove that they deserve to be taught," I said with a refined giggle.

Hartmut looked at me, a noticeable glint in his orange eyes. "It is likely he will seek revenge of some kind afterward. What is your plan for then?"

"I have no intention of ever teaching the method to any of my enemies, which is why the magic contract includes a clause that prevents those who sign it from trying to oppose me."

Cornelius understood right away. "In short, you are teaching him the compression method so that you can bind him with contract magic?"

"Precisely. It is not that I wish to teach him the method; I simply hope to ensure he cannot exact revenge on me."

Traugott having resigned meant he would hurt only himself, and the magic contract he would eventually sign for my compression method would prevent him from lashing out at me. This was a win-win situation: Ehrenfest wanted as many nobles with high mana capacities as possible, especially ones who weren't going to rebel, and Traugott would get the compression method he wanted so much without having to endure serving as my retainer.

"It seems to me that this resolves all our problems," I concluded.

"Milady, that is no punishment for Traugott!" Rihyarda declared, shaking her head with a severe expression, but that was precisely the point—we didn't want to drive Traugott into a corner and risk him ruining the dorm atmosphere when we were making so much progress uniting the factions.

"Traugott's dream to become the knight commander after growing stronger

through the mana compression method will never come true, no matter how hard he works. Is that not enough? I could inflict no punishment greater than the despair he will feel when he realizes he forever closed off that future by his own hand."

Traugott's punishment would not be the quickly fading sting of a swift hand, but a scar he would bear for the rest of his life. Rihyarda, however, wanted something more visible that others would understand as a punishment.

"It might be better to strip him of his noble rank and send him to the temple so that he can learn his lesson," Rihyarda mused.

"Are you that mad at me, Rihyarda...?" I asked, her sudden remark almost bringing me to tears.

"...I think you are being soft, milady, but I am not mad at you," she replied after blinking a few times in surprise.

"Then please, do anything but send him to the temple. As the High Bishop, that's my territory. Now that I'm free of enduring Traugott as a retainer, the last thing I want is to be stuck dealing with him as a blue priest," I said, vigorously shaking my head with displeasure.

Cornelius chuckled, but this was no laughing matter. Considering that Traugott looked down on Damuel for being a laynoble, I couldn't even imagine what attitude he would have toward the gray priests and shrine maidens. I would feel especially bad for those assigned to be his attendants, since they would need to put up with his inevitable temper tantrums over being stuck in the temple.

"Not to mention, Ferdinand and I would need to train Traugott as a blue priest, and neither of us have time to waste on him. If you want to teach him a lesson, you or Grandfather are welcome to do so in a way that doesn't interfere with my work. I have nothing to do with him anymore, so please do not send him my way and make him my problem again."

"I suppose you are right," Rihyarda conceded, lowering her eyes a little.

"Your decision may appear soft, but in reality, you are cutting him off in the best possible way. Simple, yet utterly brilliant," Hartmut said, wearing the smile

of someone who was entirely satisfied things had gone their way. That kind of annoyed me; I was not entirely fond of what he had done here either.

“I will take this opportunity to note something else, Hartmut,” I said.

“Yes?” he asked, completely unafraid.

“If you are going to say that providing me with information is your responsibility, then tell me what you learn before publicizing it of your own accord.”

“Lady Rozemyne?”

“I will not ask where you obtain your information; I recognize that being able to obtain such valuable knowledge at all is a sign of your excellent skills. However, the scholars I know report everything they learn to their superiors, and it is their superiors who decide how that information is used.”

Compared to how Justus entrusted everything to Ferdinand, Hartmut had a tendency to use his gathered intel in ways that I didn’t entirely approve of.

“If you say it is information you obtained for my sake, then I should decide how and when it is used and publicized,” I continued. “You should not say you are acting as my retainer if you only gather that which suits your needs and disclose it only when you believe the time is right.”

Hartmut gasped in realization, abruptly stood up, and then knelt before me with his head reverently lowered. “Your will is my command,” he intoned.

And so our discussion came to an end, with me having lost one retainer and—more distressingly—most of my after-dinner reading time for that evening.

A Tea Party with Eglantine

Angelica was putting her absolute all into her studies, having become almost unrecognizable as she worked toward obtaining the fourth stage of the mana compression method.

“Lady Rozemyne’s compression method is incredible,” she had said to Cornelius at one point. “I really respect her ability to come up with so many new things. I want to increase my capacity and raise Stenluke even better.”

It seemed that Angelica had found her motivation, and Cornelius was stuck helping her as she charged directly toward her goal. He had years of experience teaching her from his work in the Raise Angelica’s Grades Squadron, plus he had studied up to sixth-year texts under Damuel’s guidance specifically so that he could tutor her. He was the perfect man for the job.

It helped that Cornelius had already finished his written classes, since this meant he could spend his mornings accompanying me to the library when necessary, on top of serving as a tutor for Angelica and the other apprentice knights in the common room after breakfast and dinner.

“Cornelius, I imagine it must be rough teaching Angelica. How are you faring?”

“It would be easier if not for your trips to the library. Could you by chance go there only once every two days?” he asked with a smile.

I shook my head, also wearing a smile. “There are but three weeks before I must return to Ehrenfest, so there is no time to waste. Besides, I am certain you will manage, Cornelius. You have my faith.”

“I suppose I knew you wouldn’t be able to show such restraint...” Cornelius replied with a hopeless shrug. His expression made it clear that he was well aware nothing he could say would possibly sway me.

“Restraint, hm...?” The word gave me pause, and I put a contemplative hand against my cheek. “I recall a distant memory in which I abandoned all restraint.”

“Don’t abandon restraint!” Cornelius cried at once. “Learn to show more, if anything!” His sudden outburst reminded me of my days with Benno, which made me feel a little nostalgic.

Oh, right. I need to contact Benno to inform him we’re going to need a lot more rinsham and plant paper soon. We’ll also need to discuss potentially selling the production methods for these products.

As I made the decision to tell him once I was back in Ehrenfest for the Dedication Ritual, Cornelius suddenly pressed his hands against my cheeks and squished my face together. “Don’t space out in the middle of a conversation like that. Listen to people when they speak.”

“Pweashe wet gow!”

I grabbed his wrists in an attempt to loosen his grip, but the strength of a knight was simply too much for me to overcome. He was going to crush my face at this rate, which was a real shame, since I was blessed with such a delightfully cute one in this world. As I continued trying to escape him, the frustration in Cornelius’s eyes slowly turned into amusement.

“You two certainly are close siblings,” Leonore suddenly interjected with a giggle.

Cornelius gasped, moving his hands away at once. His eyes then awkwardly flitted between the two of us.

“Lady Rozemyne and I only began interacting like this since she came to the Royal Academy. Before then, we only lived together for the brief period of education before her baptism,” he explained.

“I enjoy it here at the Royal Academy, specifically because it allows for such behavior,” I added. The adults would have scolded us if we had done something like this back in the castle; there, we had needed to maintain the proper distance between the daughter of an archduke and her guard knights. It was only here at the Academy that we had gotten closer, though we still weren’t entirely like proper siblings.

Leonore was peering our way with interest, so I decided to shift the topic to something a bit more romantic.

“Speaking of which, sixth-years need an escort for their graduation ceremony, correct? I’ve heard that girls have a family member escort them if they have no romantic partner, but what about men? Would you escort Mother, Cornelius?”

I glanced over at Angelica, since it was rumored she was going to be marrying one of my brothers. Meanwhile, Leonore’s blue eyes sparkled with eager excitement.

Cornelius blinked in surprise at the sudden change of topic but gave an answer nonetheless. “Yes, I suppose so. It would either be Mother or one of our aunts, so that anyone watching would immediately know we were not romantically involved. Siblings of a similar age might seem like romantic partners to those uninvolved, which can impact marriage discussions.”

“I see. Both boys and girls rely on their family when they have no escort. Who do you plan to escort, Cornelius?” I asked.

“Huh?! What’re you saying?!” Cornelius floundered, shooting looks all around with clear panic on his face.

“Do you not yet have one, perhaps? Will one more year be enough time for you to find someone? I am told you are quite popular with the girls, so if necessary, I can ask one of them for you.”

“It is nothing for you to worry about, Lady Rozemyne! I will ask her myself,” he stressed, revealing that he had someone in mind.

I nodded, interested, and that was when I saw Leonore lower her eyes with worry beside me.

Days passed with Cornelius following me to the library despite being so busy, and eventually, the date for my tea party with Eglantine was decided.

“The afternoon three days from now, hm? Very well,” I said.

My retainers swiftly began making the necessary preparations, all wearing proud smiles at the fact I had received an invitation from none other than the greater duchy Klassenberg. Brunhilde and Lieseleta immediately checked to make sure they didn’t have any classes in the afternoon three days from now.

It was a tea party just for girls, so Leonore and Judithe were going to be serving as my guards. Angelica was too busy focusing on her studies, and watching her remain utterly focused now that she had made her choice was genuinely inspiring. Philine's light-green eyes sparkled with excitement, and she rushed out of the dorm saying she was going to gather information about Klassenberg.

Out of all my excited retainers, Brunhilde was the most excited of all, since this was an opportunity to put her weight behind spreading trends. "Lady Rozemyne, perhaps we should bring a small jar of rinsham to give her?" she suggested. "I believe you promised to do so during the tea party with the music professors."

"True. I believe a jar with enough for a single use should do. Could you pour one for me?"

"As you wish."

Brunhilde first selected which jar to use; she then laboriously debated which of the three kinds of rinsham we had would mix the best with Eglantine's usual scent, and then delicately filled the jar. I could remember that Eglantine had smelled nice, but I had exactly zero memory of the actual aroma.

"Should the pound cake we bring be honey-flavored again?" Lieseleta asked. Her question gave me pause. If Anastasius had already called her over to share the pound cake, which was likely, then she had probably eaten honey-flavored pound cake twice by now.

"Surely she would find us lacking in taste if we brought the same gift every time, no? Or would it be more effective for starting a trend if we held it up as our prized sweet and brought it every time? How do these things work in the Sovereignty?" I asked in return.

Brunhilde joined me in thought, and then she snapped her fingers in realization. "Why not bring two pound cakes, one flavored with honey and one with apfelsige? By contrasting the one she already knows with one of a slightly different taste, it will not seem as though we are simply bringing the same thing over and over again," she said.

Bringing a flavor other than the plain cake we had shared with Solange or the

rumtopf we had brought to Anastasius would convey just how many varieties of pound cake there really were. Brunhilde had suggested the apfelsige pound cake for this occasion because it would go well with Eglantine's preferred teas and aromas. I could only raise my hands in defeat and nod to each suggestion Brunhilde made, since I knew nothing of what such preferences might signify. Her competence and skills continued to surprise me.

"It shall be done then," Lieseleta said with a smile upon seeing my nodding. She went into the kitchen, at which point Brunhilde looked over at Rosina, who was going to be attending the tea party as my personal musician and had thus been present for the entire discussion so far.

"Rosina, have you completed the song dedicated to the Goddess of Light yet?"

"I believe it will take a little while longer, my lady; the song needs to be refined as much as is feasibly possible. If you would be so gracious as to allow me to make a suggestion, I believe it may be wise to consult Prince Anastasius once more before presenting the song to Lady Eglantine."

Anastasius's demand for us to give Eglantine the song had come in the heat of the moment, but he was still the one who had instructed us to compose it; consulting him again certainly did seem like a wise thing to do. The only problem was that we needed to decide whether to ask him to compose his own lyrics. His outpour of raw emotion could possibly have some rather embarrassing results, so there was a chance we could wish we had just written them ourselves.

On the day of the tea party, I headed to Klassenberg's assigned tea party room. Each tea party room had several tables and chairs, but since only one table was being used today, the majority were stored away at the back of the room. Large screens covered with artistic illustrations closed off a little box of space for us.

Ehrenfest buildings often used tapestries to decorate the walls but kept a lot of the ivory exposed, and the furniture was mostly made of wood. Klassenberg buildings, in contrast, had intricately embroidered cloth entirely covering the

walls à la wallpaper, on top of which hung lines of paintings that seemed to serve as a symbol of wealth. Most of the furniture appeared to be made out of a marble-like stone, which made it really apparent how different the culture of each duchy was.

"I am glad you came, Lady Rozemyne," Eglantine said, her bright orange eyes softening into a smile as she welcomed me. Her wavy golden hair was done half-up, just as before, and adorned with elaborate lace decorations that were currently in style and made as part of one's bridal duties. It seemed this trend had all started when a girl made lace decorations to attract the boy she liked, and when their romance bore fruit, lace instantly became popular all throughout the Royal Academy.

Lady Eglantine is on a whole nother level from me... She makes lace as well as Tuuli does, and Tuuli is a pro.

Incidentally, I was leaving the creation of all my hair ornaments and such to Tuuli. I had made them myself at the start, but she was so overwhelmingly better than me by this point that I didn't dare put on one of my own.

"I thank you ever so much for inviting me, Lady Eglantine."

"I would have liked to invite some of my friends and introduce you to them, but I hope to use today to engage in more thorough conversation with you," she said. "Please allow me to introduce you to them at another time."

"Your words honor me," I replied. Despite tea parties in the Royal Academy being an important vehicle for spreading trends, I was honestly more than fine with there being fewer people here. It was more relaxing that way.

Eglantine's attendant accepted the gifts from Brunhilde and placed the two kinds of pound cake on the table. Eglantine and I drank the tea poured for us by our attendants and recommended sweets to one another.

"Lady Rozemyne, just how many flavors of pound cake are there? These have a unique taste compared to the cake Prince Anastasius treated me to the other day," Eglantine said. It seemed the prince had dutifully shared his pound cake with her. Hopefully that had earned him some points.

"That was pound cake with rumtopf, while this is pound cake with apfelsige.

Does honey pound cake remain your favorite, Lady Eglantine?”

“I’m quite fond of the honey pound cake, but this apfelsige one is lovely as well. It has a refreshing flavor that is quite pleasing to the palate.”

She liked the apfelsige pound cake after all. A discreet smile played on Brunhilde’s lips, since she had chosen that flavor herself.

“I have also brought with me the rinsham, which adds gloss to one’s hair. My retainer Lieseleta can give instructions on how to use it,” I noted, prompting Lieseleta to hold out the jar.

Eglantine opened the jar before leisurely smelling its contents. “The aroma is lovely,” she said with a satisfied smile. She then passed the rinsham to one of her attendants, who went off with Lieseleta to learn how to use it.

Eglantine watched the two leave with a gentle expression before turning to me. “Lady Rozemyne, I heard that you played a game of ditter against Dunkelfelger over the library’s magic tools. Prince Anastasius told me the details,” she said. “It seems you won quite soundly. I am quite surprised.”

Anastasius was apparently using me as a regular topic in his conversations with Eglantine. Her information network truly was intimidating—she already knew everything there was to know about Schwartz and Weiss.

“My involvement with the magic tools can only be described as the product of a bizarre accident, and I won the game of ditter only through the use of surprising tactics, rather than the strength and skill of my knights. Under normal circumstances, Dunkelfelger would have claimed victory. Their apprentice knights were truly something to behold.”

“Oh my, but Professor Rauffen was positively gushing with praise for your fighting style. He is quite excited for the rematch.”

Okaaay... Note to self: avoid Professor Rauffen at all costs.

Eglantine smiled as she deftly changed the topic of conversation. “Your dedication whirling is quite beautiful, Lady Rozemyne.”

“I am sure it only seems so due to my abnormally small size. If my whirling is truly special in any way, it is only because I have seen you practice up close,

Lady Eglantine. I always whirl while wishing that I might capture even a fraction of your skill and grace."

"...I truly am glad you are not a man, Lady Rozemyne. If you were to bestow upon me such praise so passionately and with heated eyes after watching me practice, my heart would surely have fallen for you," Eglantine said shyly. It seemed that people often praised her whirling as skillful, but none before me had ever said they considered her a source of inspiration.

Hm... Should I pass this tidbit on to Prince Anastasius? Or would he just get mad at me out of jealousy again?

"I am also told you have already finished all of your classes," Eglantine continued. "I was truly surprised when my retainers consulted me about your future plans."

"My guardians have told me that first-and second-year classes are often finished early," I replied, though I doubted Ferdinand had expected me to finish them all in the first two weeks for the sake of accessing the library.

That thought reminded me that the Dedication Ritual was coming up soon. I was about to be ripped away from the absolute perfection that was spending each and every day holed up in the library. I couldn't think of anything more heart-wrenching.

"...Not to mention, I needed to finish my classes swiftly as I will need to return to Ehrenfest on business before the end of the term," I added.

"Because you are Ehrenfest's High Bishop, I presume?"

"Precisely. The Dedication Ritual is being held soon."

While most nobles would grimace at the mere thought of visiting the temple, Eglantine's orange eyes showed no such disgust. In fact, she seemed interested —more than interested, if the serious look on her face was anything to go by.

"What manner of ceremony is the Dedication Ritual? Is it similar to dedication whirling?"

"There is no relation to whirling as far as I know. It is a ritual wherein small chalices are filled with mana, such that the duchy's land may be enriched in the

spring. The size of each year's harvest greatly depends on the amount of mana provided, so the Dedication Ritual is a very important ceremony," I explained.

"I see that Ehrenfest is preserving old traditions, having the child of the archduke serve as the High Bishop and fill the land with mana. I am moved."

I blinked in surprise, having expected Eglantine to say something about Ehrenfest having so little mana that we had to resort to using one of the archduke's children for religious ceremonies, but it was quite the opposite. She lowered her eyes for a moment before she continued.

"There is something I wish to discuss with you, Lady Rozemyne, but could we first use these? It is a quite personal topic, and I would rather our retainers not hear."

"Of course," I replied.

Eglantine had pulled out sound-blocking magic tools, so I smoothly placed my hand on the one set in front of me. She was wearing a small smile, but I could tell at once that it was dripping with worry. Given how she had jumped on the topic of the temple, I could safely conclude she had invited me to this tea party with the intention to talk about temple business.

"What manner of work do you perform at the temple, Lady Rozemyne?"

"I was instructed by Aub Ehrenfest to help alleviate the mana shortage, and so my most important job is providing significant quantities of mana for rituals. To be honest, I am leaving the rest of my work to others at the moment," I explained. I saw no reason to be stupidly honest and reveal that I was serving as the orphanage director and a forewoman on top of that.

Eglantine's eyes sparkled. "To alleviate the mana shortage, you say? Does that mean I will also be able to enter the temple?"

"You plan to enter the temple, Lady Eglantine?!" I exclaimed.

Nobles scorned the temple for a reason: it had become a place to abandon children who didn't have enough mana to be useful to their house, who needed to be isolated from noble society, and whose parents couldn't afford to raise them. It was maybe somewhat strange for me to say this considering that I was the High Bishop, but Eglantine was downright abnormal for wanting to join.

“Why do you want to enter the temple? You must know what kind of place it is.”

“Of course. I know how nobles treat the temple,” Eglantine replied, clasping her hands together in front of her chest. “You know my history, do you not, Lady Rozemyne...?”

“The music professors gave me a brief overview, but nothing more.”

“I lost my entire family in a war for political power. Prince Sigiswald has asked for my hand in marriage, since he knows wedding me will get him closer to the throne, which has forced Prince Anastasius to likewise ask for my hand to forestall him. I wish to see no more battles for power and authority, yet my decision here may create another tragedy like the one that took my family. I do not want to plant the seeds of war.”

I was already aware that Eglantine had been the third prince’s daughter at the time of the civil war. According to the history lesson Ferdinand had given me, the third prince had defeated the first prince, only to then be killed by an assassin the first prince had sent out before his death. As the home of the third prince’s wife, Klassenberg had furiously put its support behind the fifth prince, and when those who supported the first prince then moved to support the fourth, the civil war had dramatically intensified.

“I understand well that you would wish to avoid wars of succession after surviving in the midst of the civil war, but does Aub Klassenberg know of your plans to enter the temple?”

“He does, though he said it was unthinkable for a noble to enter the temple and refused my suggestion entirely.” That was why she wanted to talk to me about my role as the High Bishop, it seemed—she wanted something to convince him with.

Unfortunately, I was not the answer she was looking for. My presence in the temple was solely to alleviate a crippling mana shortage, meaning the circumstances were completely unlike those in a greater duchy that had outright won the civil war. Not to mention, the plan was for me to leave once I came of age so that I could get married, which ran in completely the opposite direction to Eglantine wanting to join the temple to avoid marriage. With how

few nobles there now were, Eglantine would never be allowed to join the temple when she could be producing children with huge mana capacities.

“I believe it is only natural that Aub Klassenberg would refuse; I am more than familiar with how much scorn the temple receives from nobles,” I said. “Furthermore, you wish to join the temple to avoid marriage, correct? I am sorry to say that the powers that be plan for me to resign from my position as High Bishop to get married when I come of age. You will find nothing useful from me.”

“I see... Here I was thinking it an excellent idea that would allow me to contribute mana to the duchy while also avoiding another war for power...” Eglantine lowered her eyes again before letting out a sigh. “Is there any other position that would allow me to avoid marriage, such that I do not have to wed royalty?”

It wasn’t that she wanted to join the temple in particular; she just didn’t want to be the center of yet another war. In which case, she was better off trying to find a solution that didn’t involve the temple.

“Becoming the next Aub Klassenberg would allow me to avoid all this trouble, but my cousin—or rather, my nephew—is already in place to take that position,” Eglantine noted. She had considered marrying into another duchy, but refusing a marriage proposal from royalty for such a reason would infuriate said royalty and place a massive burden on Aub Klassenberg.

“My grandfather—no, my adoptive father—regrets adopting me, even though it was for my protection,” she continued. “He says that he stole away my proper position as royalty, and so he hopes for me to wed a prince and regain my original status. If only he understood that I wish for peace much more than status...”

“Perhaps you could ask one of your family members to escort you at your graduation,” I suggested. “It seems you can hardly choose one of the princes as you are now.”

“Indeed,” Eglantine said with a sad smile. “That is my intention, assuming I do not receive a direct order from the king or Aub Klassenberg.”

Ouch. Looks like you’ve struck out, Prince Anastasius.

“Lady Rozemyne, please do keep it a secret that I am planning to join the temple,” Eglantine said.

“Nobody would even believe me,” I replied. Even I was struggling to comprehend that one of the Klassenberg archduke candidates wanted to join the temple. Trying to explain this to Anastasius would no doubt result in him getting mad at me for insulting her honor.

With the serious portion of our discussion over, we moved on to talking about trends from Ehrenfest. Eglantine was quite curious about rinsham and my hairpins on top of music, and she seemed interested in importing them to Klassenberg.

“I will report this to Aub Ehrenfest upon my return for the Dedication Ritual. Would you like me to stealthily bring back some rinsham for you? Though it would be a product with a cost.”

“Oh my. Were Prince Anastasius to hear that, he would get jealous again,” Eglantine said with an amused smile. She then placed a finger over her lips. “Please do. One discreet jar, as a secret between us. May our friendship be long and prosperous, Lady Rozemyne.”

Reporting to the Prince

After my tea party with Eglantine, I returned to the bliss that was visiting the library every day. I only had two more weeks to spend in this heaven; I needed to pump myself up and read as much as I could before the Dedication Ritual pulled me back down to earth.

As I was busy reading my book, I vaguely heard a person calling “Hey!” to get someone’s attention. Why couldn’t people learn to be quiet in the library? I turned the page just as the voice came again.

“Listen to me, tiny Ehrenfest girl.”

“Lady Rozemyne! Prince Anastasius is here!” Lieseleta cried from beside me, slamming my book shut in a hurry.

I snapped back to reality and looked up. Anastasius was the guy being noisy in the library. My conversation with Lestilaut from Dunkelfelger had taught me that archduke candidates and royalty normally had their retainers fetch the books they needed, meaning they rarely ever stepped foot in the library themselves, yet here the prince was. Perhaps he had come here out of a love for libraries and the books within them?

And just like that, my opinion of Anastasius improves dramatically.

“Do you have business here in the library?” I asked with a polite smile about thirty percent more genuine than the one I usually wore. “If you need any books in particular, Professor Solange will gladly direct you to them. Schwartz and Weiss are also very familiar with the reading material available here.”

Anastasius made a face as though he were chewing on a bug. “No. I have business with you. Your tea party with Eglantine was three whole days ago. Why have you not come to give me a report? And don’t try to tell me your letter requesting a meeting was lost in transit.”

Aw, what? He’s not a bookworm prince after all...? Too bad.

Just like that, my opinion of Anastasius plummeted back down to where it had

been before. I sighed in disappointment. To say that one's letter requesting a meeting had gotten lost in transit was a common excuse used to shift the blame onto the scholars for not doing their jobs properly. It was basically like a politician back on Earth saying "It was my secretary's fault" or something after getting caught.

I tilted my head, repeatedly blinking as Anastasius glared at me with frustrated gray eyes. "Did I not promise to never approach you on my own terms, Prince Anastasius? I have been solemnly awaiting your summons, for it would be far beyond me to break a promise with royalty."

That was my excuse, at least. The truth was that I knew everyone would make a huge fuss about me contacting Prince Anastasius, so I had deliberately put things off for as long as possible.

Anastasius scoffed dismissively. "Am I to pretend you were not so absorbed in your reading a moment ago that you didn't even notice my calls?"

I merely smiled and said that I was relieved he had found his way to me. Incidentally, given that Anastasius had cleared the room back when he had made his request, none of my retainers were aware I needed to report to him after my tea party with Eglantine. They had all paled in terror.

"No matter," he said. "I summon you now. Give your report immediately."

"Even though I will not have any gifts to bring?" I asked. My hope was to postpone this for at least a short while, but Anastasius seemed to be in a pretty big hurry. He remarked that he didn't care and that I was to come immediately; then he turned to leave the reading room, flourishing his black cape in the process.

I jumped out of my seat and reached for the book on the desk. I needed to check it out now, since I most likely wouldn't have time to return to the library if this little meeting stretched on for too long.

"I wish to—" I began, only for Lieseleta to interrupt me.

"I shall borrow the book in your place and return the key to the carrel. Please report to Prince Anastasius at once," she said. Rihyarda joined her in hurrying me on—the book was ripped out of my hand, and I was practically dragged out

of the library.

Aah. I messed up.

I trailed behind Anastasius with Rihyarda, Hartmut, Cornelius, and Leonore in tow. The end result of my attempt to avoid standing out was the prince summoning me directly, such that I was now walking directly behind him on our way to his villa. To make matters worse, we were at a point in the term when more students were finishing their classes, so there were even more potential onlookers.

I should have just sent a normal request for a meeting. Why did I have to be so dumb?!

As much as I wanted to hang my head in sorrow, I kept a smile plastered on my face and marched onward, holding my head high until Anastasius suddenly stopped and turned around.

"Talk about slow. How are you this slow, Rozemyne?"

"My apologies. Please feel free to return to your villa ahead of me," I said. It really wasn't something that could be helped; Anastasius was just that much taller than me, and I was already trying so hard to keep up that I was almost out of breath. I was significantly healthier now, but I was relying on my magic tools so much that I still lacked stamina. Trying any harder would simply result in me embarrassing myself.

In fact, I might collapse just trying to maintain our current pace!

The most exercise I had done over the past week was walking to and from the library, so it wasn't much of a surprise that I'd developed pretty much no extra stamina. This also reminded me that I had stopped keeping up with my morning exercises, something I was sure Ferdinand wouldn't be all too pleased to hear.

Well, whatever. There's already a hundred things he's going to be mad at me about. What's one more on the pile?

I did my best to keep my legs moving and my breathing steady, but it eventually became too much for me. My body felt heavy, and I started gasping for air.

“Excuse me, milady.”

“Rihyarda...”

After a word of caution, Rihyarda hefted me up. I was so relieved that I collapsed against her without a second thought, only to straighten back up a little when Anastasius stopped in place. He was now looking at us in total disbelief.

“Lady Rozemyne has a naturally poor constitution, meaning she has considerably less stamina than others her age,” Rihyarda said. “I noticed that she had started to pale and was likely to faint soon, so I hope you will forgive my carrying her.”

“‘Likely to faint’? I heard something about her weakness from Rauffen, but is it truly this dire?” Anastasius asked, his eyes widening. He had no doubt been told about me collapsing in the Farthest Hall on my way to get my schtappe, but he hadn’t really believed it. Should Rauffen really have been so talkative in the first place though? Maybe it was his job to give information to royalty and higher-ranking archduke candidates, but I had an inkling he was leaking everything about me to anyone who asked.

“She is much healthier than she was before, but she must still be wary of overexerting herself,” Rihyarda said, squeezing me protectively in her arms.

Anastasius shot us another look, this time tinged with equal parts disbelief and annoyance. “If she cannot walk a distance this short, how can she travel through your castle?”

“Aub Ehrenfest has given milady permission to use her highbeast when moving throughout the castle and the dormitory. This permission does not extend to the Royal Academy though, of course.” I would need the permission of royalty to ride Lessy inside the Royal Academy.

“You may carry her then. Just hurry up,” Anastasius said with a sigh before he resumed walking.

Rihyarda followed after him with me in her arms. I noticed we were getting even more looks now than before, and it took me a good deal of self-restraint not to cover my head with my cape to escape their gazes. I knew doing that

would just make things worse.

“Are you well, milady? You seem to be turning more pale,” Rihyarda whispered, keeping her eyes directly forward as she walked. It seemed I had pushed myself a little too hard; the second I started to relax in her arms, I started feeling so sick that my head spun.

“I feel bad enough that I yearn even for Ferdinand’s kindness as a means to help...” I said. It was extremely rare for me to willingly ask to drink one of his potions.

Rihyarda merely squeezed her eyes shut and then exhaled.

“Please sit here, Lady Rozemyne.” Anastasius’s head attendant offered me a seat, but upon seeing how sick I was, he shot the prince a reproachful glance. I apparently looked so bad that even someone who barely knew me couldn’t help but grimace.

Anastasius, however, just gave a light shrug and waved a dismissive hand. “Rozemyne, clear the room.”

“Will we not be using magic tools?” I asked. “Lady Eglantine elected to use them during our tea party.” I didn’t really want Rihyarda to leave when she had the potions I wanted, but unfortunately, my suggestion was shot down at once.

“No. Some apprentice scholars have mastered the art of reading lips, so sound-blocking magic tools will serve no purpose.”

I had initially assumed he was just being excessive, but in reality, Anastasius had been raised in an environment where people knowing how to lip-read was normal and expected. And on top of that, it was almost certainly essential that royalty remain fully on guard even against children like me.

Having no other choice, I dismissed my retainers after first drinking a potion from Rihyarda. I was now alone in the room with Anastasius and his retainers. I sipped my tea and took a bite out of a sweet recommended to me, as was the standard way to begin meetings. Once formalities were over, Anastasius got right to the point. It seemed he had been waiting for this report for a long time.

“What was her answer?” he asked. “Who will she have escort her?”

“She said that she plans to ask a member of her family.”

“Useless! That’s what she always says!” he exclaimed, shaking his head and then fixing me with a glare. “Is that all you have after making me wait this long?”

Unfortunately for him, it was the truth. “I apologize for not being useful to you, Prince Anastasius. However, it is a fact that Lady Eglantine has said she will choose neither you nor your brother. Now, if you will excuse me...”

My intention was to cut the conversation short then and there, but Anastasius raised a hand to stop me. “Wait, Rozemyne. What do you mean, she will choose neither me nor my brother? Is she in love with someone else?”

Why would you ever think that?!

I cradled my head, recalling how troubled Eglantine had been at the tea party. She was deeply traumatized by the civil war she had been involved in, so much so that she was trying to enter the temple as a blue shrine maiden despite being the archduke candidate of a greater duchy... yet Anastasius could think only of romance.

“Lady Eglantine is not in a position where she can love another so easily. Should you not know that better than anyone, Prince Anastasius?”

If she were to declare she was in love with someone else while two princes contended for her hand in marriage, it would only further complicate the situation. I sighed, which made Anastasius narrow his sharp eyes. He looked deathly serious to the point that it was scary. I gulped and straightened my back. The dull ache in my head was bothering me, but now wasn’t the time to go limp with exhaustion.

“You know something. What did Eglantine tell you?”

“I had thought you would know what I am referring to already, Prince Anastasius.”

“I will decide what I do and do not know. Speak.”

Perhaps due to his sheer presence as royalty, the aura he exuded overwhelmed me and allowed room for neither protest nor disobedience. Oh

well. I just needed to avoid mentioning Eglantine's plan to join the temple.

"You are aware that Lady Eglantine is a former princess who lost her family in the civil war, correct?"

"Yes."

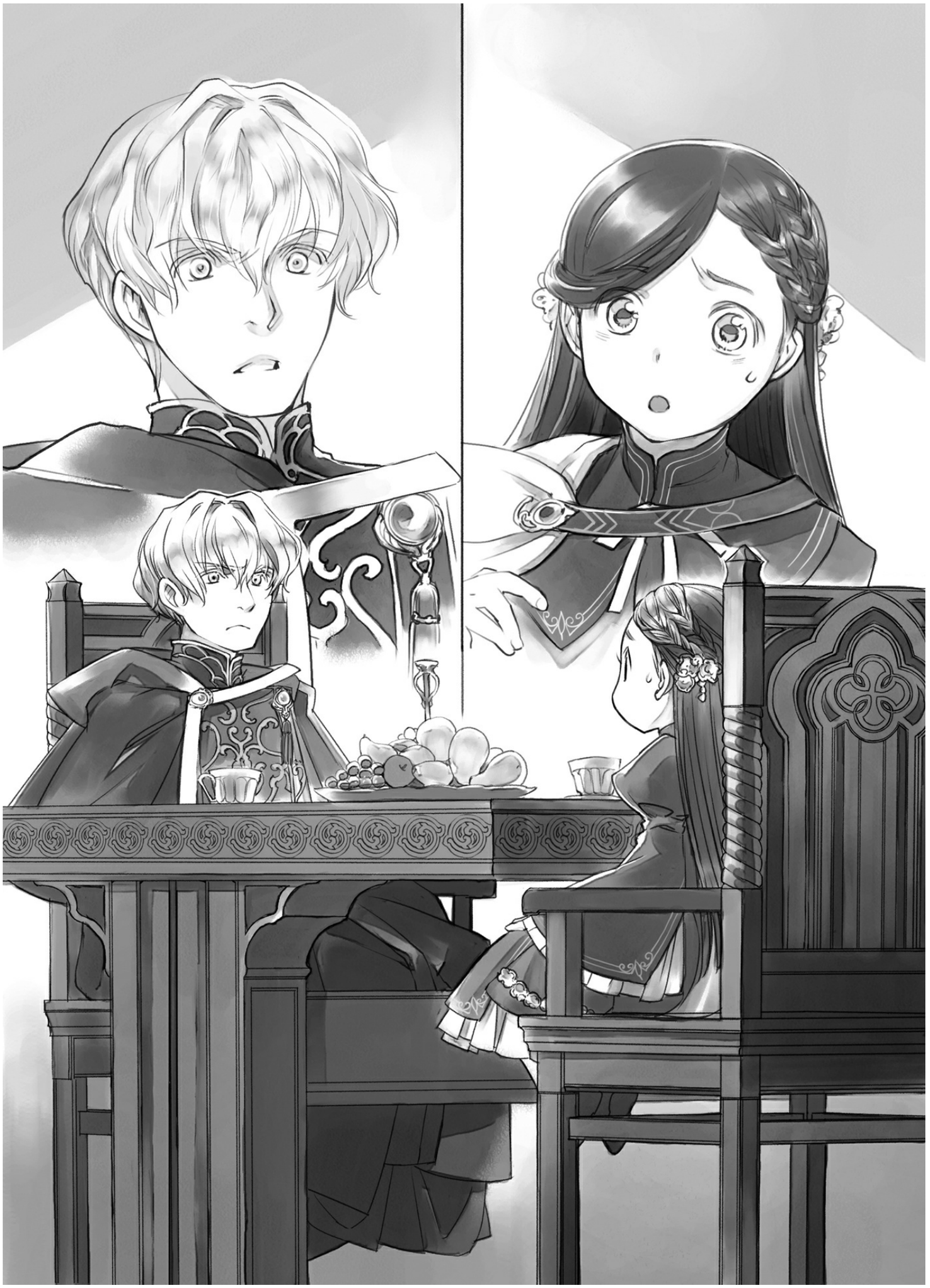
"It is because of this experience that she wishes to choose neither you nor your brother. She will only make a decision if ordered to by the king or Aub Klassenberg. Lady Eglantine does not wish to bring about yet another war, but I imagine that much is already common knowledge," I said, cautiously observing his reaction.

Anastasius blinked in surprise, pausing for a long moment before giving a response. "Eglantine wants to return to royalty, does she not? That is what I was told."

It was my turn to blink in surprise; I hadn't expected that at all. "As far as I am aware, her grandfather is the one who wishes for her to return to royalty. He feels he stole her rightful place from her by adopting her."

"The previous aub..." Anastasius muttered under his breath with a sigh. "Do you mean to say Eglantine does not wish to be royalty herself?"

"I am sure Lady Eglantine wants peace more than anything else."



I wasn't sure whether it was because noble speech relied so heavily on euphemisms or because Anastasius kept trying to communicate to her through other people, but I could already recognize the misunderstanding between him and Eglantine despite having only really spoken to them twice.

"This is just my personal opinion, and you may readily disregard my words as the nonsense of a child should they overstep any boundaries, but... I believe you should have a serious conversation with Lady Eglantine about what you both want in life before you discuss escorting her, Prince Anastasius. By that I mean a face-to-face conversation not conducted through third parties such as myself. It seems to me that neither of you properly understand the other's feelings and desires."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Anastasius asked, wincing at my apparent petulance, but the real question was how anyone hadn't noticed that already.

"Lady Eglantine indicated that both you and your brother are proposing to her for political reasons."

"No. I truly do—"

"Those are words you should tell Lady Eglantine in person, rather than through me," I interrupted. I was still feeling queasy, so the last thing I wanted was to hear him wax poetic; rather, I wanted to go back to the dormitory already. "I believe your affection for her is being distorted through the lens of politics. Why not start by conveying your feelings directly, to avoid any potential misunderstandings?"

Anastasius visibly slumped forward in despair, horrified to hear that she thought he was acting for political reasons. Naturally, I elected not to conclude my advice with, *"Considering how little you understand each other, perhaps it would be best for Lady Eglantine's future if you simply never spoke to her again?"* and instead took a more diplomatic approach.

"Lady Eglantine is currently searching for a way to distance herself from the ongoing political struggle and avoid marrying into royalty. She had wished to become Aub Klassenberg to achieve this, but would that truly work?" I asked.

"...It would prevent her from wedding into the family of another, at least.

Fewer women become aubs, but when they do, men wed into their families rather than the other way around."

It turned out that when a male successor died and a woman was quickly forced to inherit the position of aub, her engagement was normally canceled in the process; only male archduke candidates in a position to marry into other families could marry female aubs. In a similar regard, a woman set to become aub would usually have her engagement canceled when a younger brother was born and took her position. That was what had happened with Georgine and Sylvester, to my understanding.

"You may prioritize her feelings, you may prioritize your position in the royal family, or you may come up with some clever third solution that is beyond me. In any case, you have quite a bit of work ahead of you, Prince Anastasius."

What did one need to become king? Was simply giving up on Eglantine an option? What actions would need to be taken in either of these scenarios? I wasn't all that informed on royal affairs, so these were questions I didn't have any answers to.

"This may be tough given Lady Eglantine's current position, but I believe it best to take the path that will allow her to live as peacefully and with as little conflict as possible," I continued.

"I think so too," Anastasius muttered. He then grinned as though some brilliant idea had just come to him. "Rozemyne, your report was far more valuable than I expected."

The prince's determined expression made it abundantly clear he had not elected to give up on Eglantine. I didn't know what his plan was, but I at least hoped he would remain this motivated until she cut him off for good. Either way, I hoped Eglantine's decision would result in her happiness.

"Prince Anastasius, there is more I wish to say, but it is extraneous and admittedly harsh to the point of rudeness. With that in mind, will you allow me to continue?"

"I will," Anastasius said, furrowing his brow slightly and jutting out his chin to indicate I should speak.

I placed a hand on my cheek to still my fuzzy head and swaying vision. “It is clear from her practicing alone that Lady Eglantine pours her very soul into her dedication whirling. You should take your own practice more seriously if you wish to be a good match for her. At the moment, you are noticeably worse than her when you perform side by side.”

Anastasius grimaced with displeasure, but I continued nonetheless. “Furthermore, I can teach you a love song so powerful that women in Ehrenfest faint upon hearing it. I suppose this depends on you being confident with the harspiel, but would you like to learn it? Lady Eglantine is quite dedicated to the arts, so you might find more success if you approach things from that angle. When praising her, do not simply say that she is good; tell her why in concrete terms. Also, I imagine you are more likely to touch her heart if you say ‘I love your voice’ rather than ‘Your voice is beautiful’ or something of the like.”

Anastasius’s eye twitched as he listened with a bitter frown. “You certainly are holding nothing back. Not even my retainers dare to speak so openly.”

“My apologies. You are welcome to ignore me,” I replied. I had already told him everything I thought he would benefit from hearing. Whether he acted on my advice had nothing to do with me.

Anastasius drummed his fingers against the armrest of his chair, visibly frustrated. “I will give you some advice in turn, Rozemyne. You need to learn to hide your emotions more, and to advertise the information you have without sharing it so freely. You are currently letting far too much spill without a second thought. Others will exploit this weakness and treat you lightly.”

He was annoyed at me, but his advice was unmistakably genuine. I chose to accept it, since I was aware of my ignorance when it came to socializing.

“I am honored to receive your advice and will make an effort to improve. Now, if you would allow it, I wish to leave things there for today. My head has been spinning quite terribly, and I’m afraid I will soon...”

I abruptly stopped mid-sentence. The potion had made me feel a little better, but the dull pain in my head was still pounding away, and now I was battling a sudden bout of extreme drowsiness.

“Oswin!” Anastasius called. “Summon Rozemyne’s retainers!”

“Right away!”

I slumped back into the chair, and the last thing I saw before passing out was Anastasius shooting up from his seat and Oswin, his head attendant, rushing to the waiting room where Rihyarda and the others were.

When I woke up, I found a letter from Anastasius wherein he apologized for having forced me to give him a report despite knowing I was feeling unwell. Given that there was a message from Eglantine alongside it, I could guess he had written it after she had scolded him.

Maybe he’s made some progress with her... I sure hope so.

I smiled at the sight of their names lined up next to each other, all close and friendly.

An Order to Return to Ehrenfest

I was finally feeling better. I didn't know whether it was because the Royal Academy was unexpectedly exhausting or because I hadn't yet built my stamina back up, but I had ended up so sick that it took three full days for me to recover.

"I am truly relieved to see that your fever has gone down, milady. The past three days have been difficult to say the least," Rihyarda said. She then went on to explain everything that had happened.

First of all, Anastasius and his retainers had been exceedingly panicked about me passing out in the middle of our meeting. Oswin in particular had been extremely apologetic, considering they had forced me to give a report despite knowing about my weak constitution and that I wasn't feeling well. My new retainers had also never seen me pass out before, and the sight of my unconscious body had disturbed them so much that they hadn't been able to help at all. In the end, Rihyarda had needed to take care of matters herself, picking me up and leaving Anastasius's villa.

Even after getting back to the dormitory, however, I didn't regain consciousness. Cornelius and Wilfried had gone pure white; my being asleep and not responding to any calls must have brought back strong memories of my two-year coma.

"It seems I will need to apologize to them all..." I observed.

"Your recovery takes priority," Rihyarda said, stressing that I wasn't allowed to leave my bed today either. "We do not want you getting sick again in the middle of apologizing."

"Right..."

In return for agreeing to rest, I was permitted to read the books I had borrowed from the library. I ultimately spent the whole day relaxing in bed.

"I can go to the library today, right, Rihyarda?" I asked. She noted that the

color had fully returned to my face and nodded, so I jumped out of my bed with joy.

“We were told much about your poor health,” Leonore said, having stood guard in my room while I was sick, “but when I saw you faint, my mind went completely blank. I had no idea what to do.”

With that, she opened the door so that we could go to the dining hall for breakfast, visibly relieved to see that I was better. It was common enough to see apprentice knights pass out during training, but this had been her first time seeing someone faint for seemingly no reason. Clueless as to why I had suddenly fallen unconscious, she hadn’t known how to react, and so she had ended up floundering in place.

“Good morning, Lady Rozemyne.”

Hartmut and Cornelius were waiting on the second floor. They too looked relieved to see me up and about again.

“My apologies for having shocked you, Hartmut,” I said.

“My heart veritably stopped,” he replied. “All those who attended the playroom during the year of your debut had already seen you collapse from a single snowball, Lady Rozemyne, but this was my first time seeing such a shocking display.” He had heard about my fainting from his mother, Ottilie, but still couldn’t help but be surprised.

Once we arrived at the breakfast table, Wilfried gave Rihyarda a suspicious look.

“As she spent all of yesterday in bed with nary a sign of a fever, it is safe to say she has recovered,” Rihyarda said in response to his silent question.

“Alright then. Rozemyne, go back to Ehrenfest.”

“Um, what...?” I asked, tilting my head.

Wilfried sighed and said that he would explain after breakfast, meaning my confusion remained the entire time we were eating. Only once we were done did Wilfried and I gather in a meeting room with our retainers.

“This arrived from back home. It’s an order for you to return,” Wilfried said,

holding up a letter from Sylvester and Ferdinand. It contained three clear messages:

“Hurry up and get back now that your classes are done. You keep causing unexpected problems one after another.”

“Leave the Royal Academy at once. There is a mountain of things you must explain upon your return.”

“The reports we are receiving explain nothing.”

In short, my guardians intended to interrogate me the moment I was back in Ehrenfest, entrusting future socializing in the Royal Academy to Wilfried.

“A-Absolutely not! I was told I could stay here until the Dedication Ritual, which means I’ve still got ten days left! I’m going to continue going to the library for as long as I can!” I exclaimed. I had already lost four whole days due to my poor health, so I was desperate not to lose even more.

“Rozemyne, this is an order from Aub Ehrenfest himself,” Wilfried emphasized.

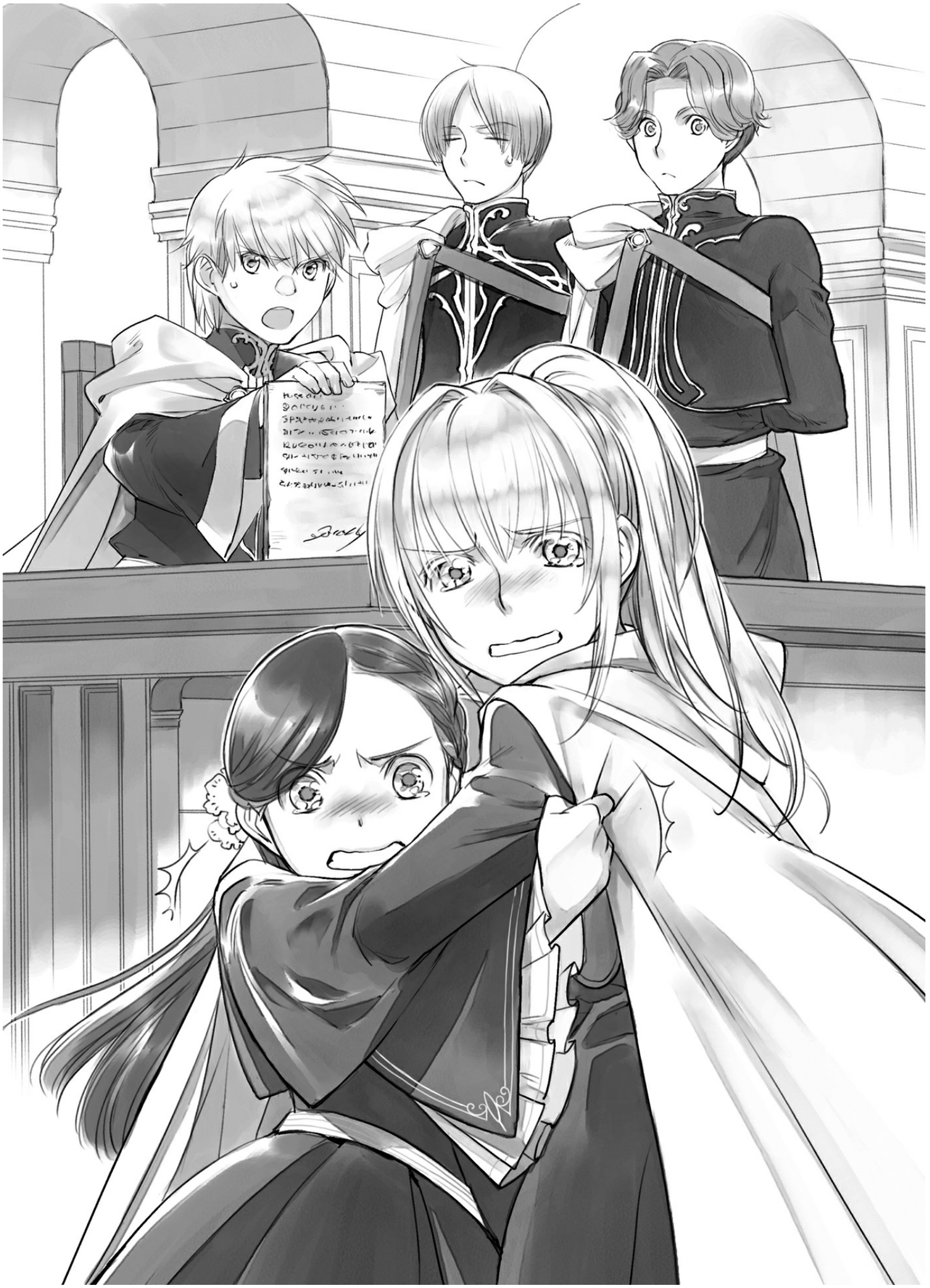
“I-I’m regrettably too ill to return to Ehrenfest before the Dedication Ritual. It is essential that I lock myself away in the library, for the sake of psychological stability and physical enrichment.”

“I get that you’re panicking here, but could you at least say things that make sense?” Wilfried sighed, folding his arms and giving me an exasperated look.

“But this is just too cruel. Too sudden!”

“That’s right! It’s much, much too sudden!” Angelica suddenly cried, throwing her full support behind my protests. “She can’t go home yet! The exam for my last class is three days from now! I’m going to pass it and get the fourth step of the mana compression method! Don’t go home yet, Lady Rozemyne! Please, just three more days! Stay for three more days!”

Angelica gripped me in a tight hug as if to stop me from leaving. I hugged her right back; I needed her valuable support.



“That’s right,” I added. “There’s Angelica’s test, of course, but I have also promised to deliver Prince Anastasius his music, and I need to thank Lady Eglantine for her words of concern. I will also need to fill Schwartz and Weiss with a great deal of mana, since I am going to be away for a lengthy period of time. In short, I have much to prepare before I can leave. I cannot depart so suddenly.”

Rihyarda nodded in agreement. “Making the proper preparations is crucial. Wilfried, my boy, we will want to inform Prince Anastasius and Lady Eglantine of milady’s departure, for your sake.”

“Fair enough. We wouldn’t want to leave any loose ends with royalty before she goes,” Wilfried replied. Since no retainers had been present for my discussion with Anastasius, he wouldn’t know what to say or do in my absence.

Sensing that Wilfried was opening up to discussion, the apprentice knights who had been caught up in Angelica’s studies and the retainers of mine who needed Angelica to pass before they could secure the improved mana compression method all nodded in agreement.

“We would appreciate this being postponed until Angelica finishes her last test,” one said.

“Either she passes and graduates, or she shames Ehrenfest by dropping out,” added another. “The fate of our duchy hangs in the balance.”

“Three days. Please, just three more days. Give her time to prepare,” pleaded a third.

Angelica’s motivation would no doubt plummet down to nothingness without the mana compression method as bait—she might even be too devastated to finish her final class. It was for that reason that all the apprentice knights familiar with her failures last year were banding together in a united effort to keep Angelica on the narrow track to success I had created for her.

“Angelica, are your grades so bad that you might not even graduate?” Wilfried asked.

“Yes!” Angelica said proudly. “All of my written-class grades are just barely passes!”

That's not something to be proud of, Angelica...

She was puffing out her chest with pride over how hard she had worked this year for the mana compression method, but it just made how empty her head was stand out all the more.

"Lord Wilfried," Cornelius interjected, "we will force Lady Rozemyne to return to Ehrenfest the moment Angelica finishes her test. We shall come together as her retainers, tear the book from Lady Rozemyne's hands, and carry her to the teleportation circle ourselves. So please... Please, give us three days."

"Cornelius, isn't that a bit harsh?!" I exclaimed.

Either way, it seemed everyone's desperation had gotten through to Wilfried. He fell into thought for a moment before looking up.

"Alright. I'll tell Father to give you three days to prepare, so finish all you need to do by then. You're leaving next Earthday. Got that, Rozemyne?" Wilfried asked, looking over us all.

Everyone gave firm nods, determination clear on their faces. I was still annoyed at having to leave a full week earlier than planned, but protesting on my own without any backup would get me nowhere. I hung my head and nodded in agreement as well.

"Fine."

Since the magic circles used to transport people required a lot more mana than those used to transport inanimate objects, reports to Ehrenfest were delivered via boards and letters rather than people. There were knights serving as guards at the teleportation hall who would receive ordonnanzes from Hirschur and then transcribe her messages. It turned out that Wilfried was writing daily reports on all the, quote, unquote, "messes I had made," since there were just so many. In other words, it was his fault I was being ordered to come home.

Curse you, Wilfried!

I had a letter sent to Ehrenfest asking for a replacement chef to work in the dormitory's kitchen, since I was planning to take Ella back with me. It was too much to ask Nicola to handle all the cooking herself when I returned to the

temple for the Dedication Ritual, and deciding which one of my personal chefs would accompany me was easy—no way was I going to leave Ella alone in the Royal Academy with nobody to protect her.

"Wilfried, should I bring Rosina back with me also?"

"I would prefer you leave her. Rosina is the most skilled musician here, such that even the music professors are impressed with her, remember? She'll play a crucial role when we're socializing."

Rosina was evidently someone they needed during the upcoming tea parties. She knew all the new songs that were popular in Ehrenfest, and she had started making more herself since arriving at the Royal Academy. Considering that she was good enough to earn the praise of not just the music professors but also Eglantine, her skill was essential for our duchy to gain as much of an advantage as possible.

"In that case, I shall entrust her to you, Wilfried. Please take extra care to ensure she is not mistreated, and that nobody attempts to take her for their own."

"I know. She's your own personal musician. We'll make sure she's treated well," Wilfried replied, sounding confident. I decided to place her in his care. If she wasn't coming back to Ehrenfest with me, there was a lot she needed to do here.

"Well, Rosina, you heard him. You are to stay here to aid with socializing. Would you have the time to swiftly write out sheet music for me? One for the song dedicated to the Goddess of Light, one for the song dedicated to the Goddess of Wisdom, and one for the song dedicated to the Goddess of Earth. I would like to show the Goddess of Light song to Ferdinand as well."

"Please do ask Lord Ferdinand whether he would care to arrange the song himself," Rosina replied.

I was clinging to the faint hope that presenting Ferdinand the new songs dedicated to the Goddesses of Light and Wisdom would make him show even a little more restraint during my interrogation. The song dedicated to the Goddess of Earth, meanwhile, was the previously mentioned love song that caused some women to faint. We had already decided not to show printed

goods in the Royal Academy yet, so it was essential that Rosina write the sheet music by hand. It would then be delivered to Anastasius alongside a letter of gratitude and the report mentioning my absence.

The lyrics will definitely be appropriate to the situation, I thought to myself. After all, they were about "wanting to know your happiness" and "not letting things end without knowing for certain," both of which suited Anastasius to a T. He just needed to practice and learn to sing it well—then he would surely make Eglantine fall for him a little more, even if she didn't outright faint.

I had been pretty rude to Anastasius, so I wanted to earn some points where I could. After a moment of thought, I added a postscript to the letter about my upcoming departure from the Academy. In it, I suggested that he tell me Lady Eglantine's favorite flowers and colors so that I could order a hairpin for her. He would surely want to give her such a gift for her graduation ceremony.

While I was at it, I also wrote a letter of thanks to Eglantine, in which I mentioned that I would buy some rinsham while I was back at Ehrenfest.

The day after Brunhilde had sent the letters for me, a passionate ordonnanz from Anastasius came flying into my room.

"Excellent, Rozemyne! The song is divine! Eglantine's favorite flowers are koralies, and I am told she is going to be wearing red clothes. Make her hairpin with that in mind, and..."

The message continued, but all that mattered was that Lady Eglantine liked koralies—which were very similar to lilies—and that she was planning to wear red. The rest was just endless praise for her, which I was fed up with by the time the message had reached its third repeat.

I sent Anastasius my reply before heading to the library. I wasn't just going there to read though. Reading is important, of course, but my main objective was to refill Schwartz and Weiss with mana. I got the feeling I wouldn't be coming right back to the Royal Academy even after the Dedication Ritual, so it was best for me to pour as much mana into them as possible.

"Oh my, Lady Rozemyne. It has been so long that I had begun to worry," Solange said when I arrived. "It is good to see you well."

I could understand her concern; I had been coming to the library in the morning and then leaving in the evening like clockwork for days, only to suddenly disappear after Anastasius came and dragged me away.

“I was unwell for a few days, but it was nothing serious. My apologies for worrying you. I am visiting today to inform you that I will soon be returning to Ehrenfest, and to supply Schwartz and Weiss with mana in preparation for my absence.”

“I thank you ever so much for your concern,” Solange said. She then called Schwartz and Weiss over, who looked up at me with their golden eyes.

“Milady is leaving?”

“Milady will be gone?”

“I must return home on important business, but I shall come back to the Royal Academy before the Interduchy Tournament,” I replied, touching the feystones on their foreheads. I poured in an extra-large helping of mana before letting out a sigh. “That should do for some time.”

“Thank you ever so much for supplying Schwartz and Weiss with mana despite your important archduke candidate duties, Lady Rozemyne.”

My plan had been to spend more time in the library and enjoy my last reading session, but an ordonnanz from Hirschur stopped me in my tracks. “Lady Rozemyne, I would have liked you to tell me you are going back to Ehrenfest. Return to the dormitory at once,” it said thrice in her voice.

As a summons from a dormitory supervisor, it wasn’t something I could just ignore—Hirschur would end up barging into the library to fetch me. I weepily shut my book, not wanting to bother my fellow library goers.

“I shall take my leave before I cause any problems here. Schwartz and Weiss... Please continue assisting Professor Solange with her work.”

“Okay, milady.”

“We can help.”

After saying my farewells and returning to the dorm, I found Hirschur waiting for me with boxes and huge bundles of paper. “Bring these to Ferdinand while

you're there," she said. "They're transcriptions of the magic circles sewn onto Schwartz's and Weiss's clothes and torsos, in addition to my analyses so far. Have Ferdinand decipher them before you return. Additionally, these are magic tools I had Ferdinand make for me in the past. They have been rather sluggish lately, so I would appreciate him fixing them."

As it turned out, the boxes stacked up were all for Ferdinand. She had lost contact with him since he entered the temple, so they had gradually built up over the years.

All my retainers were busy going through Hirschur's packages and preparing for my departure, so there was nobody to accompany me to the library. My last day before leaving was therefore a depressing one, during which I instead planned for the upcoming interrogation, sorting through the information everyone had gathered for me and preparing payments for that information.

The knights were united in their goal to tutor Angelica for her written classes, my retainers needed her to pass to secure the fourth step of my mana compression themselves, and the other apprentices simply didn't want all their work thus far to have been wasted. Angelica was just as determined: she threw herself at her final exam with deadly intensity despite barely being able to keep her eyes open, doing her best to live up to everyone's expectations and make her dreams come true.

Angelica's efforts were ultimately rewarded when she just narrowly managed to secure a pass. She was very proud, and while her professor recommended she retake the test for a higher grade, she convinced them with teary eyes to let the matter go.

"And now, I've finished all my classes!" Angelica declared, her face as bright as the sun. She could pass practical lessons in an instant, but she always ended up barely scraping by in her written classes. Thankfully she was now done with them.

"I get the fourth step of your mana compression method *and* I can finally return to guard duty!" she continued with a satisfied smile. I would be returning to Ehrenfest with Rihyarda, my head attendant, as well as Cornelius, Angelica, and Leonore, who had finished all their classes. Judithe, Brunhilde, and Lieseleta

were staying behind to work on their remaining practical classes, as were my scholars, since I wanted them to continue gathering information.

“Philine, Hartmut, it will soon be time for socializing in the Royal Academy to begin for real. New information is going to be flying all over the place, so please do your best to gather what you can,” I requested.

“As you wish.”

“I can’t believe I’m the only apprentice knight who hasn’t finished all their classes!” Judithe wailed, having wanted to come back with me, but there was no helping the fact she still needed to study. Unlike Angelica with her unthinkably grave flaws, Judithe was neither particularly good nor bad when it came to her written and practical classes. She needed extra time, but with the socializing season having not even started yet, her progress was normal.

“Lieseleta, Brunhilde, if you end up accompanying Wilfried to his tea parties, be sure to advise his attendants,” I said.

“Understood.”

After saying my farewells to my retainers, I went to the room with the teleportation circle, leaving the rest to Wilfried.

“Everyone is eagerly awaiting your return to Ehrenfest, Lady Rozemyne. I have received three messages from Aub Ehrenfest today alone,” the guard standing by the door said with an amused smile, holding up the three boards in question. Each one carried the same simple message: “What’s taking so long?” Somehow, I could feel Sylvester’s annoyance through his angry scribbling.

Only three people could use the teleportation circle at a time, so Rihyarda, Cornelius, and I stepped onto it first. The circle was filled with mana to activate it, and then it shone with black and gold light. The feystone in my brooch started to glow at the same time, the world distorted, and for an instant, I was struck by a wave of nausea.

When my vision focused again, there were familiar faces lined up before me. Charlotte was the first one to rush over, her brow furrowed with worry as she peered down at me with damp eyes. “Welcome home, dear sister. I am told you spent three whole days with a fever. Are you feeling any better now?”

“Hello, Charlotte. Yes, I certainly feel much better.”

We stepped off the circle to make space for Angelica and Leonore before making our way to a waiting room.

“Rozemyne. Good to see you doing well,” Bonifatius said.

“Hello, Grandfather.”

“I trained the heck out of Damuel while you were gone. Take a look.”

Damuel was covered in cuts and bruises, but he certainly looked more muscular than before. His once feeble expression that had made him an easy target for bullying was now firmer and, to put it simply, more manly.

“I can only imagine what you have been put through, but you certainly seem to have gotten stronger...” I observed.

“I am very happy to see you return. Very, very happy...” he replied, the emotion so thick in his words that I couldn’t help but smile.

Karstedt took this opportunity to step into the conversation. “Rozemyne, I felt my heart stop when I heard you participated in a game of treasure-stealing ditter,” he said.

“Father...”

He said that he was worried sick about me, but his eyes were pressing me for details. Before I could oblige him, however, Elvira stepped forward to contain his curiosity.

“I heard the same and nearly fainted in shock,” she said. “How did you end up participating in a game of ditter despite not even being an apprentice knight? Should Cornelius not have stopped you?” With that last remark, she shot Cornelius a stern glare.

“Mother, Cornelius is not to blame,” I said, trying to ease her irritation. “I insisted that I would participate.”

“I tried to stop her but couldn’t,” Cornelius added. “And when Professor Rauffen eagerly accepted her participation, there was nothing more I could do.”

“I can certainly see Rauffen finding that idea amusing...” Florencia said with a

sigh. It turned out that he was responsible for Dunkelfelger having become so skilled at ditter. Florencia had seen the duchy's transformation firsthand during Rauffen's student days, and everyone simultaneously gave sighs of resignation. "You defeated Dunkelfelger, did you not? Rauffen will surely be requesting rematches by the day."

"That I will entrust to the apprentice knights. I shall participate no longer."

"I certainly hope not..." Florencia said, trailing off with genuine worry. It seemed that once Dunkelfelger found a worthy opponent, they sunk their claws into them and never let go.

That is not something I wanted to know...

I slumped over in despair, and that was when Sylvester grabbed my right shoulder. On his lips was a bright smile, but his deep-green eyes were contrastingly severe. I stiffened up a little.

"You're late, Rozemyne. I've been looking forward to you getting back," he said.

"Is there any particular reason you have been so eager for my return, Sylvester...?"

"Yeah. This has pretty much been unprecedented. Hirschur has sent reports that might as well have been blank once a week for I don't know how many years. Then, out of nowhere, she starts sending actual updates and nonstop questions. When you consider that I'm also getting baffling reports from Wilfried almost every single day, it's no surprise that I'd want to speak to the person at the center of all this."

Wilfried was sending Sylvester regular reports, but I didn't really see the point in them if they were so confusing.

"Perhaps you should have summoned Wilfried to discuss improving his writing skills, rather than summoning me."

"It's not his writing that's baffling! It's what you've been doing! 'Rozemyne became the master of royalty-owned magic tools when she went to get registered in the library.' It makes no sense at all. You're coming to my office. Explain everything at once."

Mm... No, that really does seem like a Wilfried problem to me.

Had he taken the time to write out every detail, the events wouldn't have seemed so bewildering. As I mused over how to correct this, a hand gripped my other shoulder. When I looked up, Ferdinand was staring down at me with a frosty smile. There was no joy whatsoever in his golden eyes either.

"Welcome back, Rozemyne. You certainly took your time."

"I'm not so sure about that, Ferdinand. There is still much time before the Dedication Ritual, so this return is quite speedy by my measure," I noted, looking up at Ferdinand as I indirectly expressed my wrath at the library being so abruptly taken from me.

His brow knitted in response. "I believe I told you to finish your exams as quickly as possible so that you may return before causing any problems."

"Did you now? I remember being forbidden from the library before finishing all my classes, but I cannot recall this order to return immediately."

We stared each other down with fake smiles until, eventually, Ferdinand narrowed his eyes. A thin smile remained on his lips. "There is much we have to discuss. By what circumstances did you end up in a personal tea party with Klassenberg and the second prince? Ehrenfest will end up absorbed into the second prince's faction depending on the details of what happened and how you spoke to them, but I am sure you were fully aware of that and acted accordingly."

Eep! I'm sorry! I just thought the prince was super annoying! My focus was entirely on getting back to the library to read!

"Now, shall we go? We have plenty of time before the Dedication Ritual."

"O-Okay."

And so, I was immediately kidnapped and taken to the archduke's office by my three guardians.

Interrogation

I was seated in a chair right in the middle of Sylvester's office. A cold sweat ran down my back as my eyes flitted from Sylvester, to Ferdinand, to Karstedt.

Urk. Why does everyone look so mad and scary?

"Clear the room," Sylvester ordered. "Aside from Rozemyne, only the three of us are needed here."

"Lord Sylvester, will you not need someone to explain what happened while she was sick and unconscious?" Rihyarda asked.

"Stand down, Rihyarda. We can ask for more details later on if we need them," Sylvester replied, furrowing his brow as deeply as Ferdinand usually would. My retainers all obeyed, shooting me worried glances as they went.

Nooo! Don't leave me here to die!

Just hearing the door shut mercilessly behind them made me want to burst into tears. It was like I was attending one of those pressure interviews where the employer tries to weed out the weak by emotionally breaking them. I searched around for an escape route, but Ferdinand shook his head.

"We have no choice. You spoke to the prince without your retainers, and thus we can conclude that royalty would rather they not know what you discussed. We want to respect that decision as much as possible."

"In other words, you want me to tell you absolutely everything I spoke about with Prince Anastasius...?"

"Yeah," Sylvester said. "We need to know everything if we want to plan out Ehrenfest's next moves."

So he said, but I didn't feel too good about disclosing Anastasius's love life after he had mustered the courage to speak up about it. Plus, who knew what he would do to me if he found out?

"What we discussed was highly personal, such that I do not think Prince

Anastasius would appreciate me telling anyone," I said.

"This wouldn't be necessary if you were a normal noble, but you defy expectation at every turn. You must tell us everything. Nothing can be hidden, else you will continue making the same mistakes," Ferdinand replied. He honestly had a point—I would definitely need some pointers on how to proceed from here. It was extremely likely I was doing some abnormal things without realizing it.

I nodded, at which point Sylvester took his seat. Karstedt moved to stand behind him, while Ferdinand sat in his usual chair to record the meeting like a scholar, tapping his fingers against the desk.

"Now then, care to explain how you have developed such a close relationship with royalty, despite having spent only half a term with them?" Ferdinand asked. "Given that Prince Anastasius sent out your retainers, you must have discussed something quite personal."

"Wait, what? A close relationship...?" I was so stunned that I couldn't help but echo the words. We were anything but close—I had promised to never approach him myself, meaning I only spoke to him when he summoned me, and our discussions were solely focused on Eglantine. "I am merely the victim of circumstance. I could not defy the orders of royalty, so I did not have any control over what happened."

"Seriously?" Sylvester asked, glaring at me despite the fact my answer was completely serious.

Sorry, but facts are facts.

Ferdinand started flipping through the letters stacked on the table, clearly unsatisfied with my answer. "When did you first make contact with the prince?" he asked. "Our reports say it was during whirl practice, but if you remember anything before then, say so now."

"Um... I guess you could say it was when I greeted him at the fellowship gathering. He complained to me, saying that I was nothing like the rumors he had heard." I went on to detail the rest of our conversation, which made all three of my guardians cradle their heads at once. Sylvester in particular let out a groan as he was rubbing his temples.

“Nobody told me anything about that, Rozemyne. Did you really pick a fight with royalty?”

“Hm...? I just got a little annoyed, since he kept complaining. I didn’t pick a fight or anything like that,” I replied, my eyes shifting about the room. It was then that Ferdinand gave me a smile that chilled my spine.

“What you said contained more irony and sarcasm than anything I have ever heard you say before. It hurts my head to think you spoke like that to a prince,” he said.

I sucked in a tiny gasp, at which Karstedt sighed and shook his head. “The prince must have been outright stunned for someone to have spoken to him like that during their very first meeting.”

Oopsie... It seems I was making mistakes from the very beginning.

“Okay, I finally understand. That’s why Prince Anastasius was acting so spiteful during whirl practice. I picked a fight with him first.”

“We need more details. It seems that your perspective varies greatly from the reports we’ve received,” Ferdinand said, impatiently tapping the letters.

I explained the events of whirl practice: Anastasius had accused me of plotting to get closer to him, spurring me to respond that I would make sure to avoid him completely from then on.

Sylvester glared at me; then he started rubbing his forehead in an unsuccessful attempt to loosen his tightly furrowed brow. “I’m starting to sympathize with the prince here,” he said. “He had no idea what a disaster he was walking into. You must be the most bizarre person he’s ever met in his life, Rozemyne.”

I don’t want to hear that from you, Sylvester. You big weirdo.

“I thought it an efficient way of avoiding trouble—a way to inform those after Prince Anastasius that I wasn’t a rival.”

“Your heart was in the right place, since a weak duchy like Ehrenfest meddling in royal affairs would cause nothing but problems, but like always, your methods are terrible. Try to phrase things more diplomatically,” Sylvester said,

going on to mention that I would need to undergo socializing training in the spring. Just thinking about it was depressing. “Still, how did your unthinkably blatant refusal result in him talking to you more?”

“Like I said, it just ended up happening. The next time we met was at a tea party with the music professors. Lady Eglantine was in attendance, so Prince Anastasius forced his way in to join her. Naturally, when they asked me for permission to let the prince attend as well, I couldn’t exactly decline.”

Sylvester nodded, holding his stomach a little. “Yeah, that was a good decision, at least.”

I went on to explain how Anastasius had ordered me to compose a song and then rejected it in a very stuck-up and princely manner. He had then stormed out of the room in a fuss, causing Eglantine to rush after him.

“Oh, and the professors spoke to me about your student days in the Royal Academy, Sylvester. It seems Prince Anastasius is acting no different from you when you were pining for Florencia.”

“Forget everything they said right now!” Sylvester exclaimed, now cradling his head for a different reason than before. “Gaaah!”

I shook my head in refusal. My retainers had attended that tea party, meaning even Rihyarda had heard the story. “Forgetting is out of the question, but I can at least keep it a secret from Wilfried and Charlotte for you.”

“Everyone above a certain age in Ehrenfest knows of Sylvester’s history, but this is valuable information about the prince. His heart is set on the girl from Klassenberg, hm?” Ferdinand asked me, a gleam in his light-golden eyes. It seemed that my guardians had been completely unaware, despite this being common knowledge in the Royal Academy, so I could see why information gathering was such a prominent business there. I told them what I knew, including what I had heard from the music professors.

“Is this valuable information then?” I asked. “Lady Eglantine is the daughter of the late third prince who died in the civil war, and she became who she is now after her grandfather, the previous Aub Klassenberg, adopted her.”

Sylvester, Ferdinand, and Karstedt all deeply inhaled, their eyes wide.

“Her grandfather has told the princes that Lady Eglantine wishes to return to royalty,” I continued, “and so both the first and second prince are asking for her hand in marriage. It seems that whoever she picks will gain an enormous advantage when it comes to taking the throne.”

“Rozemyne, you are in much too deep... I imagine this is information only nobles very close to royalty know. Sylvester, choose now which side you will pick. Rozemyne’s current position in all this means we are going to be wrapped up in the business of royalty whether we like it or not,” Ferdinand said.

Sylvester put on a stern expression in an instant, causing me to slump my shoulders. Ehrenfest had managed to avoid any harm during the previous civil war precisely because it had remained neutral. But now, due to my getting too close to Anastasius, it was very likely we were going to be involved in any future incidents.

What if our duchy comes to harm or is even destroyed because of me...?

“Rozemyne, we haven’t heard about your summons from the prince yet. You met with him again after the tea party, right?” Sylvester asked.

“To explain that, I must first begin with Schwartz and Weiss...”

“You mean when you became their master while registering at the library? The reports on that didn’t make any sense,” Sylvester said, urging me on.

I nodded as I started on yet another explanation. “Wilfried told me I couldn’t register in the library until all the first-years had finished their written lessons, so I made them study as hard as they could. I was so overjoyed when they all passed that I completely lost control of my emotions, and since I was still not used to controlling my mana after the jureve, my prayers of gratitude ended up becoming a blessing that activated Schwartz and Weiss.”

“That is about what I expected... They surely had a master already though. Did you steal them through sheer mana capacity?” Ferdinand asked.

It was then that I realized very few people knew about the changes in the library. Those who had graduated in the past and were familiar with the old Royal Academy took Schwartz and Weiss moving around as a given, whereas most current students didn’t even know they existed. I explained to Ferdinand

that the Sovereignty's purge had gotten rid of the archnoble librarians, leaving only a sole mednoble librarian who wasn't capable of properly supplying them with mana.

"They were skilled individuals who knew their books well and often provided me with support, but... I see. They are gone now," Ferdinand said plainly.

Sylvester rested his head against his desk and let out a heavy sigh. "I knew the purge was causing problems all over the place, but if they can't even get librarians for the Royal Academy, the Sovereignty must be in a real mess."

The Sovereignty was composed of the winners of the civil war, and since Ehrenfest had remained neutral, our connections to them were weak. On top of that, few Ehrenfest students had grades impressive enough to warrant their invitation to the tea parties of those in higher-ranking duchies, so information of that sort was in short supply.

"Professor Solange was truly struggling without Schwartz and Weiss. I suggested that I provide some assistance myself, but archduke candidates cannot move to the Sovereignty. In the end, we agreed that I would only provide mana while I am attending the Academy. The prince said that I may do as I please while I am there."

"Seems like you adopting Rozemyne was the right idea after all, Sylvester. If she were merely an archnoble and my daughter, the Sovereignty would've taken her already," Karstedt commented as the realization dawned on him.

"Yup. I'm a genius alright," Sylvester boasted, puffing out his chest at the adoption having been his idea or whatever. I personally would have enjoyed moving to the Sovereignty and working in the Royal Academy's library.

"Still, to think you would become their master without even touching them. You truly are something else..." Ferdinand mused aloud. "But in any case, Hirschur's report said she discovered many magic circles woven onto the two magic tools. We shall discuss those in depth later."

"Oh, that reminds me—I actually have a bunch of packages for you from Professor Hirschur. She wants you to repair the magic tools you made for her in the past. Also, it turns out we need your help with Schwartz and Weiss."

Traces of a pleased smile played on his lips. Now seemed a good time to tell him about the other things I had for him.

“As for gifts, I have brought songs dedicated to the Goddesses of Light and Wisdom that I composed alongside Rosina. I would appreciate it if you considered arranging them. The song for the Goddess of Light is to be given to Lady Eglantine by Prince Anastasius.”

Sylvester frowned. “You didn’t mention that, Rozemyne...”

“Did I not mention it just a moment ago? I said that Prince Anastasius told me to compose a song, only to then say he didn’t want it and storm out in a fuss. It is no surprise for someone in love to act so strangely, and seeing as he sent me the request before anyone, I thought it best to deliver the song to him anyway. Would you rather I just give it to Eglantine directly?” I asked, causing Ferdinand to rub his temples.

“You should first ask the prince what his intentions are. Do not make this decision on your own.”

“Hm? But I can’t do that,” I replied, shaking my head. “I promised not to contact him myself, remember?” I wasn’t about to break a promise with royalty.

“Rozemyne, do you truly intend to ignore the request of a prince for such a trivial reason?!”

“I’m not ignoring him—that’s such a misleading way to phrase it. I am merely... waiting for him. I am patiently waiting for Prince Anastasius to contact me. He will come to me when he remembers that he needs it.”

“Have you finally lost the last of your wits? The prince would never come to you.”

“He’ll come. I mean, he came to the library when I was reading once and dragged me away,” I said, feeling the frustration of not just an afternoon, but four whole days of reading time being taken from me all over again. My three guardians looked at me with shock.

“Rozemyne!” Sylvester exclaimed. “Do you mean to say he didn’t summon you while you were in the library, but that he actually came to get you in

person?! You made him come to you?! That's insane!"

"Hm? But I didn't want to talk to him myself. As I've said enough times now, I promised not to contact him, so..."

"Rozemyne, take back that promise," Ferdinand said. "Do you want the prince appearing and dragging you off every time he needs you? Do you want people to determine you are important enough for the prince himself to approach you? Your actions here are paving the way for unthinkable rumors, and you will make so many annoying enemies that you will no longer have any time to read."

Now aware that forcing Anastasius to summon me for matters that could be easily solved through ordonnanzes or letters would eat into my precious reading time, I pressed my hands against my cheeks and shrieked. "I'll take it back as soon as I return to the Royal Academy! I don't want to lose even more reading time!"

"Good grief... With your utter lack of social skills, it may be best for everyone if you did remain holed up in the library at all times," Ferdinand said, his exhaustion unmistakable. My appreciation for him immediately shot through the roof.

Someone else agreeing it's a good idea for me to stay in the library? Heck yeah! We should make this a yearly holiday! I never want to forget this moment!

I was so overwhelmed with glee that I abruptly stood up and shot both hands into the air. "Aah, goodness! You're like a god to me right now, Ferdinand! Praise be to—"

"I need no prayers. Sit."

That's too bad, I guess.

"Rozemyne, have you made any more blunders with royalty?" Sylvester asked, his voice almost an agonized cry. "Please, tell me that's all you've done!"

I detailed the events after Anastasius had come to take me from the library. He had dragged me away, I downed a potion, and then my head went so fuzzy that I passed out.

"Why did the prince take you away?" Ferdinand asked.

“Love has consumed him,” I replied. “He wanted to know what Lady Eglantine and I discussed at our tea party.”

I explained that Eglantine was afraid of becoming the catalyst for another war and that she didn’t want either prince to escort her during her graduation ceremony. I also mentioned that Anastasius had realized something after hearing these wishes.

“Let’s see, what else...? I taught Prince Anastasius my song dedicated to the Goddess of Earth. Also, since I said some pretty rude things to him, I offered to give him a hairpin for Eglantine as an apology. He happily accepted. That’s about it, though.”

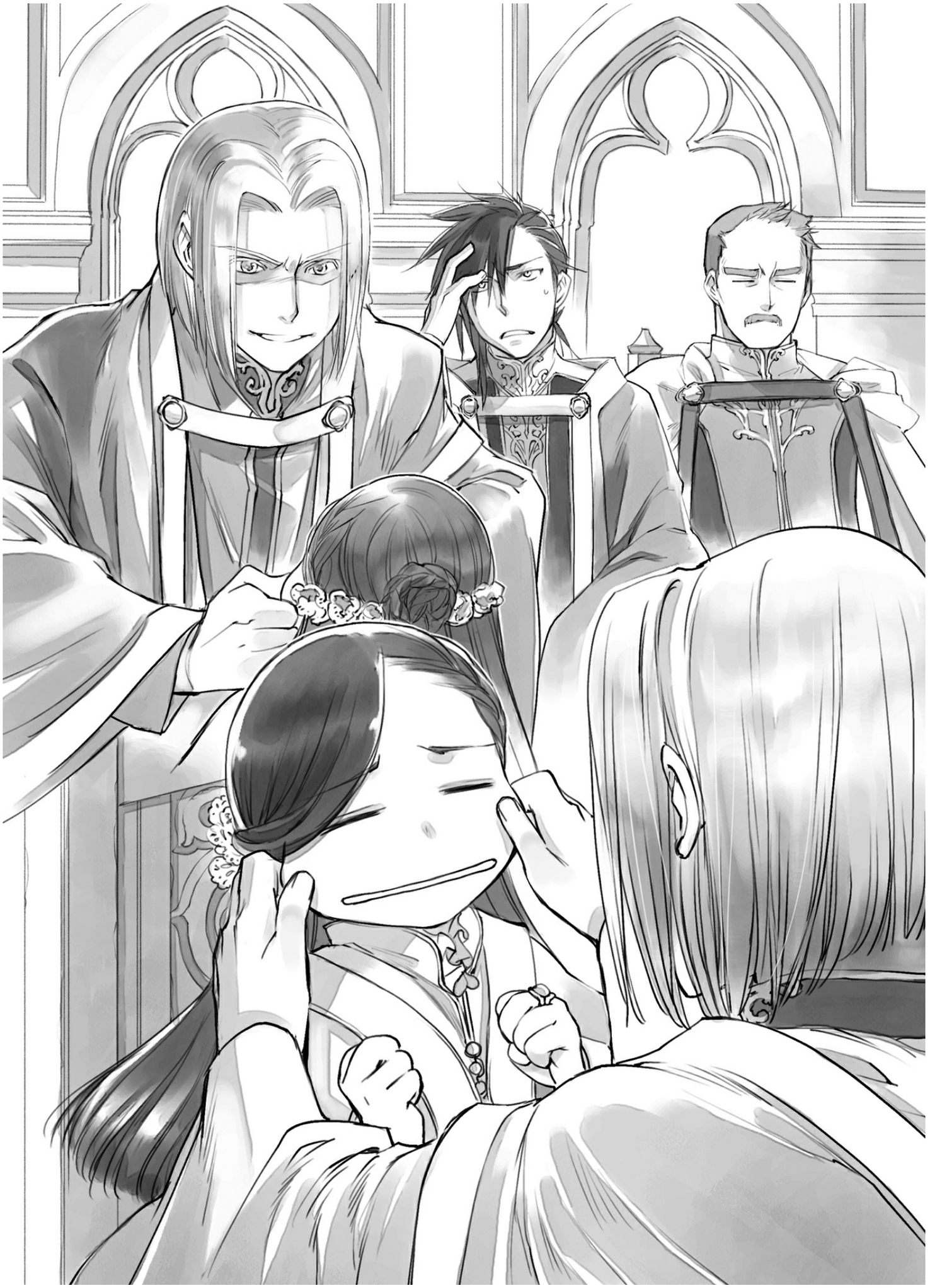
“Wait. Why did you not speak to us before offering to make him a hairpin?”

“Hm? It just came to mind as a way to earn some points with him while sending a letter of gratitude for his concern and informing him I would be absent from the Academy.”

My guardians all raised their eyebrows at once, shocked that I had managed to bungle things up even further in the three days they had given me. Ferdinand stood up from his chair with a clatter, walked up to me with a chilly smile, and then pinched both my cheeks.

“Rozemyne, did I not teach you to think before you act? To not immediately do whatever comes to mind? I had thought you learned the importance of maintaining contact and talking things over, but it seems my teachings were not at all sufficient. Or have they simply melted away along with your mana clumps over the past two years?”

“I’m sho showwy!”



He yelled at me not to make decisions on my own when uncertain, and to instead send messages back home for consultation. Wilfried was doing this already; he had apparently sent many questions to Ehrenfest when looking for ways to contain me. I clapped my hands together, having not realized that was an option, and my guardians all put their heads in their hands as one, now completely aware they hadn't prepared me enough for the Royal Academy.

"You were asleep for two years. This is understandable. We will need to educate you on proper socializing before next year," Ferdinand said. It seemed my current behavior was the result of us having prioritized my grades and the Dedication Ritual when bringing me up to speed.

"Under normal circumstances, an Ehrenfest first-year would never deal so closely with royalty. It is unthinkable," Ferdinand continued. "Furthermore, you have problems with your health, and I thought it would take you much longer to finish your classes. My plan was to cover for your poor social skills by allowing you to enjoy the library for a brief period once your classes were over, then call you back prior to the start of the socializing season and have you return only when the Interduchy Tournament was on the horizon. And yet..."

"Seems like you surpassed his expectations," Sylvester said with a smirk.

Ferdinand responded with a cold glance. "You are the one who will struggle to clean up this mess at the Archduke Conference, Aub Ehrenfest," he noted dryly, but Sylvester's focus was entirely on me.

"I've gotta say, Rozemyne, I'm impressed you've managed this many disasters in such a short space of time. Socializing season hasn't even started, and you've done all this?"

"Sylvester, shall we not linger on the past?" I asked. "Now is the time to face the future."

"Idiot. The past's gonna stick with us whether we linger on it or not. Our relationships with royalty and the greater duchies are going to have a big impact on Ehrenfest's future," he said with a glare. I could already see him making me chirp "pooey" again, so I rushed to change the subject.

"In that case, shall we discuss these matters with Benno and the guildmaster,

Gustav, to urge things in a direction that benefits Ehrenfest? Rinsham, hairpins, and pound cakes all received much attention at the Royal Academy. I imagine the prince giving the woman he's pining for a hairpin will serve as extraordinarily good marketing, but perhaps that is just me."

"It will, but even so: You idiot! How could you be so thoughtless?! I told you not to act carelessly when it comes to gifts and selling stuff. Why're you pulling this crap outside of the Archduke Conference?!" Sylvester barked. He was completely right—my offer to make a hairpin for Anastasius was much too premature.

"Sorry... Should I go turn him down?"

"I'm mad precisely because it's not easy to turn down a royal."

"Sylvester, 'not easy' is a gross understatement—it is impossible," Ferdinand said with an exhausted headshake. "We have no choice but to exploit this situation for the benefit of the duchy. It is true that a Klassenberg candidate wearing a hairpin during her graduation ceremony will serve as valuable marketing."

"Oh, if we're going that far, how about we print and sell a love story about them alongside the hairpin? That should spread printing in an instant," I suggested.

While we didn't want to spread our learning materials to other duchies just yet, since we needed to maintain our superiority when it came to grades —we were more than interested in the spread of printing on the whole. A love story about royalty was perfect in this regard. Gossip always spreads faster than anything. If we printed it on a single sheet of paper, similar to a flyer, we could keep the price down too.

The more I thought about it, the better an opportunity this seemed to be. We could sell more sheets whenever there's breaking news, so that people were able to purchase only the sheets they're interested in, and then we could start selling binders of sorts to store them in. It might even be fun to try to gather all the sheets printed in a year or something.

"Rozemyne, are you saying that you intend to side with the second prince from now on?" Ferdinand asked.

“Hm? No. I am on Lady Eglantine’s side. It seems to me that I could write a best-selling story about her regardless of which prince she chooses, or even if she chooses neither. Plus, considering how valuable her hairpin and rinsham marketing is going to be, I imagine she is our best chance at spreading them among high-status women.”

The pound cake was also likely to sell well among women who frequently attend tea parties. To summarize, Eglantine was gorgeous, of a high status, and interested in both rinsham and hairpins. She was the best advertising billboard that I could ask for.

Despite my list of reasons, Sylvester just shook his head. “You’re thinking too much like a merchant, Rozemyne. Your mind is focused entirely on profit.”

“I’m afraid I still don’t understand what else nobles hope to get out of situations like this. Should I not be siding with Lady Eglantine?” I asked, looking at Ferdinand. He mulled things over for a moment before lowering his eyes and giving a slow sigh.

“Your decision is not fundamentally poor. If we are to believe your words, then the question of who becomes the next king rests largely in the hands of the greater duchy Klassenberg. It would not be a mistake to side with Eglantine rather than one of the princes, but it is down to Aub Ehrenfest to make the final decision,” he said, looking Sylvester’s way.

I frowned slightly as Sylvester fell into thought like this was some huge problem to debate. The fact that I couldn’t bring myself to care about faction politics really showed that I wasn’t much like a regular noble at all.

“I think we can decide who to stick with later,” I said.

“Rozemyne?”

“What matters right now is what we should do when people come asking about rinsham, hairpins, plant paper, and pound cake at the Archduke Conference. Prince Anastasius and Lady Eglantine are both interested in these things, and I imagine business deals will take priority over any faction squabbling.”

As long as Eglantine didn’t make her choice right away, things would remain

more or less the same for a while longer. It was a decision that would sway the battle for the throne, but we had no way of knowing who she might choose. For that reason, it seemed better to focus on rapidly approaching problems we could actually deal with ourselves.

"Unlike the Plantin Company's many plant paper workshops, the Gilberta Company has only one workshop for rinsham at the moment, and it takes a considerable amount of time to make but a single hairpin. There is much that we need to discuss before we can start exporting either product as an Ehrenfest specialty. Should we make new workshops? Hire more merchants to move the product? Is there anything that will conflict with my magic contracts with Benno? If so, should we nullify those contracts? Should we aim to sell the production methods? How are we going to provide lodgings for the visiting merchants? How will we maintain the peace? How will we distribute the profits? As I said, there is much to discuss."

It was in our best interest to have a great number of merchants come to Ehrenfest, but before we could do that, we needed to ensure we had enough products available, otherwise we risked aggravating merchants who had traveled from far away only to leave empty-handed. The city's peace would easily fall apart if a bunch of outsiders fought over a sparse supply, and while I did not have the mindset of a noble, all the people who would struggle as a result were those close to me: the Gilberta Company, the Plantin Company, and the city guards. That was why I wanted to stop those problems before they even began.

"Rather than worry about where the Sovereignty will stand years from now, we should be focusing on problems we will encounter without fail this coming spring," I concluded.

Sylvester nodded in agreement. "True. Summon Benno and Gustav. I need to speak to them before this spring's Archduke Conference."

We were still in the middle of winter, before the regular hunting of the Lord of Winter. It wouldn't be easy to call even commoner merchants over in this state.

"Rozemyne, inform Benno and the others that they are going to be receiving a

letter of summons from Aub Ehrenfest. It would not do for us to summon them without a warning," Ferdinand said, no doubt recalling how much the merchants had struggled with their sudden summons from Giebe Haldenzel. I remembered being told how much pain they had gone through having a business discussion with archnobles, due to Elvira wanting a workshop built in her home province of Haldenzel. It had apparently been such a terrible situation that even Ferdinand gave Benno his sympathy.

"Furthermore, organize and give a full report on who will be accompanying Benno to the castle," Ferdinand continued. "The scholars will need to make that many letters of invitation."

"Very well," I replied. "Sylvester, I believe the Gilberta Company has a new representative now. Would you like me to call them also?"

"Sure. I'll leave the finer details to you. That'll be better for you anyway, right?"

"I thank you."

"Right. Rozemyne, you're going back to the temple tomorrow. We need to prepare before the Lord of Winter becomes fully active."

"Okay."

Returning to the Temple

Dinner was basically a gathering of the whole archducal family, with even Ferdinand and Bonifatius in attendance. Charlotte asked me what kind of place the Royal Academy was, so I passionately regaled her with tales of the library and of Schwartz and Weiss.

“Magic tools in the shape of large shumils, you say? They must be very cute.”

“Indeed. They are quite popular among the girls there. I need to provide them with new clothes as their master, and everyone has come together to think up designs. The current plan is to dress one as a boy and one as a girl, with both wearing Library Committee armbands. I plan to wear one such armband myself.”

“Matching armbands? I would love to see them walking around the library in clothes that match your own. I cannot wait for next year.”

Once my lively conversation with Charlotte had reached its natural conclusion, Bonifatius eagerly asked me about my ditter match. Knights certainly did seem to love ditter, and I could see Karstedt’s eyes gleaming with interest from where he stood behind Sylvester.

“I’m told you used a surprise strategy to beat Dunkelfelger,” Bonifatius said. “What’d you manage to pull off?”

“It was an unorthodox technique that will not work again. First, I had our knights hunt a small feybeast that could be bound with light without dying and that wouldn’t struggle too much.”

“Couldn’t your opponents have killed a feybeast like that in a single hit?” Bonifatius asked, frowning as he thought it over.

“Indeed,” I replied, proudly puffing out my chest, “which is why I hid it inside my highbeast for protection.”

“Inside your highbeast?!”

“Yes. Our opponents would need to surpass my mana capacity to destroy my highbeast and steal our treasure, so we were unlikely to lose for as long as it was kept inside.”

Given the dazed expressions on Karstedt’s and Bonifatius’s faces, it certainly seemed to be a strategy that most knights would never consider. Ferdinand, however, nodded along in agreement. “To think that bizarre grun could be used for such a purpose,” he said, sounding clearly impressed.

From there, I explained how we had launched a surprise attack on the enemy when they came back with their treasure. Bonifatius listened carefully, his brows knitted once again.

“It sounds to me like you ambushed your enemy in the middle of the arena like normal. How’s that a surprise attack?”

“The current trend in the Royal Academy is to play speed ditter, and so neither of our teams had played treasure-stealing ditter before,” I explained. “Nobody expected to be attacked while transporting their feybeast back, and thus it became a surprise attack.”

Bonifatius’s face hardened at my words, as though he found them completely unthinkable. “Slack,” he muttered. “They’re far too slack.”

I had to wonder what kind of a hellscape ditter games had been back when treasure-stealing ditter was the popular version to play. Just thinking about it scared me.

“However, our half-baked surprise attack was only half successful,” I said. “Ehrenfest’s apprentice knights lacked any coordination whatsoever, whereas Dunkelfelger immediately put their formation back together.”

Karstedt nodded in response, stroking his chin with an expression that suggested he knew what I was talking about. I decided to take this opportunity to make my request.

“Father, perhaps this is not the place to say this, but I believe some improvements need to be made to the apprentice knights’ training. Speed ditter has been chosen over treasure-stealing ditter for years now, which has led to a total lack of coordination on our end. Learning about cooperation and

formations during written classes simply does not translate to actual ability.”

“That explains why the apprentices have been getting so much worse lately,” Karstedt replied. “There’s also the fact we’ve been prioritizing them less to focus on the archducal family’s guard knights. I’ll see about fixing this.”

The higher-ups in the Knight’s Order generally all served as the archducal family’s guard knights. It made sense they would slack on training the apprentices when they themselves were being constantly pushed to their limits by Bonifatius’s brutal training regimen. Plus, considering there had been an attack on the castle itself, training the guard knights was a much greater priority.

“I cannot say whether Dunkelfelger’s competence is down to its Knight’s Order or Professor Rauffen himself, but their knights displayed a level of coordination that we simply could not match,” I said. “Ehrenfest will struggle to win any ditter games in its current state, even with increased mana capacities.”

The only ones who had shown any sort of coordination were the apprentices serving as guard knights for the archducal family. I mentioned this, and a glint appeared in Bonifatius’s eyes; after all, he was the one who had trained them.

“Hrm... If you’re this concerned, Rozemyne, I can start training the apprentices next. I’d say the guard knights are all in good shape now.”

“Absolutely. Please do. You have done a wonderful job training Angelica and Cornelius, so my expectations are high.”

“Hm? Hm! You can count on me!”

Bonifatius accepted my request with a confidence-inspiring grin. Considering that the higher-ups no longer needed to endure his merciless training and could now focus on the apprentices again, I was certain our knights were about to get very strong very quickly.

“So the ambush failed, huh? What happened next?” Sylvester asked, encouraging me to continue my story. All eyes fell on me again.

“We then launched a second surprise attack. I figured that if we made Dunkelfelger’s treasure feybeast go on a rampage, they would no longer be able to hold back against it, and they would need to draw their attention away from

our knights. That was why I grew their feybeast to a massive size."

This reveal was met with a unified "What?!" from all those in attendance. Everyone widened their eyes, so I decided to elaborate.

"I poured a few drops of Ferdinand's ultra-nasty—*ahem*—extremely effective rejuvenation potion onto a ruelle dyed with my mana, which I then asked Judithe to throw at the feybeast. I was sure it would eat the fruit on its own, but she succeeded in shooting it directly into its mouth. Impressive, no?"

Sylvester shot me a glance, as though he felt uncomfortable speaking at all. "So you healed the enemy feybeast and increased its size so it would go on a rampage?"

"Precisely. Cornelius and Angelica were able to recover their mana in the time our opponent spent dealing with the abrupt chaos and then launched full-power attacks at the feybeast that secured our victory."

As an awkward silence fell over the room, Ferdinand alone nodded with great interest. "That is quite an interesting technique to use during your first game of treasure-stealing ditter. Your ideas continue to surprise me."

"Professor Rauffen said it was reminiscent of the tricks you used to pull, Ferdinand. What were your own techniques like?" I asked. In response, he agreed to show me some of his documents on ditter strategies at a later point in time.

"An interesting approach for sure, but unfortunately not something we can use against the Lord of Winter," Karstedt noted. I shrugged; that was too bad.

When I returned to my room in the castle after dinner, I found that a bath had already been prepared. My attendants started to undress me.

"Milady, we're also going to take off your magic tools today," Rihyarda said.

My body went heavy the very instant the tools were removed. I couldn't move like I wanted to anymore, though I wasn't completely infirm, so it was safe to say I was at least thirty percent of the way back to being normal. My legs wobbled, but I could actually stand on my own.

Rihyarda and Ottilie carried me to the bath.

“Lady Rozemyne, I am ever so grateful you accepted Hartmut as your retainer, though I cannot help but worry that my foolish son is being a burden to you. Has he been helpful so far?” Ottilie asked. She was Hartmut’s mother, and now that I thought about it, I could see the resemblance.

Holding back the urge to say he was obsessively working to strengthen my sainthood, I instead explained that he had compiled results from the previous Interduchy Tournaments, and taught Philine and the other apprentice scholars how to gather information, among other things. He was a fine senior apprentice.

“He seems truly obsessed with you, Lady Rozemyne. Please do not hesitate to stop him should he ever overstep his bounds. For your sake, I can easily envision him crossing lines that should not be crossed. That is why I cannot help but worry,” she stressed.

It seemed that Hartmut truly did see me as a saint, a noble who gave blessings without restraint or hesitation, who was brimming with humility and merciful to all. I steeled my resolve to shatter those delusions as soon as possible, only to be struck with a sudden realization.

Wait a second. Shouldn’t he have figured out the truth once he saw how I actually am in the Royal Academy? It didn’t seem that way to me though. Strange...

I floated around in the bath for a while before Rihyarda urged me into bed, forcing me to sleep without the magic tools on. “We had to leave them on while you were in the Royal Academy because there were others around,” she explained. “You need to spend tonight without the tools so that you can truly understand the situation you’re in, milady. You overexert yourself to the point that I struggle to even watch.”

I couldn’t argue back. The fact that I wore my magic tools at all times in the Royal Academy meant my recovery had seldom crossed my mind. Now that they had been removed, however, I couldn’t avoid the truth: despite having woken up two months ago, I was still a long way from being completely better.

“Spend today resting. You’ll be returning to the temple tomorrow, and from

there, you're going to be plenty busy again."

"That's true..."

I needed to write to Benno and the others so that we could meet and discuss everything that had come up. I also wanted to check on the orphanage and the workshop, the Dedication Ritual was coming up, and Ferdinand would certainly want my help with his paperwork.

"It is precisely because I must stand down once you leave for the temple that I am so concerned," Rihyarda added.

"You have been with me every waking moment since I arrived at the Royal Academy. Please use this time to relax at least a little."

"I am grateful for your consideration, milady, but I must request that you take great care of yourself. Here in Ehrenfest, your health is our greatest priority; Royal Academy affairs will no longer distract us from that."

With that, Rihyarda put out the lights. It was an early bedtime for me.

The next day, I was told we were waiting for the blizzard to ease before we departed for the temple. I made the necessary preparations to leave at a moment's notice, and then I started writing my letter to Benno.

In the letter, I explained that rinsham, hairpins, pound cake, and plant paper were all going to be discussed at the next Archduke Conference, since they were now trendy topics of conversation at the Royal Academy. I also warned that, when the blizzards calmed, the archduke was planning to summon the Merchant's Guild, the Gilberta Company, and the Plantin Company to a meeting. To conclude, I mentioned that I was going to be in the temple due to the Dedication Ritual starting next Earthday, and that I would want to speak to him in person on the next clear day.

I wrote similar letters to Otto and Gustav, making sure to include the hairpin order in my letter to the Gilberta Company: "Please use the highest-quality thread possible to make a red-themed koralie hairpin for a girl to wear at her coming of age ceremony." Once they were done, I stuck the letters in the pocket of my jacket and nodded to myself.

I now had some extra time on my hands. Rihyarda must have deduced that I was thinking about what to read next, as she grabbed the key to the book boxes and opened one in particular at Ottilie's direction.

"Lady Rozemyne, you have been gifted two books by Lady Elvira," Ottilie explained. "They were printed in Haldenzel."

Joy welled in my heart over new books being introduced to the world. In my hands were two knight story collections made with plant paper, both with simple covers that contained only their respective titles—one read *Hand-Selected Knight Stories* and the other *Royal Academy Stories*. Packaged alongside them was a written warning from Elvira, saying that the books were never to be taken out of my room in the castle, as Ferdinand would require the archduke's permission to enter it.

I started thumbing through the books. The first was a collection of Elvira's favorite knight stories, only with the illustrations changed to reflect Ferdinand. Someone other than Wilma had drawn them, but it only took me a single glance to realize they were based on him. I wasn't sure whether this was simply because the artists had taken inspiration from that one illustration Wilma had made as thanks for the art materials I once gave her or whether this was a direct request from Elvira, but Ferdinand was shining about thirty percent more brightly in these pictures than in any that had come before them.

Hand-Selected Knight Stories was all about knights, as one would expect, but every tale had a romantic twist. According to Ottilie, Elvira had sold the first volume in secret at a tea party with women from her faction. It was so well received that she had immediately begun working on *Royal Academy Stories*, a collection of school romance stories that Elvira and her friends knew from their time as students. Elvira had written the manuscripts herself, with help from some volunteers.

"I was unaware Mother has such literary talents. To think she's been a writer all along..."

"Lady Elvira has loved to write compositions ever since her time as an apprentice scholar. She has been very lively as of late, saying she has finally found the perfect hobby."

“Are you reading the books as well, Ottilie?”

“Oh, yes. I am quite enjoying them.”

Elvira had established plant paper and printing workshops in her home province just to make books about Ferdinand. Her enthusiasm was intense to the point of overwhelming, and each page I turned only made her dedication clearer.

As a slight criticism, Mother, not every boy in Royal Academy Stories *should be modeled after Ferdinand.*

Just as I finished one of the collections, an ordonnanz flew in and said it was time for us to leave for the temple. I shut the book before leaving the room with my retainers, who were coming to see me go. Ferdinand, Eckhart, and Justus were already waiting for me, so I moved to join them with Damuel and Angelica.

“Are you coming with us to the temple, Angelica? Should you really be on guard duty outside the castle before coming of age?” I asked. My eyes turned to Ferdinand, who looked down at the practically buzzing Angelica and gave a slight nod.

“While she hasn’t yet had her coming of age ceremony, she is already fifteen. She is motivated, she finished the classes everyone was so worried about... and most importantly of all, you need at least one female knight with you.”

My parents had chosen my retainers for me at my baptism ceremony, but I was now old enough that I needed to pick for myself. I had been told that I could pick a new adult female knight after the Dedication Ritual should I wish to.

“I can finally do guard duty again!” Angelica exclaimed. “Please let me serve!”

“If you have permission from both Father and Sylvester then I suppose I do not mind,” I replied, taking out Lessy. Ella climbed in first, opting to sit in the back as usual, while Angelica chose the passenger seat where Brigitte had used to sit. I explained how to attach the seat belt while Ferdinand arranged for his work things to be loaded onto the back seats.

Um, he’s pretty brazenly adding more boxes to my highbeast than I did for my

luggage. That doesn't seem right to me.

"Is everything ready, Lady Rozemyne?" Damuel asked. Once I nodded, he raised a hand to Ferdinand, who then looked at Norbert standing at the ready by the doors.

"Open the doors," Norbert instructed.

They were flung open in an instant. The blizzard was certainly calmer than before, but snow continued to fall. The most I could see were a blue cape and dark-yellow capes as figures leapt into the murky whiteness. I slammed my foot against the accelerator, desperate not to lose sight of them, as those gathered called out their farewells.

"Lady Rozemyne, I can't believe how comfortable your highbeast is," Angelica said as we made our way to the temple.

"Eheheh. I know, right? Lessy is cute *and* practical. He's the best," I replied, glancing at the cooking utensils, luggage, and work stuff packed next to Ella on the back seats. "Just to note, my attendants at the temple are gray priests and shrine maidens, but they are just as dedicated to serving me as you and Damuel are."

Nobles held a lot of prejudice toward the temple. Damuel had been assigned there as a form of demotion after being punished for not following orders, while Brigitte had become my guard knight precisely because she was resolved to suffer through anything for Illgner's sake. Neither had been in a position to be particularly harsh toward my attendants, which was exactly why I was cautious about new guards entering the temple.

"I don't understand... What do you want me to do, Lady Rozemyne?"

"I merely ask that those in my service refrain from treating the commoners with blatant disgust, if possible."

"Um, disgust? Blatant...? I think I get it!"

She totally doesn't!

"Angelica, I want you to be friendly with the priests and shrine maidens who serve me in the temple," I explained as clearly as possible, eyeing her reaction

all the while. In an instant, her forlorn yet beautiful expression blossomed into a genuine smile.

“Okay! I understand. You can count on me!”

When we arrived at the temple, my attendants greeted me with Fran standing at the lead. “Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne,” they said together before assisting Ferdinand’s attendants with removing the luggage from Lessy. Wilma was helping Ella with her work stuff, while Monika carried my personal belongings.

“Lady Rozemyne, may I help the others?” Zahm asked, also wanting to help Ferdinand’s retainers. I responded with a brisk nod; Ferdinand had packed more than enough into Lessy, who I couldn’t put away until it was all out.

Fran and Fritz moved to take the luggage inside the temple. “I shall go help as well,” Gil said, but I raised a hand to stop him.

“One moment.” I handed him the letters in my pocket. “Deliver these to the Plantin Company as soon as you can, while the blizzard is still weak. Tell them this is a letter for the Gilberta Company, and this for the guildmaster. He should understand the gravity of the situation if you mention that the archduke will soon be summoning him.”

“As you wish. I will leave at once.”

Gil was the closest person to the Plantin and Gilberta Companies out of all my retainers, since he had gone with them to Illgner and Haldenzel. He had seen their struggles up close and, as a representative of the workshop, was often wrapped up in the unreasonable demands of nobles. It was for this reason that, when I gave him the three letters, he paled and immediately rushed off.

Thanks to all the assistance we had, moving everything inside the temple was a quick process. I decided it best to leave the rest to Ferdinand’s attendants and moved to return to my own chambers with my attendants.

“Rozemyne,” Ferdinand said, pausing midway through giving instructions to the attendants carrying his boxes. “I am told you are not up to date with the orphanage and workshop, considering that you were moved to the castle so promptly after awakening. Prioritize communication with the lower city over

assisting me tomorrow. Ensure that you are prepared enough to answer any questions about business with other duchies."

"Understood." It was my job to protect the gray priests and everyone in the lower city from being forced into unfair deals.

Nicola was already waiting with tea and sweets when I arrived at my High Bishop's chambers, having returned ahead of me. I took this opportunity to introduce Angelica as the guard knight who was going to be serving me here in Brigitte's place.

"I want to be on good terms with everyone who serves Lady Rozemyne," Angelica said, a heroic sparkle in her eyes.

Fran and the others faltered somewhat, unsure how to respond to that. It certainly wasn't a very noble thing for her to say, and so their eyes wandered about the room as they searched for an appropriate reply. It was only when Damuel started rubbing his temples and sighed that Fran knew for sure that her statement had been abnormal, and a forced smile soon worked its way across his face.

"I am Fran, Lady Rozemyne's head attendant in the temple. It pleases me to know she has a guard knight as noble as yourself, Lady Angelica. I pray in gratitude for your assistance," he said politely.

Damuel stood with Angelica by the door and started going over everything she would need to know when on guard duty in the temple. This was pretty much just an introduction—there were a lot of things she wouldn't understand until she saw them and went through the motions herself, so a verbal explanation ultimately wasn't going to be enough.

"Fran, I request a report of what happened in my absence."

"Understood."

Several children had caught colds in the orphanage but recovered without incident. Winter handiwork and printing in the workshop was going fine as well.

"The Plantin and Gilberta Companies are being summoned to the castle when the blizzards stop and spring approaches, so I intend to meet with them before the Dedication Ritual, as soon as the weather lightens up enough for them to

visit," I said. "Please prepare the orphanage director's chambers such that a meeting can be held there at any time."

Gil returned not long after I was done listening to everyone's reports, completely covered in snow and shaking from the cold. I requested that he stand near the furnace so that he could warm up as he gave his report.

"Master Benno said that he'd expected the letter sooner or later," Gil said. "He will contact both the guildmaster and the Gilberta Company and is likewise interested in a meeting once the blizzards start to ease."

"I imagine he will send Lutz over soon to get a feel for things, so you should also help prepare the orphanage director's chambers, Gil. Go and get changed first though. We cannot have you catching a cold now when there is so much to do."

"Understood. As you wish."

Just as Ferdinand suggested, I spent the next day looking over the orphanage, starting at third bell. During my previous visit I had only taken a quick look around, but this time, with the reports I had previously received from Wilma and Rosina, I started to ascertain what the children knew, who had picked up which skills, what their specialties at work were, and so on. I encouraged the artists to continue their practice and praised the apprentices who could now handle workshop labor on their own.

"I see Delia is taking care of the youngest children with Lily and Wilma," I said.

"Lily can't spend all her time looking after them, and it was only natural given my experience with Dirk," Delia said, having been nodding along in agreement. She had spent her time in the orphanage as Dirk's older sister and played a considerable role in raising all the new young children delivered to the temple. It was a relief to know she had found her place here.

"How has Dirk been lately?" I asked. "Has he had any problems?"

Delia fell into thought for a moment. "He's become a bit rebellious lately, so he doesn't listen to what I say all that much." She turned around to where Dirk was poking his head around a corner. His reddish-brown hair swayed a little as

he moved, and it must have been my imagination, but he actually looked a lot like Delia.

“I always listen to everything Delia says,” he called out. “I’m a good boy, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Geez! Don’t lie, Dirk!” Delia exclaimed. She sounded angry, but there was a playful smile on her face. It seemed they had developed a healthy sibling relationship, which was of course nice to see, but it also made me a little upset. I couldn’t help but wish I had spent just as much time with Kamil.

After we had finished talking about the orphanage, Fritz came to tell me about the workshop. He had primarily handled operations while Gil was absent from spring to autumn. It seemed the best workers always accompanied Gil, leaving Fritz with the arduous task of training new workers.

“We are likely going to be establishing more workshops once trade begins with other duchies,” I noted. “You will want to train an ace team of experts to send to these other locations.”

“Master Benno warned me I would need to do something of the sort. He said to prepare for when nobles began establishing new workshops en masse, so I’ve gathered the gray priests used to receiving direct orders from nobles. The problem is going to be getting them used to living with commoners,” he explained, at which point the gray priests who had been sent to other locations gave small smiles.

“The culture in the temple differs from that of the outside world,” I said. “I suppose that comes as no surprise, though, since there are cultural differences even among commoners; the lower city, Illgner, and Haldenzel are all completely dissimilar. I would suggest you send those who specialize in trying new things.”

The smiles the gray priests gave in response were so brimming with confidence that I could immediately tell just how much they had grown through their work in the outside world.

Ferdinand and Hirschur's Gifts

After looking over the orphanage and workshop, I started compiling all my newly gathered information. I would be having a meeting with Giebe Haldenzel after the Dedication Ritual and heading to Haldenzel in the spring, so I needed to use everything the gray priests had told me.

"Zahm, could you request a meeting with the High Priest for me? Also, ask him to lend me an ordonnanz. Monika, organize today's reports. The gray priests have gotten much more valuable over the past two years thanks to their hard work, so I will need to update some documents. Fran, bring me the Haldenzel documents that Gil organized."

After distributing work to my attendants, I started reading through the Haldenzel documents Fran brought me. I needed to suss out what would come up in negotiations, how much work the Gutenbergs had done, where the work pipeline might get clogged, et cetera. Still, I had to wonder if Giebe Haldenzel knew exactly what kind of stories Elvira was printing. Was she the only one making books? I was suddenly very curious.

Haah... I really want to read the other book Mother made.

I couldn't calm down when I had a book in my possession that I hadn't yet read. The temple was a more relaxing place for me than almost anywhere else, but I wanted to rush back to the castle just to delve into those stories. My mind quickly wandered, only snapping back to reality when Zahm returned from Ferdinand's chambers with a troubled expression.

"Zahm, did something happen?" I asked.

"It seems the High Priest has holed up in his workshop ever since his return to the temple yesterday. His attendants say he has not yet eaten, even though we are now approaching fifth bell."

Ferdinand had told me to spend the day checking up on the orphanage and workshop, and now I knew why: he had clearly just wanted to hide away in his

workshop. I could imagine he was losing his mind right now researching the gifts Hirschur had included among all our luggage.

“He endured an endless stream of work while I was asleep, correct? I see no issue with letting him have his fun for one day.”

“He has been in his workshop since yesterday, so a full day has passed already,” Zahm noted, his expression clouding with worry as he glanced at the door. Fran was looking equally concerned about Ferdinand not having eaten in so long. This was nothing new, but once again I was reminded just how much Ferdinand’s former attendants still cared for him.

“Should I go check up on him?”

“We would greatly appreciate it. You are the only one in the temple with higher authority than the High Priest, Lady Rozemyne.”

Yet I somehow doubt he would acknowledge an order from me to leave his workshop...

I stood up in any case, thinking about what I could do to ease their worries. Zahm opened the door for me, and I started for the High Priest’s chambers with him and Fran in tow.

“Rozemyne! Thank you for coming!” Eckhart said, greeting me with a smile. He was, for some reason, doing paperwork at Ferdinand’s desk. When I glanced around the room, I realized that Justus wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

“Eckhart, where’s Justus?” I asked. “Don’t tell me he forced all the work on you and is locked up in the workshop with Ferdinand.”

“No, he went back to the castle after finishing his half of the work and the blizzard died down a bit. He was looking forward to Hirschur’s gifts, but Lord Ferdinand wouldn’t let him in the workshop.”

Ferdinand’s temple workshop was made such that one needed an enormous amount of mana to enter, specifically to prevent Sylvester from barging in and causing problems. Justus had ultimately had no choice but to gaze at the workshop door with envy before finishing the bare minimum of his work and leaving for the castle.

“Not to mention, he is not forcing the work on me. I am willingly doing this work so that Lord Ferdinand may dedicate as much time as possible to his research.” Eckhart continued. He was willingly helping out, but even then, I could see he was reaching his limit. “You can enter his workshop, can’t you, Rozemyne?”

“I cannot open the door on my own, as my mana is not registered with its feystone,” I said. It perhaps wasn’t the fairest situation, considering that Ferdinand was registered with and could enter my workshop in the High Bishop’s chambers.

Eckhart slumped over at my response before looking at the magic tool for speaking into the workshop. “Could you at least try talking to him? Lord Ferdinand has stopped responding to anything I say, but he should respond to a visitor.”

Having no other choice, I touched the communication feystone and spoke. “Ferdinand, it’s Rozemyne.”

“Now you, hm? I am busy. Unless it is urgent, save it for later.”

“It is urgent. You need to eat. Eckhart and your attendants are worried sick!”

“Understood. You may rest easy with the knowledge that I will eat when I find an ideal stopping point with my work,” he said, flatly rejecting my concerns. Why couldn’t he just come out already?

I sighed, stepped back from the feystone, and then turned back to Eckhart. “He says he will eat when he finds a good place to stop. He won’t die from going a day or two without food. Would it not be fine to just let him do as he pleases until the Dedication Ritual?”

His obsessive focus was something I understood all too well; in fact, I could remember holing up on a regular basis back in my Urano days whenever I got absorbed in a book. I saw no reason to interrupt him before the Dedication Ritual posed an actual problem we would need him for.

I was pretty satisfied with this conclusion, but Eckhart knelt in front of me alongside Ferdinand’s servants. “Rozemyne, Lord Ferdinand has been saying that since morning. Is there nothing you can do? Surely you of all people have

something that can draw his interest," he said, looking at me with such desperation that one might think the world was ending and only I could save him.

I couldn't help but grimace slightly. I could tell I needed to drag Ferdinand out of his dark cave now, else Eckhart would continue pleading with me until the end of time.

"Baiting him out is a simple matter, but it would result in him yelling at me, which is hardly ideal. I just emerged from a harsh scolding and would not like to receive another any time soon..." I muttered.

"Do you mean to say that you did something to earn the High Priest's ire, Lady Rozemyne?" Fran asked. Zahm began giving me encouragement, saying that he would join me in getting scolded so I wouldn't have to be alone.

Either way, Ferdinand is going to be really ticked off about having been torn from his work. I don't want to willingly throw myself to the dogs by volunteering information that will make him even angrier.

Eckhart paused for a moment before clapping a hand on my shoulder. He leaned closer, his blue eyes gleaming with satisfaction, and whispered in my ear as if disclosing a secret.

"The sooner you get this over with, the less he'll complain, Rozemyne. Not to mention, you can calm his wrath at least slightly by shifting the topic of conversation to magic tool research. You might even be able to distract him completely."

"Okay. I'll do it. You've convinced me." I raised my head with firm resolve and spoke into the magic tool again. "Ferdinand, come out. Let's eat dinner together."

"You're still here? No. Leave me be."

"I was thinking we should discuss mana compression. Are you uninterested in the new fourth stage of my process? All those in the temple—that is to say, you and my guard knights—know of my compression method already, so I imagine it is safe to discuss over dinner."

Ferdinand fell silent, no doubt weighing his interest in continuing his research

against discussing the mana compression method. He needed one more push, and while I was apprehensive about the idea, I knew just what to say.

"Furthermore, there is something I wish to consult you about. I plan on teaching the children of the former Veronica faction my mana compression method and taking them in. I—"

"Have you lost your mind?!" Ferdinand roared, bursting through the door to interrupt me. I had succeeded in getting him out of his workshop, but the blue vein bulging on his forehead told me he was moments away from unleashing his thunderous wrath. His face was worn from what was quite clearly sleep deprivation, but his eyes were as sharp as ever, presumably because he had spent that time absorbed in what he liked doing most. To be honest, it was a pretty scary look.

"You scolded me about not communicating so here I am, communicating. You *are* going to listen, aren't you?"

"I suppose I have no choice. Good grief..." Ferdinand tapped a finger against his temple, making no attempt to hide his displeasure.

"In that case, once sixth bell rings, you can—"

"We will eat in my chambers. Do not bother me until then."

He's absolutely grasping for as much research time as possible.

I had figured out what Ferdinand was thinking the second I saw him look back at his workshop. This had to be the easiest he had ever been to read.

"That is acceptable. I will return at sixth bell," I said with a smile. Ferdinand returned to his workshop with a frown, and as his workshop door closed once again, I gazed across the assembled attendants. "And so it is done. I will be joining you for dinner tonight."

"We thank you, High Bishop. It is an immeasurable relief to know the High Priest is going to eat," his attendants said as they busily started preparations for an extra portion.

"Lady Rozemyne, shall we return to your chambers?" Fran asked.

My eating dinner here meant my attendants would need to prepare my

cutlery and the like. Those accompanying me would also need to split into groups, with some having an early dinner and the others eating after me.

“Farewell, Eckhart. I will come back at sixth bell,” I said.

“I await your return. I imagine Lord Ferdinand wouldn’t have left his workshop without you here. I’m glad to have a little sister capable of moving a mountain like him.” He praised me with a smile that made him look a lot like Karstedt, but I had to admit, his words didn’t make me all too pleased.

I returned to the High Priest’s chambers after sixth bell to find Ferdinand waiting with an irritated frown, having already come out from his workshop. I would need to endure his frustration while our attendants prepared our plates; meanwhile, Eckhart looked completely unperturbed as he stood just out of sight. It was quite honestly kind of annoying.

“Ferdinand, you are letting your emotions show. That is not proper for a noble,” I noted.

“I am doing it deliberately, because I am well aware you would not understand a fraction of my displeasure otherwise. Consider my honesty here special treatment for you in particular,” he replied, not that I was particularly interested in any “special treatment” that involved being on the receiving end of such a nasty glare. “In any case, what was that nonsense about teaching members of the former Veronica faction your compression method? Did you not say you would refuse to give this knowledge to those who would oppose you?”

“I am not going to teach it to future enemies, that much has remained unchanged, but it was only when I spoke with the children of the former Veronica faction in the Royal Academy that I realized just how large the faction was, and just how little communication there is between factions. It was previously the largest faction, correct? It is not possible to simply eliminate them all, so would you not agree it is important that we bring some to our side?”

Ferdinand listened quietly and then motioned for me to continue. The look in his eyes was not one of approval, however, but slight irritation.

“Furthermore, there are many children who regret tricking Wilfried, having not realized what they were doing at the time,” I continued. “Some anguish over being automatically considered part of their parents’ faction.”

“It is true that only adults can choose their faction.”

“But their most substantial mana growth period will most likely be over by then, will it not? It seems to me that many are upset to be missing out on so much potential mana growth purely due to a decision made by their parents, and these feelings are only exacerbated when they see Angelica and Cornelius advancing so rapidly before their very eyes.”

“It is true that one’s mana capacity grows the most while attending the Royal Academy,” Ferdinand muttered, his eyes closed in contemplation.

“Would it be possible to change the details of the magic contract such that we can bring at least the children over to our side?”

“You say that as if changing the details is easy.”

“I shall entrust the fine-tuning to you and Mother, since you are more familiar with the minutiae of faction politics than I am. We must act with caution, but we do not want to lose this many people.”

Ferdinand pondered the situation before fixing me with a piercing stare. “What is your ulterior motive here? Speak honestly.”

“Ngh... I am also hoping that binding them with a magic contract will make it easier for Sylvester to accept me taking a retainer from the former Veronica faction.”

His eyes shot wide open, and onto his lips crept a smile so cold that it practically negated the heat from the nearby furnace. “Just how much of a fool are you?” he asked in a hushed voice. “Have you forgotten what they did to you? It has been two years for the rest of the world, but only a single season for you. Surely your memory is not that poor.”

“I may be a fool, but there are promising children among the former Veronica faction. Would it not be a waste to let them rot?” I asked. Roderick was highly valuable to me for his proven ability to collect and create continuations to stories I struggled to even remember. “Not to mention, it is unpleasant to live in

a dormitory so largely overcome with despair and dismay.”

“That is simply the way of the dormitories. Such animosity between factions is a matter of course,” Ferdinand replied, scoffing as though to say I really was an idiot.

“But it doesn’t have to be that way,” I explained. “As part of the Better Grades Committee, we split everyone into teams based on courses. Those within these teams ultimately helped each other pass their written classes without paying mind to faction politics.” Things had naturally been as awkward as one would expect at first, but as the students shared their thoughts and tutored each other, the atmosphere in the common room ended up more peaceful and welcoming than ever.

Once again, Ferdinand stared at me in wide-eyed disbelief. “You were doing such things at the Royal Academy?”

“Yes. Sylvester ordered me to raise our duchy’s grades, after all. I was able to increase overall performance by establishing rewards and making everyone compete, much like I did in the winter playroom. Did you not receive reports from Wilfried on this...?” I thought this was more than important enough to warrant mention, so if not, there really was a problem with his reports.

“He sent me nothing but questions about you, though it seems there is a great deal of valuable information among the matters he did not consult me about,” Ferdinand said, eyeing me with suspicion.

I averted my gaze at once. Was it just my imagination, or was he going to lecture me about something again?

“In any case, I understand there was enough diplomacy in the dormitory for the children of the former Veronica faction to speak freely,” Ferdinand continued. “I will consider whether changing the contract and attempting to absorb some from their faction is an ideal move. If you succeed in recruiting the children on their way to adulthood, the power balance among factions will shift yet further. Of course, this carries with it a heavy risk, and caution should remain our highest priority. Do not make any rogue moves before we have come to a clear conclusion on this matter.”

“Naturally.”

During dinner, we discussed Hirschur's gifts and the like. I took the opportunity to ask what magic tools she had wanted Ferdinand to fix.

"They are magic tools used in her classes. They are around a decade old, so I was sure she would have made new ones by now, but apparently not."

Ferdinand went on to explain their purpose, and my personal interpretation led me to conclude they were pretty much projectors. If you poured mana into the feystone, it would project words written on a sheet of paper onto a white cloth, much like a slide.

"As I'm sure you saw, Hirschur loathes to put effort into anything but her research," he began. "It frustrates her beyond measure to repeat the same explanations in class, but it is only natural for students to ask questions when they did not quite catch her explanation in full. To make matters worse, the instructions get more complex and thus harder to memorize as one moves up in years. I made her a projection magic tool so that she would not have to repeat the steps in her brewing class."

He had apparently been driven to do this after Hirschur would consistently return from her classes in a foul mood. She was overjoyed to receive the magic tool, since she needed only to write the instructions once and that was that, and it became integral to her lectures from that point onward.

"From what I can glean, Hirschur has not changed from when she used to teach me."

"She said the same thing when I mentioned you were overdoing mana compression to the point of getting sick. You really pushed yourself while you were attending the Royal Academy, didn't you?"

"I would not say I am necessarily overdoing anything. Now, what is this about a fourth step?" he asked, having been so busy thinking about the former Veronica faction that he had forgotten to ask about what mattered most: the mana compression method.

At his request, I explained what had happened during the mana compression class. My misunderstanding that I needed to compress my mana further had resulted in me thinking things over and taking another look at my method.

“Your thought process continues to be incomprehensible, but I must admit, there is wisdom within it as well. Combining two existing methods rather than starting afresh was clever. You redid your compression after first decompressing all your mana, but I see no reason why you cannot simply boil down the mana while it is compressed. Why add a step to the beginning? Simply incorporate it at the end.”

“This was just the easiest way for me to visualize it.” My third step was flattening a bag to the point that it was practically airtight, and it was beyond me to imagine boiling a bag. Maybe it was easier to picture drying it to a crisp. I shut my eyes and tried just that, only for Fran to exhale in exasperation.

“Lady Rozemyne, High Priest, you have ceased eating. Might I ask that you save such strenuous thinking for once you have finished...?” Fran asked. It was then that I realized everyone, including our guard knights, were furrowing their brows as they attempted the new compression step themselves. I gave a small shrug and continued my meal.

“Combining compression methods is a very Rozemyne idea,” Ferdinand commented. “Will you be teaching this step to everyone?”

“...I will teach it to my retainers. I am sure the leaders of Ehrenfest will want to learn it as well, but as for everyone else... I suppose slow and steady wins the race. It would be nice to save it as a trump card of sorts.”

As we continued our dinner, I tried asking about Schwartz and Weiss’s magic circles. I mentioned that their charms included something that reversed attacks from enemies, which earned many nods from Ferdinand.

“One of the charms I gave you functions similarly, but this is my first time seeing a magic circle capable of reflecting multiple attacks at once,” he said. “They require a considerable amount of mana though. It is worth researching them, but I do not expect them to be very useful to you on a daily basis.”

As it turned out, Ferdinand was planning to research their charms in part to strengthen mine. I was effectively his guinea pig.

“Who else has enough mana to fuel magic tools while attending practical lessons?” he continued. “Incidentally, Rozemyne... How much have your muscles and stamina recovered since the jureve?”

Not much, since I prioritized reading in the library above all else...

Here I was, faced with a question that I couldn't answer honestly without getting shouted at. I put on a smile and changed the subject, as Eckhart had taught me.

"Professor Solange said it must be tremendous work for me to pour so much mana into Schwartz and Weiss. Is my mana capacity truly that abnormal...? I don't have much of a reference point."

"...You effortlessly compress your mana and are steadily adding more steps to the process as time goes on. Your mana capacity is incomparable to that of others your age, and it will grow even larger as your body does."

"The only thing that kept Professor Hirschur from snatching up Schwartz and Weiss was Professor Solange continually pouring mana into their charms," I said. "She was overjoyed when I gave her the opportunity to draw the magic circles while we were taking measurements. What have we learned so far? Have you made any new discoveries?"

"Ah, yes. They have been quite fascinating."

It seemed that I had succeeded in changing the topic. Ferdinand went on to describe the great beauty of the magic circles embroidered onto their torsos, speaking a bit quicker than normal. The circles were apparently complexly woven and maintained a delicate balance between several elements.

"Professor Hirschur mentioned that the circles are riddled with holes. Do you believe you can fill those in?"

"I have not yet given it a try, but I would certainly like to. There will not be any other opportunities for me to study the personal research of royalty while in Ehrenfest—I can say that without a shadow of a doubt. Though things would have turned out differently had I been able to move to the Sovereignty..."

I could guess that Ferdinand had wanted to move to the Sovereignty but was prevented from doing so by his position as an archduke candidate. I was facing exactly the same problem, since I couldn't move to the Sovereignty and work in the Royal Academy's library no matter how much I wanted to.

In which case, I'm even more sure of my decision that it should be fine to let

Ferdinand have his fun here.

"Ferdinand, I am required as Schwartz and Weiss's master to prepare new clothes for them. According to Professor Hirschur, this is a task so demanding that all those in Ehrenfest will need to band together so that we do not shame ourselves. The making of charms will require many valuable materials. Would it be possible for you to provide assistance also?" I asked.

"Hm... Challenging both those of the past and those to come, hm? Fascinating. We should start by improving the magic circles," Ferdinand muttered as he began considering what to improve first and how to improve it. I could tell we would end up with some incredibly powerful clothes if we left things in his capable hands.

Ferdinand really can do everything!

As I internally clapped in approval, Fran let out another thoroughly troubled sigh. "Excuse me, but you have both stopped eating again. The orphanage will never receive dinner at this rate."

Oops. Sorry.

We finished our meals, and then Eckhart and I immediately banded together to stop Ferdinand from retreating back into his workshop.

"Ferdinand, you have two choices here: leave your workshop when called for, or allow me to register my mana such that I can enter your workshop myself. There is no room for debate. I do not want Eckhart and your attendants pleading with me for help every single day."

"Good grief... I would rather leave when summoned than allow you to stroll in and out as you please. I must say, you are beginning to resemble Rihyarda with your forcefulness."

"I was dragged out of the library every day at the Royal Academy. Now it is your turn to know the pain I endured," I said, resting my hands on my hips as Rihyarda often would when she was about to lecture me.

Ferdinand shook his head and deeply exhaled. "Rozemyne, do not give Rihyarda so much trouble."

“I will repeat the same warning to you: do not give your attendants so much trouble.”

Damuel quickly put a hand over his mouth as he tried to contain his laughter, earning him a glare from Ferdinand. The moral of today’s exchange was that a closed mouth gathers no feet... but also that an open mouth can be used to redirect attention and anger.

The Summoned Merchants

One morning several days later, Fran noticed that the blizzard had weakened considerably. He set aside the boxes he had prepared for Ferdinand and picked up a book instead.

“Lady Rozemyne, shall we head to the orphanage director’s chambers? You can read while we wait for the others to arrive.”

And so we departed, leaving it to Zahm to contact Ferdinand. We came across Gil on the way, who was coming to tell us that the Plantin and Gilberta Companies would soon be arriving. I started reading the very moment we reached my chambers, which had been warmed ahead of time such that we were ready whenever Benno and the others got here. Fran called out a short while later.

“They have arrived, Lady Rozemyne.”

I closed my book and immediately saw a large crowd coming up the stairs: Benno, Mark, and Lutz from the Plantin Company; Otto, Theo, and Leon from the Gilberta Company; and Gustav with two assistants from the Merchant’s Guild.

“We are honored beyond words to have a moment of your time,” Gustav said, serving as the large group’s representative. He was rigid with anxiety, as expected of someone presented with a great task that had to succeed under any circumstances.

I glanced over everyone gathered and then gestured for them to take their seats.

“Lady Rozemyne, I would like to humbly request a more detailed explanation of what you discussed in your letter,” Benno said, having apparently been entrusted with taking the lead. This made sense, since I was closer to him than the other adults. Given that Gustav and his assistants were here, I started with the bare basics of noble society.

“In every duchy, noble children begin learning at the Royal Academy when they reach ten years of age.” I went on to explain that duchies were ranked according to influence, that students’ grades had an impact on this influence, and that the archduke had ordered me to raise Ehrenfest’s ranking while I was attending as an archduke candidate, namely through raising our duchy’s average grades and establishing trends. “Ehrenfest hopes to spread products like rinsham, hairpins, recipes, cooking utensils, books, plant paper, and ink as trends throughout the entire country. These are all my inventions, of course, so Aub Ehrenfest elected to wait for me to awaken before putting this plan into motion.”

“And that means you have already started spreading them in the Royal Academy,” Benno observed. I could tell from his narrowed eyes that he had wanted this information much, much sooner, but that hadn’t been an option.

“I was given these orders just prior to leaving for the Royal Academy and so I did not have time to contact anyone. Did scholars not send word to you?”

“We received messages instructing us not to allow rinsham, hairpins, or books outside the duchy. We thankfully predicted this was leading into plans for widespread distribution, so we have already prepared as well as we could.”

“I would expect nothing less from you, Benno. Your business acumen has once again served you well,” I said. I knew that I could count on Benno to have prepared to expand his business despite the instructions having said to keep products within the duchy.

“So, what is the current state of these trends?” Benno asked. “Does the fact you have returned mean they are already widely known?”

“First of all, I am electing to spread the products gradually over my time in the Royal Academy, rather than spreading everything at once in my first year.” This was so that Ehrenfest would remain a long-standing influential force instead of a mere flash in the pan.

Otto gave a few fascinated nods. “As you suggested, I am sure Ehrenfest will attract many merchants, who will find new markets every time they visit. I also believe nobles from other duchies will start arriving to look over the products themselves. Ehrenfest receives few visitors from elsewhere in the country, so I

predict this will bring about great change within the duchy."

As someone who had experience roaming all over the place as a traveling merchant, Otto knew what he was talking about. Compared to its neighbors, Frenbeltag and Ahrensbach, Ehrenfest had less to draw in outside visitors, which meant nobles from other duchies rarely actually visited us. This was especially the case now that only nobles with the archduke's direct approval could enter.

Now that he mentions it, I guess I've barely ever seen nobles from other duchies here...

"This year, I am going to spread rinsham, hairpins, pound cakes, and plant paper throughout the Royal Academy. They are all things I use on a regular basis, and they were easy topics to discuss at tea parties."

"Hm... Would it be reasonable to say their popularity among Ehrenfest nobles also influenced your decision?" Gustav asked, stroking his chin. I responded with a brisk nod.

"Additionally, I believe it would be relatively simple to build new workshops for them," I said. "We will want to profit from our products as much as we can before their production methods spread and the rest of the duchies catch up technologically. I also expect other duchies to begin producing similar products as soon as their production methods are known."

All the products I was proposing were things Lutz and I had made when we were poor kids in the lower city. To reproduce them, all one needed to know was the production method; everything else was mostly easy. That was why I wanted to wring as much money from them as possible before they really caught on throughout the country.

Otto nodded, a grim expression on his face. He represented the Gilberta Company, which sold rinsham and the hairpins.

"Once the spread of products that other duchies can reproduce starts to slow, I plan to spread printing. Our presses are by no means easy to prepare, and they are not even common in Ehrenfest yet, correct? It will take quite some time for them to spread through other duchies, and that is when their existence actually comes to light. We will secure a monopoly on printing for a good while

if we can keep the production method a secret."

Benno nodded this time, though in contrast to Otto, his expression was one of utmost approval.

"I wish to increase the number of presses in Ehrenfest, expanding the industry such that other duchies will see our books in the Royal Academy over the coming years and then bring us manuscripts to print. In truth, I would like to spread books as far and wide as possible in as short a time frame as possible, but..."

"Lady Rozemyne, being too hasty is often detrimental to business. I thoroughly believe we should take our time, allowing the printing industry to spread through society slowly but surely." Those were Benno's words, but I could tell that he really wanted to say, *"Hold your friggin' horses! You've gotta lay the groundwork first!"* The complete lack of mirth in his dark-red eyes despite his polite smile was enough to confirm to me that I wasn't too far from the truth.

"At every tea party I attended, nobles praised our rinsham and our hairpins, while complimenting the pound cakes as very pleasant to eat despite their rustic appearance. Praise for these products comes from Klassenberg and the Royal Academy's professors, so I imagine there will soon be many duchies nipping at our heels for them."

"Klassenberg? A player that large is involved...?" Gustav breathed, his eyes widening at my reveal. He was probably familiar with the names and ranks of other duchies, considering that he was involved with most of the importing and exporting done in Ehrenfest. In contrast, Benno and Otto responded to something other than the Klassenberg name.

"Lady Rozemyne, in what way will other duchies be involving themselves in the near future?"

"Socializing season in the Royal Academy has not begun quite yet, but I had to hurry home after finishing my classes to participate in the Dedication Ritual. Thus, I have only had tea parties with a Klassenberg archduke candidate, some professors, and the second prince. I do not know how things will develop in my absence."

“Lady Rozemyne, did you just say that you have only had tea parties with a student from a greater duchy, professors, and a member of royalty? Does that mean...?” Gustav went silent, his face paling as he glanced over at Otto. His instincts were as good as one would expect from someone who had done much business with nobles while serving as the guildmaster of the Merchant’s Guild.

“Indeed. I want the Gilberta Company to make a hairpin for the second prince, so that he may present it to the aforementioned archduke candidate from Klassenberg for her coming of age ceremony.”

Not just Gustav, but also his servants reeled in shock at the absurdity of my request. They shot Otto sympathetic looks, but Otto himself did not even react.

“Could I ask for more detail on her hair color and the color of what she plans to wear? Blonde hair comes in a variety of shades,” Otto said, urging his assistant Theo to prepare to write out my explanation.

“She is often compared to the Goddess of Light herself. Her hair is similar to Lutz’s in color, and I imagine it will become even more similarly colored once she begins using rinsham. Her outfit is going to be red, in the fashion of Geduldh.” From there, we discussed what flowers should accompany the red koralies, how large they should be, and so on.

“Otto, do you understand the situation?” Gustav asked in disbelief, a slight grimace on his face. “This hairpin is being offered to royalty.”

“I do, but what is there to worry about? The prince liked the hairpin that Lady Rozemyne was wearing. Given that we are the only duchy making them at the moment, if we produce the best hairpin the Gilberta Company has ever made, it will technically be the best hairpin in the country. Not to mention...” Otto looked at the hairpin I was wearing. It was one Tuuli had made for me while I was asleep.

“The Gilberta Company’s craftswomen are getting better and better with each hairpin they develop, as they find new techniques and devise new flower patterns,” he continued. “I am very proud of them. If we use the highest-quality thread and have our most skilled craftswoman use all of the techniques they have developed, I am confident we will be able to meet both Lady Rozemyne’s and the prince’s expectations.”

“But Klassenberg and royalty are...” Gustav began, still unsatisfied. He was the only one among them who firmly understood the vast difference between Ehrenfest and Klassenberg.

Benno gave a light shrug. “Guildmaster, think about the bigger picture here. Serving an archduke candidate from Klassenberg and a member of royalty is no more intimidating than serving someone like Lady Rozemyne,” he said in a faux-polite tone.

“That’s a terrible comparison, Benno!”

“It doesn’t matter whether they’re from Ehrenfest or a foreign duchy—failure is not an option. All nobles can crush us like bugs.”

Simply by virtue of their higher birth, nobles could force commoner merchants to do just about anything they wanted. Benno was taking that to its logical conclusion and saying that, to merchants, serving an Ehrenfest laynoble was pretty much the same as serving royalty. They couldn’t afford to mess up with either.

That’s the kind of absurd courage I like to see.

“Given that you are only offering up the hairpin, working for royalty might even be easier,” I noted. This was an order from me, and working with me was a lot easier for them than working with any other archnoble. Not to mention, they wouldn’t need to deal with the recipient directly; only Sylvester was going to suffer here.

“Lady Rozemyne, when is the deadline? When is her coming of age ceremony?”

“The coming of age ceremonies in the Royal Academy occur at the end of winter. You will want to have completed the hairpin before then.”

“Understood.”

With the order for Eglantine’s hairpin now placed, it felt as though a load had been taken off my shoulders. I decided it was time to change the topic of conversation.

“Now, as for plant paper, the existing name immediately reveals the source

material. I have been calling it ‘new paper’ in the Royal Academy as a result, but this doesn’t communicate all that much. It needs a new name.”

“Do you have any suggestions?” Benno asked. “Perhaps something to do with the Gutenbergs...?” I could tell from his expression that he was warning me against giving another product a strange name.

“I was thinking ‘Lutz paper’ is appropriate, since he was the first person to actually make it.”

“Might I counter by suggesting ‘Myne paper’?” Lutz asked in an instant, making it clear that “Lutz paper” was the absolute last thing he wanted. “It would certainly be more appropriate in my eyes.”

‘Myne paper’? No thanks. Absolutely not. My name doesn’t need to be anywhere near it.

After regarding Lutz with sympathetic eyes, Mark asked for my permission to speak with a warm smile. I naturally provided it.

“Might I suggest incorporating the name of the province each type of paper is created in? Illgner creates paper that is completely unlike that made in Ehrenfest, and with this in mind, I would recommend using ‘Illgner paper’ and ‘Ehrenfest paper.’”

“That will also help spread Ehrenfest’s name in the Sovereignty,” Benno said in support of the idea. The quality and type of paper varied greatly based on the wood it was made from. Geographic names would not only be easier to remember than the names of people, but they would also better market our duchy.

“Very well. We can go with ‘Ehrenfest paper’ then,” I conceded, at which point Lutz let out a heavy sigh of relief.

“Lady Rozemyne, do you believe Ehrenfest paper is going to be a popular product?” Benno asked.

“It is too early to say. I use it regularly in classes and the library, but I cannot say the same of everyone from Ehrenfest. At the moment, it is largely earning attention from the professors, who tend to be buried in paperwork. The students have little interest.”

“I would expect as much,” Gustav said, stroking his chin. “Archnobles and archduke candidates can simply continue purchasing parchment without needing to bother with any new forms of paper. Laynobles, meanwhile, would still not be able to afford to use Ehrenfest paper every day, even with it being somewhat cheaper than parchment.”

“I am giving some paper to the students transcribing books in the library in the hope of establishing it as something to be used casually. That said, those ordered to transcribe books by higher-status students are normally provided with parchment, so it might not feel so casual after all.”

“When dealing with vast amounts of text, paper is much more convenient and takes up less space than wooden boards, but I assume that isn’t easy for students to understand,” Gustav said. As it turned out, he had moved away from using wooden boards and now did all the bookkeeping for the Merchant’s Guild on plant paper. It took up much less space and made transporting documents a great deal easier, something that Benno had observed while moving so many people to Illgner and Haldenzel for work. Wooden boards were just that wasteful when it came to space.

“Lady Rozemyne, it may be wise to ask the archduke to standardize the use of plant paper among Ehrenfest scholars,” Gustav suggested. “If they see for themselves how much easier it is to work with, their passion might be conveyed when they recommend it to other duchies.”

“I see the wisdom in your words. I shall suggest this to Sylvester.”

We didn’t want our own scholars not using our prime export; in fact, the more they used it, the better. I didn’t want to be my own biggest customer, with the temple and the Merchant’s Guild taking second place. We needed the paper to start being used throughout the castle, so that the paper would naturally integrate into noble society through the scholars.

“Oh, that reminds me—I wish for the Plantin Company to make a tool in which one can store paper. I will gather the Gutenbergs to discuss this at a later date,” I said. There were a great many things I wanted for business: binders, folders, and filing cabinets, to name a few.

Gustav looked at me like a predator who had discovered its prey. “Lady

Rozemyne, might I suggest entrusting such work to companies other than the Plantin Company? There are many who wish to work with you," he said.

I tilted my head slightly. "I believe I have exclusivity with the Plantin Company. Would it not be better for the Plantin Company to distribute work as they please, just as Benno's carpentry workshop directed me to Ingo? I thought that would be standard for merchants of this city."

"It is, but the sheer size of your orders are creating too strong of an imbalance in the workload."

So he said, but all the Gutenbergs were so busy that they were more than eager to delegate work to others who were competent enough. The fact that they hadn't managed to find anyone, however, probably indicated that others lacked the skill and reliability needed to complete these jobs.

"I fully trust Benno and all the other Gutenbergs, so I am happy for them to redistribute work as they see fit. Plus, assuming the work produced is satisfactory, those they choose are more likely to be chosen for future projects as well."

To put it simply, the Gutenbergs were just a collection of merchants and craftspeople capable of meeting my demands. Johann, Ingo, and Heidi, for example, were all introduced to me through Benno. Their talents in their respective fields had served me well, and since then, they were all pulling their weight with orders. There was even Zack, who had come to me voluntarily to promote his talents. I was more than willing to embrace any skilled worker who wanted to provide their assistance.

"However, as the archduke orders more and more work to be done, our need to minimize unknown elements that may cause problems becomes greater than ever. If Benno is hesitant to distribute work to someone despite wanting nothing more than to lessen his own burden then I am equally hesitant. I will allow you to settle these things yourselves," I concluded, ultimately rejecting Gustav's proposal. I wasn't about to stick my nose into merchant drama.

I turned my attention to Benno. "Given that you planned ahead, I presume you are not monopolizing all the work?" I asked, pretty sure there was no way he could handle it all.

Benno nodded cautiously. “We require your permission to create new paper workshops and have been unable to expand as a result. However, ever since rinsham began growing popular among Ehrenfest nobles, I worked with my little sister who was wed in another city and other extended family members to expand rinsham production into other locations.”

Wowee. It looks like a lot of rinsham workshops popped up while I was asleep.

“I suppose, then, that production can increase even further if you buy the oil used in rinsham from food workshops and have the Gilberta Company’s workshop focus only on producing the product itself. What matters here is what is used for the scrub and the ratios.”

Theo and Leon from the Gilberta Company widened their eyes as they wrote down what I had said.

“Does mass-producing the hairpins seem feasible?”

“For a year now, we have been working with several workshops through the Tailor’s Guild to make hairpins for winter handiwork. They are the simplest hairpins possible, marketed toward commoners. Those who make the best ones are given more advanced flowers to create, and we are growing our numbers by hiring them once their lehange contracts end.”

By separating the orders based on skill, they had managed to achieve something that resembled mass production. They had no other choice, since mass production was necessary to meet the demands of nobles once attaching flower ornaments to clothing was in vogue. Not to mention, it turned out that Tuuli going from an apprentice to working for the archduke’s adopted daughter in a matter of years had resulted in rumors that making hairpins was the fastest way for girls to move up in the world.

I can imagine Tuuli will become a living legend if she ends up entrusted with the prince’s order. Wow! Wow! That’s my big sister for you!

I gave a curt nod, making sure to hide my excitement. “As always, I am impressed with your work. Given that the rinsham and the hairpins have already expanded enough, what say we start establishing new paper workshops starting next spring?”

“Lady Rozemyne, Haldenzel will need to come first,” Benno said.

“I will settle any Haldenzel matters after the Dedication Ritual. Should you find that Gil’s reports are lacking in any way, please provide documents to fill the gap.”

“As you wish.”

It seemed that Benno already knew what he would need. I mentally clapped my hands together in approval, at which point Gustav asked what our approach was going to be with the pound cake.

“The plan is to sell the basic recipe at the Archduke Conference to those who request it. We are trailblazers with experienced chefs and more developed kitchens and thus will have an advantage for some time. Incidentally, as a free tip, those in the Sovereignty are so used to excessively sweet foods that they preferred the powerfully sweet honey pound cake more than any other flavor.”

“Oh? Honey, you say?” Gustav asked, having not expected to receive such intel. I was going to need his help with a lot of work moving forward, so giving out this information for free was something of an investment.

“You would do well to keep that in mind when there are merchants from other duchies flooding in after the Archduke Conference.”

“You have my thanks.”

“One thing I ask is that you prepare accommodation for the merchants and travelers who are going to be coming to our duchy. I imagine the inns won’t be able to support them all, and the city’s infrastructure must be prepared. This is not something I imagine nobles will care about in the least, but commoner merchants will for the most part be seeing our lower city.”

Another important matter was stock. It was ideal for merchants to come to Ehrenfest to market our goods further, but a shortage of products would decrease interest and perhaps even infuriate merchants. Social order would pretty much fall apart if a bunch of outsiders came and fought over sparse resources.

“We will want to remain in close contact with the city guards to maintain the peace, and coordination with the guilds for inns and eateries will also be

essential. I am going to entrust these duties to the Merchant's Guild." Gustav responded to my words with wide-eyed shock, but I merely smiled at him and continued. "You may delegate any of this work to those merchants you trust so much."

Benno looked over at Gustav, barely able to contain his laughter. "Those merchants who wanted connections with Lady Rozemyne will certainly be pleased now," he said with a slight smirk that more or less said "you get what you deserve."

Gustav glared at Benno before choking out a conflicted, "Understood."

"Those local to our city might struggle to identify any flaws in its infrastructure. I am told that Otto previously worked as a traveling merchant. Perhaps you could learn something by discussing his perspective on things," I suggested.

Benno very nearly broke into a grin as Gustav sat there, completely frozen in shock. It was only when Mark cleared his throat that he snapped back to reality, and in an instant, his expression became serious once again. "Lady Rozemyne, what exactly is the Archduke Conference?" he asked.

I was sadly unable to answer, having never gone to one myself. The most I really knew was that all the archdukes and archduchesses in Yurgenschmidt came together.

"I have never attended one, as I am not an archduchess," I replied. "Aub Ehrenfest has said that the archdukes gather to discuss trade and deals, but that is all I know."

Thankfully, Gustav seemed to know more about the conferences. "I only ever receive the results from scholar-officials, but the Archduke Conferences decide which merchants are dispatched to other duchies, as well as how traveling merchants are moved, so I am somewhat familiar with them," he began. From there, he explained the developments that had followed particular decisions in the past. It turned out to be a pretty significant source of change.

"I am told that Aub Ehrenfest wishes to hear your perspectives on which duchies are best to work with and to what degree we should work with them. You will receive a summons from him once the blizzards stop."

“My, my... Did you arrange for this, Lady Rozemyne?” Gustav asked. “I can hardly express my gratitude.”

I tilted my head in visible confusion, which seemed to prompt an explanation. It turned out that the archduke and other nobles never paid any mind to the circumstances of commoner merchants and generally informed them of the results of each year’s Archduke Conference in the form of orders sent through scholars. That made sense, given that nobles didn’t really see commoners as fellow human beings, but it was hardly an approach that would lead to success.

“A normal noble would never discuss things with us ahead of time as you are, Lady Rozemyne. Our contact would begin and end with their orders. Subsequently, the responsibility falls entirely on us if we fail, so we are extremely grateful to get in any words at all before the conference is held.”

That’s normal...? Unbelievable. That seems insane to me. No wonder Ehrenfest’s influence is so weak. No wonder Sylvester and Ferdinand disagreed with my suggestions; they had never consulted merchants before and were just stunned into silence by the idea of actually bringing up their thoughts at the conference.

“That said, even during the meeting at the Italian restaurant, Aub Ehrenfest came without his scholars and willingly listened to our perspectives directly,” Gustav continued. “Perhaps our lives are going to be a little easier, at least until his successor comes to power.”

When you put it like that, Sylvester seems like an outstanding leader who carefully listens to those beneath him, instead of a loose cannon who just wanted to visit the lower city and try new food.

“I will arbitrate as best I can such that your discussion with Aub Ehrenfest goes smoothly,” I assured Gustav, deciding not to correct him. I saw no good reason to cruelly dash his hopes.

“We appreciate it. Your support is a much-needed source of encouragement,” Benno said, this time giving me a look that said not to butt in too much. It was truly amazing what he was able to communicate through expressions alone.

“Is it safe for me to assume that everyone gathered here today is going to be attending the meeting?” I asked. “Letters of invitation need to be written for

each individual ahead of time.”

“It is standard for each representative to bring one companion to the castle,” Gustav replied.

“I see. I will direct the scholars accordingly,” I noted. Gustav had done the most business with nobles out of all the commoners here, so it seemed reasonable enough for me to follow his advice.

With that said, I fell silent and looked at Lutz, who caught my eye and stiffened up at once. As much as I didn’t want to say what was about to come next, I didn’t have a choice. I inhaled sharply and then spoke, doing my best to stop my voice from quavering.

“It is possible the upcoming discussion will result in our magic contracts being nullified...”

We had to consider that the contracts I had signed with Lutz when I was Myne might no longer be valid. Benno had signed them ahead of time to engineer a way for us to stay connected even after my move to the Noble’s Quarter, but now they were very likely to be eliminated as an inconvenience. I knew it was necessary to scale up production and spread it through the country, but still—my connection to Lutz was already hanging by a thread, and this was going to make it even more precarious. The sadness welling up inside me at that thought was unbearable.

“The Plantin Company will receive three letters of invitation. Please do not fail to bring Lutz,” I said, keeping my gaze fixed on the floor, balling my hands into tight fists as I tried to stop them from trembling. Benno must have predicted this request as well, as he gave me a concerned nod.

“As you wish.”

We went on to clarify that the meeting in the castle would take place once the blizzard stopped, that I was going to be in attendance, and that they would want to prepare documents regarding their current production capacities and the amount of elbow room they had remaining.

“The blizzard is getting stronger,” Gil eventually interjected while staring out the window. Everyone fell silent in an instant. There was still a lot for us to

discuss, but we simply didn’t have the time. The blizzard would only get worse from here, so it was in my visitors’ best interests to leave as soon as possible.

Benno indirectly thanked me for giving them the chance to talk things over before the archduke eventually summoned them, and with that, our meeting came to an abrupt end.

I let out a quiet sigh as I gazed out the window, watching everyone hurry home amid the increasingly heavy blizzard until the glass eventually clouded over. There had been too many people present during our meeting for me to hug Lutz, and the thought of our contracts getting canceled just made me depressed.

I know it has to be done, but still...

After drinking down the last of my tea with a dejected sigh, I returned to my High Bishop’s chambers.

Epilogue

Benno reflexively held down his hat the moment he exited the temple; the blizzard was stronger now than when he had arrived. He climbed down the stairs with his collar popped, heading straight toward and then climbing through the open door of the waiting carriage. Mark and Lutz rushed in soon after, covered in snow from the short walk. The driver shut the door behind them, and the carriage started moving in no time.

Ever since Rozemyne became the High Bishop, Benno had started receiving official invites in response to his requests for meetings and would arrive at the temple via carriage. The driver was surely going through hell driving them in this weather, but it was worth it—unlike the Othmar Company, the Plantin Company wasn't located right by the temple, so making the journey on foot would only have gotten them buried in snow.

The carriage moved slower than usual, likely due to the snow blocking the driver's vision. Inside, the silence was almost deafening, broken only by an annoyingly loud rattle as the windows endured the heavy winds. Lutz would normally spend the journey back discussing his time with Rozemyne in her hidden room and what he should or shouldn't say to her family, but today he just stared at the floor with his lips pressed tightly together.

Benno noticed that Mark was looking at him with a concerned expression, but he just shook his head and stared out the window with a sigh. *I know this is 'cause the magic contracts are getting nullified, but, huh... What to do about this?*

Their meeting today had not gone as Lutz was used to. Once the introductions were complete, they would usually be taken into the hidden room, where Rozemyne would speak not as a noble, but as Myne. There, Lutz was able to speak freely, and Myne would listen to him as though it were completely normal.

Today, however, the guildmaster had also been in attendance, and only he,

Benno, and Otto were generally permitted to speak. Lutz had no doubt been shaken to the core by Rozemyne casually announcing that their contract was going to be nullified, especially considering the noble smile on her face, but he probably hadn't noticed how she really felt. She had maintained a calm composure when she brought up the matter, but her hands were tightly clenched and trembling slightly.

We need to keep Rozemyne emotionally stable here.

Both the Plantin and the Gilberta Companies still needed Rozemyne's backing, and this conversation had confirmed there would soon be a flood of merchants coming in from other duchies. The lower city merchants would most likely be crushed without someone to shield them from the unreasonable demands they would surely face; all it took was a whim or a bit of misplaced anger for a noble to end them.

As the one who had gotten Tuuli into the Gilberta Company, Lutz into the Plantin Company, and the guildmaster to stay away from Rozemyne, Benno knew it was his responsibility to keep Rozemyne emotionally stable so that she could protect the Gutenbergs and the lower city merchants.

And to keep her stable, we need Lutz to get a grip too.

"Welcome back, Master Benno."

A servant greeted them as they went inside the Plantin Company. The interior was dim, and there was nobody else inside, as was to be expected; no normal person would risk going out to buy books and paper in the midst of an intense blizzard, so they would close up shop until the weather calmed. The lehanges wouldn't come to work either, meaning that during such periods, the Plantin Company largely housed only three people: Benno, the owner; Mark, the leherl; and Lutz, the leherl apprentice. There were also some servants and a chef who only lived there during the winter.

Most of those willing to live in a closed store over the winter were bachelors without a family or any relatives to help with winter preparations, those who were on bad terms with their families and wanted to avoid being shacked up with them for an entire season, and those who were looking to save money for when they were married by living with their employer rather than spending on

winter preparations. The chef staying with them this winter was in the third camp, and since he worked in the Italian restaurant, their meals were more than satisfactory.

Benno and the others knocked the snow from their clothes as they climbed the stairs to the second floor where they lived. The furnace in the shared living space had already been lit, making it much warmer. Benno exhaled with relief, but there was no time to linger.

“Mark, bring tea to my room. Lutz, keep your coat on and come with me. We need to talk.”

Still wearing his coat, Benno went into his room and started a fire in his personal furnace. His own room was frosty cold, since they usually stayed in the living room to save on costs. They were technically wasting firewood, but there wasn’t much else they could do when talking about Rozemyne. They couldn’t risk the servants overhearing.

Lutz trudged in with slumped shoulders and a clouded expression. He had entered after Benno, who pulled up a chair and sat right next to the furnace, staring into the fire as he waited for the leherl apprentice to do the same.

“Lutz, you need to keep yourself under control, otherwise Rozemyne’s going to become unstable,” Benno said, looking the boy over. “If you ever need to let out some feelings or vent your frustrations, do that here. Don’t show weakness like this in the temple.”

Lutz watched the fire slowly grow bigger and then shut his eyes tight. “I... I don’t think she cares anymore.”

“Excuse me?”

“I can’t believe she didn’t even blink when she talked about nullifying our contracts...” he murmured. “She probably doesn’t even care about them anymore.”

Yeah, this is what we get for relying on the hidden room too much.

Benno ran his fingers through his slicked-back hair, letting it down. For Lutz, it had been normal to use the hidden room when talking about important things. He had given Rozemyne reports through Gil and Fritz in the past, but he wasn’t

used to talking to her about important things when she was wearing her noble persona.

“Are you stupid?” Benno asked. “Like hell Rozemyne wants those contracts nullified.”

“But, Master Benno...”

“The magic contracts are more important to her than anyone. Could you not see how desperate she is to cling to her few remaining connections to the lower city? To be honest, considering how we’re going to be expanding these businesses, those contracts are nothing but a problem for you and me.”

Lutz firmly shook his head. “‘Nothing but a problem’?” he echoed, his voice quavering.

Benno scratched his head. Lutz was a lot more dependent on those contracts than he had thought. “Think about it as an apprentice leherl in the Plantin Company,” he said. “There were a lot of good opportunities we couldn’t take advantage of while she was asleep due to those contracts, remember, and she’s sickly enough that it might happen again sometime. Those contracts just don’t work for industries being expanded at the command of an archduke.”

Without Rozemyne’s approval, they hadn’t been able to make Haldenzel its own Plant Paper Guild, and even when it came to printing and making books, there were some things they couldn’t do without her. Myne becoming Rozemyne had resulted in paper-making and printing becoming official duchy industries, and with the archduke now steering them into popularity, it didn’t make sense to ask her permission for every little thing.

Lutz looked up with a start. “But the contracts are—”

“They were always just for insurance. We didn’t know if some random noble would snatch Myne away when she went to the temple, and our contracts were a way for us to keep in touch with her.”

Of course, Myne had then been passed off as dead, and Rozemyne became the archduke’s adopted daughter. The Gilberta Company was a growing star that had secured the exclusive business of the trailblazing archducal family, while Benno and the others were awarded the name “Plantin” by the

archduke's adopted daughter. No longer did they need to worry about Rozemyne suddenly going missing or not being allowed to see them anymore.

"Everything's different from how it was back then," Benno concluded. "You two don't need those contracts anymore."

Lutz mulled over those words for a moment and then repeated, "Everything's different..." The contracts had made sense back when the immediate short-term was more important than anything else, but now that the Plantin Company was guaranteed a role in the archduke's expanding industries, there wasn't much use for them at all.

"But that's not true for her. Barely any time has passed since she woke up from her two-year slumber, and she hasn't yet had an opportunity to see anyone from her family," Benno explained. "Her losing one more tiny connection to the lower city runs the risk of making her as emotionally unstable as she was before." He was alluding to their first meeting after Rozemyne had woken up, when she had mentioned being unable to cry no matter how much she wanted to and then immediately burst into tears.

Rozemyne was living all alone in noble society as the archduke's daughter—who knew what might destabilize her? Just discussing business with archnobles was enough to exhaust Benno; it was impossible to say how much greater of a burden she was enduring.

Back when Myne was an apprentice blue shrine maiden, she had called Lutz and Tuuli over to the temple on a regular basis when she was stuck there over the winter. Those were ancient memories to Lutz, since he was a kid and that was years ago, but to Benno, it had happened just recently.

"You should know better than anyone that no matter how calm Rozemyne looks, she's not necessarily calm on the inside," Benno said. Myne had given Lutz consoling smiles even when enduring the tremendous pain of the Devouring. Benno's childhood sweetheart from when he was thirteen had also endured it, and the way she had screamed when the heat welled up out of nowhere stuck with him to this day. His brows knitted as he thought back to that girl, the love of his life whom he had failed to save. "You may not have seen it, Lutz, but her hands were shaking when she brought up nullifying the

contracts. Don't let her noble facade fool you."

Lutz swallowed hard, his expression twisting into a grimace. He was frustrated at himself for not having paid enough attention to Rozemyne.

"Lutz, stay on track here. Our job doesn't change whether those contracts are there or not—we've still got our eyes on the same prize. And given how hard it is for Rozemyne to meet with her family, you're the only one who can keep her calm. If at any point she gets unstable, you can let her cry on you until she's satisfied and reassure her that nothing's changed, as you've done before."

It was then that Lutz's eyes finally stopped wavering. He faced forward, slapped himself on the cheeks, and nodded. "Yes, Master Benno."

That should do it, Benno thought, letting out a relieved sigh at Lutz having calmed down. *So long as Lutz stays strong, Rozemyne'll manage somehow.*

"Master Benno, I have brought the tea," Mark said, stepping into the room as though he had been waiting for the exact moment the conversation came to a close. He glanced at Lutz and then nodded. "If you have finished your discussion, shall we move to the living room? It is much warmer there."

Benno paused for a moment. "Nah, it's easier to work here where there's more paperwork. I'll start gathering input on the lower city infrastructure improvements Rozemyne was talking about."

"You will need additional documents for when you go to the castle to explain things to the archduke, correct?" Lutz asked, immediately picking up his boards and some ink with a confident smile. Benno grinned right back at him. They might not have been able to go out into the snow, but there was still plenty for them to do. There was no time to mope.

"It is nice to see you both so motivated, but I did just prepare tea," Mark noted. "Might I suggest you begin drinking?" His intimidating smile strongly encouraged them not to let the drinks go to waste.

Benno and Lutz exchanged glances before hurriedly picking up their teacups.



Honest Courting

The girl sitting before me lowered her gaze, her long eyelashes casting small shadows across her face. Her soft lips parted slightly as she sipped from her teacup.

Aah. Eglantine is as beautiful as ever.

I had initially learned about her when we were both young. My father, the fifth prince, had been deemed irrelevant to the civil war and subsequently ignored, but he was ultimately convinced to join the battle by the previous Aub Klassenberg. Eglantine's entire family had succumbed to poison in the midst of the conflict, and Eglantine herself survived only because she had yet to be baptized and could therefore still eat in the room for children. She was then swiftly taken in by the Klassenbergs, her maternal relatives.

It was through these experiences that Eglantine became the tragic princess, who had lost her family and royal status in the civil war.

When I first saw Eglantine in the Royal Academy, she was already dazzling beyond her ten years, but beauty was not all she had: her grades surpassed even my own as a member of royalty, and she possessed a gentle character which earned respect from her retainers and even those of the lower-ranked duchies. She was already expected to one day surpass my father in terms of mana quantity and number of elements, since she was the daughter of the late third prince, but she had most likely already achieved this at ten years of age.

My father heeded Klassenberg's plea that Eglantine wished to return to royalty, and so he gave her a choice: she could marry my brother or she could marry me, and the person she chose would become the next king. It was then that I desired the throne for the first time.

...And that was because I desired *her*.

I watched the slight movement in Eglantine's throat as she swallowed a sip of tea. She then quietly set down her cup and withdrew her hand, her fingertips

the color of ripened prunbeers moving with such grace that they practically danced through the air. I stared at the arcs they made so closely that I almost burned the sight into my eyes; it was the duty of royalty to carefully observe the poison-testing process, and that was the justification I was going with.

Eglantine noticed my gaze, at which point her bright orange eyes crinkled into a gentle smile. “Prince Anastasius, please do eat to your heart’s content,” she said.

I picked up my own teacup and took a sip myself, as proper etiquette dictated, but I was agonizing the entire time. How was I going to put them into words? I needed to express my feelings to her directly, yet it was proving to be a greater challenge than I ever could have imagined. My fingers tightened around the handle of my cup, causing small ripples to spread across the liquid within. A groan built up within my throat without my knowing.

Will a straightforward expression of my love not become an order...?

Firm words from royalty became an order—this was a fact drilled into me since birth, and so I had followed proper courting etiquette and only expressed my feelings to Eglantine through others. My older brother, the first prince, was sending her letters and gifts as well, but he had never courted her in person.

However, my brother has no feelings for Eglantine. He wishes to marry her only to acquire the throne.

Sigiswald already had a wife from a middle duchy, one who was planned to become his second wife once he married a woman from a greater duchy. The moment that thought crossed my mind, I heard Rozemyne’s voice echoing through my mind: *“Lady Eglantine indicated that both you and your brother are proposing to her for political reasons.”*

To think she assumed this entire time that I too was only after the throne...

I could not help but sigh. My brother already had a wife, and I would not stand him marrying Eglantine so frivolously. I wanted to make this beautiful woman happy with my own two hands, and it was for this reason alone that I sought the throne, even knowing it would make an enemy out of my brother.

“Please excuse my rudeness, Prince Anastasius, but did you not mention

having something important to discuss?" Eglantine asked, tilting her head with a confused expression. It seemed that I had contemplatively stared into my tea for much too long.

I quickly set down my cup and partook in the prepared sweets. The sugary lumps fell apart in my mouth. Sweets of this nature were commonly served in the Sovereignty, but perhaps due to my having eaten Ehrenfest sweets recently, they tasted far sweeter than usual.

What am I to do...?

Even when facing Eglantine alone, I could not speak my feelings so abruptly. I almost reached for the sound-blocking magic tools in my pockets, but I ultimately paused. It was much too early. My mind raced for something to open with, but all that came to mind were Rozemyne's harsh words.

"You had a tea party with Rozemyne, did you not?" I finally asked.

"Oh my. Has Lady Rozemyne said something?" Eglantine asked. Her smile deepened, but I was watching her carefully enough to notice her cheeks tense up ever so slightly. Had they discussed something she did not want me to hear? Or had Rozemyne been so rude to her that she found the memory appalling?

They best not have amused themselves by speaking ill of me.

Rozemyne's evil, poisonous smile flashed through my mind. I envisioned myself dropping a fist on her skull in an attempt to calm down, then composed myself with a light cough. "So, what do you think of Ehrenfest? They certainly have introduced many strange products this year. How do they seem to those from Klassenberg the First? As royalty, I also thought it important to find out what the professors think about her."

This wasn't a complete lie—Ehrenfest was producing a continuous stream of unique products, from new sweets, to hair ornaments, to some kind of medicine that made one's hair glossy. A middle duchy that had once struggled to maintain its already low rank had all of a sudden become a presence that was impossible to ignore. There were no doubt problems I could prevent simply by knowing what the other duchies thought about this, and memories of the kerfuffle with Dunkelfelger were still fresh in my mind. I was also receiving many requests from students wishing to become the new master of the

library's magic tools, though I was refusing them all.

"Well," Eglantine began, "I suppose it has gone from being a middle duchy that ascended the rankings purely through its neutrality in the civil war to a duchy that has finally begun to develop enough strength to justify its rank."

I nodded, though I did not quite agree. "Are you not overestimating them? The past has shown that no matter how skilled or excellent an individual from Ehrenfest may be, they do not bring the entire duchy to that height. Their brilliance ends with them, and their influence remains soundly on an individual level. Do you have any proof that Rozemyne is not the same?"

It was not uncommon for geniuses specializing in a particular interest to appear in Ehrenfest. There was Hirschur, for example, who was so devoted to research that even Professor Gundolf could make neither head nor tail of, and Christine, whose skill with the harspiel made an eternal impression on all those who heard her play. As of yet, however, their influence had not spread enough to be advantageous to the entire duchy.

"It seems to me that the entire duchy is being influenced this time," Eglantine replied. "All the Ehrenfest girls at the advancement ceremony had used rinsham, and the new music is known to all the students after only a number of years. I am told that students of all grades can play these new songs. Furthermore, the younger students have shown great improvement in their written lessons."

"Did that not begin three or so years ago?" I asked. Rozemyne might not have even been baptized at that point, and she had slept for two years since. Surely the improvements in their grades were not her accomplishment.

"This year, Ehrenfest students of all grades have made much progress. The specifics remain unknown, but it seems to be the result of some system that Lady Rozemyne established. In a rare break of trend, Ehrenfest is clearly planning to publicize her developments and use them to benefit the entire duchy. I am quite sure Ehrenfest will see much growth while she is here."

"I see. And their other archduke candidate?" I asked, changing the topic of conversation. It did not entirely please me to see Eglantine praising Rozemyne so highly.

“Professor Primevere has described Lord Wilfried as quite talented also. He passed court etiquette in a single attempt and is skilled at controlling his mana. However, he was frequently seen asking Lady Rozemyne for advice. Plus, while his written grades are respectable compared to other students, they are quite average for an archduke candidate.”

“I see. Advice during class, hm...?”

Rozemyne had been adopted into the archducal family, and the bad habit she had shown in thoughtlessly giving me valuable information perhaps resulted from her doing the same for the archduke’s blood-related son. They were supposed to be competing for the position of aub as fellow candidates, but it was highly likely she had been instructed to raise and support her rival instead.

Far be it from me to waste her valuable advice then...

I inhaled deeply and then took out the sound-blocking magic tools. The moment I held one out to Eglantine, she shot a brief, worried glance to her attendants.

“Better this than clearing the room of your retainers, no?” I asked.

Eglantine nodded in agreement before taking the magic tool. This was far from the first time she had tried to avoid spending any time alone with me, but it hurt my heart all the same. I tightened my grip on the tool.

“When you spoke with Rozemyne, you said that you would pick neither me nor my brother. Is that correct?”

Eglantine paused. “It seems I have spoken too freely. Perhaps I was charmed by Lady Rozemyne’s adorable visage? Please forget what she told you,” she eventually said with a troubled smile, hoping to end the discussion there. But this was not something I could simply ignore.

“Rozemyne informed me of your choice. You will obey an order to marry one of us but not make a decision of your own. She said that you wish only for peace, and not to return to royalty.”

“Do forgive me. I do not know what overcame me, to speak such words. Prince Anastasius, truly, please do forget what she said,” Eglantine repeated desperately, her eyes growing faintly damp with tears. The sight was cute

beyond words, but I would not be swayed; if my spirit was not strong enough to see this through, I would never have tolerated Rozemyne's unfathomably harsh and crude advice.

"Forgive me. I wish to grant your every request, but this is not something I can ignore. I want to know your true feelings," I said, looking at her directly.

A clouded, defeated expression arose on her face. I could not tell whether it was her relenting to voice her request or her despairing that no matter what she said, her wish would not come true.

"Up until recently, I was aware only that you wished to return to royalty, and it has been my desire to make your wish a reality. The man you choose will in turn become king. To take your hand in marriage, I must rule. That is the only reason I have ever wanted the throne. But now I am told that your true wish is for peace."

Eglantine's smile became more intense, her eyes pleading with me to dig no further, but standing down now would not bring about any change. I gripped the sound-blocking tool with both hands and gazed at her more intently than before, hoping for even a fraction more of my feelings to be conveyed to her.

"My purpose is not to grant the previous Aub Klassenberg's wish—it is to grant *your* wish," I explained. "And while it is frustrating that Rozemyne was the one to point this out to me, in order to accomplish this, I want to hear your thoughts directly. I want to hear what you wish for in person, with no intermediary. And then, I want you to know my wish. Just as you do not wish to be royalty, I do not care about becoming the next king. Sigiswald seeks the throne, and if your hand in marriage was not hanging in the balance, I would willingly let him take it."

Eglantine attempted to hide behind her usual smile, but her lips were noticeably trembling. For years I had seen only her polite facade, a wall of diplomacy that firmly separated us, and that knowledge had pained me deeply. But now I was finally seeing an ounce of true emotion from her, and I couldn't help but feel glad at that fact.

Perhaps it would be safe to say that a fraction of my feelings have reached her.

I could feel the blood coursing through my body like scorching fire. My face was hot, and my ears were ringing. It was beyond me to dress my words in poetic whispers of my love; the best I could do was say my thoughts directly. From the perspective of royalty, I was no doubt disgracing myself.

“I yearn for nothing but you,” I said. “I want you to pick me; not my brother, and not anyone else. I want you to be my Goddess of Light and mine alone. This is not an order, of course, but my true wish.”

I steadied my breathing and watched Eglantine carefully. Our eyes met only for the briefest moment before she averted her gaze. Even now that I was following Rozemyne’s suggestion and speaking my thoughts to her in person, it appeared she could not accept my feelings.

My grip on the magic tool slackened as a wave of disappointment washed over me, but then Eglantine finally spoke. “I am shocked that you would speak so directly,” she whispered to herself, and my grip tightened once again as I strained to hear every word.

“Was that too direct of me? To tell the truth, I am following Rozemyne’s advice. She said that the political struggle has placed walls between us that twist our intentions. She suspected that we were not at all conveying our true goals to one another.”

“She did...?” Eglantine asked. Her cheeks were flushed a bashful red so charming that it made my heart pound in my chest. This was my first time seeing such a reaction from her. Could it be that Rozemyne’s advice was actually working?

“Yes. She casually told me that, since I understood your intentions so poorly, I would need to start again from the beginning and ask you about them directly. Could you imagine anyone more rude?” I asked, allowing a grin to play on my lips as I attempted to lighten the mood.

Eglantine’s bright orange eyes widened. “I never would have expected you of all people to heed such blunt words, Prince Anastasius.”

“Much of her advice was irritating to hear, but if she spoke truly, I was indeed putting you through suffering due to my own ignorance of your intentions. At the very least, I wanted you to know that my objective is not and will never be

the throne.”

“I certainly do understand that now...” Eglantine said, lowering her eyes. I could feel the smile on my face broaden now that I understood this as her expression of shyness.

“Hm... If Rozemyne’s advice regarding this matter was correct, perhaps I should pay attention to her other advice as well.”

“You mean to say Lady Rozemyne said even more to you...? I’m not sure if my heart can take much more...” Eglantine murmured with a small, pouty glare. It was so endearing that my heart practically leapt with joy. I reveled in the moment for a short while before recalling Rozemyne’s other advice.

“It was all unbelievably rude advice that no other would ever dare speak to royalty. Would you care to hear it?”

“Absolutely.” Eglantine was now wearing her polite smile once more, but I could still sense the slight sulkiness to her expression. It was a pleasing development, and one that inspired me to start with the most shocking of all Rozemyne’s advice.

“To begin with, she said that I should practice my whirling more seriously if my desire is to suit you. It seems I am noticeably worse when we whirl together.”

Eglantine blinked at me in utter disbelief, though her stunned silence did not last long. “Ah... Did Lady Rozemyne truly say that to you?” she asked.

“Yes. She had my permission to speak freely, but even so I was taken aback by the impertinence of her remarks. She criticized the way I compliment you; told me to practice harspiel more, since you are so dedicated to the arts; and more.”

As I listed them off one by one, Eglantine’s smile froze. Her shock was understandable; it was unthinkable for an archduke candidate from the thirteenth-ranked duchy to speak so brazenly to a member of royalty.

“Rozemyne held nothing back and then abruptly fainted,” I explained. “She had said that she was feeling ill, but I would never have thought that she might pass out so suddenly. It came as enough of a surprise to me, but I cannot even remember the last time I saw Oswin look quite so traumatized.”

Eglantine had shown such a variety of new emotions as she listened to me speak that I carelessly went ahead and mentioned Rozemyne collapsing. In an instant, her expression changed.

“Prince Anastasius, you summoned Lady Rozemyne when she was in poor health? Goodness, that must have been terrible for her. Have you at least expressed your sympathy?”

“Me? I am willing to excuse her passing out, but as for her blunder... Is it not normal for her to first request my forgiveness?”

To pass out in a meeting with royalty was an unthinkable disgrace. Rozemyne would need to request a meeting to plead for my forgiveness, and I would generously do just that. The suggestion that I should send a letter to express my sympathy while she was sick made little sense, though had it been Eglantine in her place, I would not have wasted any time in rushing to her side.

“Under normal circumstances, yes, but the request has not yet arrived, I presume? That is evidence that Rozemyne has not yet recovered. Aub Ehrenfest must be hysterical. Please send words of sympathy not just for Lady Rozemyne, but for her entire duchy.”

“I see... I was aware that duchies generally do not interfere with Academy affairs, but I had not realized that they receive reports so frequently.”

I was unsure what information was usually passed between dorms and their duchies, but Aub Ehrenfest would certainly be in a panic to have learned that his child was called before royalty, fainted, and was now so bedridden that she could not even apologize. I had nothing but sympathy for Aub Ehrenfest, who was unable to do a thing as he read about Rozemyne collapsing in the Farthest Hall, becoming the master of the library’s magic tools, and taking on Dunkelfelger in a game of ditter.

Still, it would not be wise to send words of sympathy to Rozemyne.

There was no need to break custom for this; a poor movement on my part would result in the public assuming that Rozemyne was now in my favor. I did not wish to send words of sympathy when nobody would understand that I was doing it only at Eglantine’s request.

“Eglantine, I cannot produce such a letter so freely. If you would write it with me and assist with the phrasing, however... I will send it to Ehrenfest.”

“...If you insist,” Eglantine conceded, agreeing to compose a sympathetic letter through which I would apologize. I noticed that her smile had softened, and so I reached out a hand to her. It felt as though she might now accept it.

“Eglantine, would you care to accompany me to a gazebo later to discuss this further? I will need both Aub Klassenberg and his predecessor on our side if we are to make your dream come true, no?”

“I do not believe convincing my uncle and grandfather is going to be quite so easy,” she replied. It wasn’t a clear answer, but it was the first time she hadn’t explicitly refused my invitation to the gazebos, which were well-known gathering spots for couples and lovers. In an instant, I was invincible. Formal political negotiations with an aub and a former aub were nothing compared to speaking my feelings honestly to Eglantine.

How shall I convince them? I do not have much time, but this is a challenge worth pursuing.

Life without One's Lady

"Lady Rozemyne truly did leave for the temple in no time at all..." I said mostly to myself once she had departed via highbeast. I really had not expected that she would disappear after spending only one day in the castle. Cornelius and Rihyarda turned to me, nodding in agreement with wry smiles, while Norbert and several of the attendants working for the castle swiftly used magic tools to melt the snow that had blown inside and dry the area.

"Now," Rihyarda began, "let us return to the northern building. We must think about our next steps. I am taking some time off so that I may briefly return home, but what about the rest of you? Did you contact your families last night?"

I personally hadn't made any plans, having simply confirmed that I was available for guard duty for as long as Lady Rozemyne was in Ehrenfest.

"No point staying in the castle with nobody to guard. What're you gonna do, Leonore?" Cornelius asked, looking my way. He and I had returned from the Royal Academy with Lady Rozemyne with the intention of guarding her while she was in the castle. As we were underage, we could not accompany her to the temple; that duty was left to Damuel and Angelica. "I'm thinking about asking Father about how knights should coordinate in fights. The Order should be in the middle of planning for the Lord of Winter hunt right now. I can imagine just standing nearby and listening in is going to be very worthwhile."

It made me happy that Cornelius was taking the results of the treasure-stealing ditter match so seriously. There were more than a few apprentice knights who still couldn't understand the importance of coordination or how inferior we were to Dunkelfelger's knights no matter how many times I tried to explain it.

"Leonore, will you be heading back to the Royal Academy? I remember you saying how hurrying through your lessons for Rozemyne's sake hadn't given you any time to spend with your friends, and that there's a lot you want to research

in the library, right? You've also got to keep in mind how much of a pain it'll be if your family gets a hold of you this winter. If you want, I can send word once Rozemyne finishes the Dedication Ritual, so you can just hurry back when we need you."

Cornelius was certainly right; all of my family were dying to know more about Lady Rozemyne, so returning home right now would only see me endure an endless barrage of questions. Without any guard work to do, I would inevitably be stuck talking to my uncle and everyone all winter.

"True..." I replied. "I would much rather retreat to the Royal Academy than endure my father and everyone else's questioning. Will you be fine here alone, Cornelius?"

"Should be. There's a lot I need to write up reports on," Cornelius replied with a shrug. As Rozemyne's older brother by blood, he was evidently used to this kind of thing. He was clearly on good terms with her, and I had seen him instructing the other retainers in the dorm, so I knew I could trust him to notify my family of my return to the academy.

"Then it's settled—Cornelius stays, while Leonore goes back to the Academy tomorrow," Rihyarda said. "I will tell Lord Sylvester to send word to the teleporter in advance. As for me, I need to gather my house for a family meeting. Traugott is truly giving me a headache..."

Once we returned to the room for retainers in Lady Rozemyne's chambers, Rihyarda left the rest to Ottilie as she hurriedly left to prepare for her family meeting. The speed at which she moved made me blink in surprise, and I only came back to reality when Ottilie finished preparing tea for us.

"Rihyarda may be reliable like no one else, but she accompanied a student to the Royal Academy at her advanced age and needs to clean up the terrible mess her grandson made. Her hands truly were full," Ottilie said, having apparently heard of what Traugott had done at the Academy.

Lady Rozemyne had pushed Traugott to resign for her own reasons, but his insubordination was severe enough that he could easily have been fired on the spot. The disrespect he showed toward her was especially infuriating to those of us who genuinely served as her retainers, and it besmirched the archducal

family's good name. Rihyarda was fully in the right for having exploded at him for not having the proper mindset of a servant.

Cornelius nodded. "Traugott is of archduke blood and does not have much to do with us Leisegangs, so unlike you and me, he must not be happy at all about Rozemyne's status."

Traugott was Lord Bonifatius's grandson, but only through his second wife, who hadn't been a Leisegang noble. Maybe due to that, Traugott had seen Cornelius as a rival ever since they were young. It was apparently a pain having to deal with his constant antagonisms.

"Still, that's not a good excuse to look down on the person you're serving. He always complained to people about Rozemyne, and to be honest, I'm glad he's not her retainer anymore," Cornelius said.

"It was wretched enough that Rihyarda, his own grandmother, demanded that he be fired," Ottilie noted with a sigh. "I did not see the incident firsthand, but he must have truly been acting terribly." She then gave both Cornelius and me a look of genuine concern. "How has Hartmut been, might I ask? He is smitten with Lady Rozemyne and can lose control a bit sometimes, no? I have not heard from him since I received an enthusiastic letter saying that he was picked to serve as one of her retainers. I am truly worried that he might earn Lady Rozemyne's disfavor in an entirely different fashion than Traugott."

Cornelius and I reflexively exchanged looks. As Leisegang nobles, we too were worried about Hartmut's nonsense.

"It seems that Lady Rozemyne is a bit taken aback by Hartmut's enthusiasm, but she did chastise him for how he handled information during the Traugott incident, and he seems to have learned from his mistake," I said. "I do not believe he will lose control in a way that displeases Lady Rozemyne."

Ottilie paused in thought for a moment before furrowing her brow. "But he will still work in the shadows to further his own ends, do you not think?" she asked, having found no reassurance in my words. As his mother, she knew Hartmut well; anyone else would surely have been fooled by his polite smile and attitude. "Leonore, I do apologize for this, but could you keep an eye on him when you return to the Royal Academy?"

“Yeah,” Cornelius agreed. “He won’t stop talking about how Rozemyne is best suited to become the next aub. He hasn’t given up on her taking the position at all.”

Having both Ottilie and Cornelius request my help with such serious expressions made me a little worried. It was certainly true that someone needed to keep an eye on him. With Cornelius and me here at the castle, Brunhilde was the only retainer of a high enough status to restrain him, but she could not be trusted with such a duty. Given how many trends and inventions Lady Rozemyne had introduced thus far, she too believed that Ehrenfest would progress the most under her rule.

“Okay. I will remind Hartmut not to work in the shadows and oppose Lady Rozemyne’s will while she and you are gone, Cornelius.”

“Thanks. I’m glad she took you on as a retainer, Leonore,” he said with a grin.

I could feel a smile touch my own lips as well. I had accepted this position not just because my father had said doing so was my duty as a Leisegang noble, but also because I wanted to be closer to Cornelius. It was an indecent motivation to have, but Cornelius had started taking his training and studies very seriously when Lady Rozemyne began her long sleep. He had gone from doing only the bare minimum expected of an archnoble to working harder than anyone, and I was struck with the overwhelming desire to watch over his efforts forever.

“We don’t have any guard work to do while Rozemyne’s away, so this is the perfect chance to train up the apprentices who don’t know how to cooperate,” Cornelius said. “You saw how they worked from afar, and you know how to put what we learned in class into practice now. Could you train them in preparation for the Interduchy Tournament?”

Cornelius was pinning his hopes on me, which made me want to work even harder. Maybe half of the analysis of the treasure-stealing ditter game had actually come from Lady Rozemyne. She was only a first-year archduke candidate, but she had seen right through the enemy’s techniques and set up plans to beat them. I needed to do even better as a fourth-year actually taking the knight course.

“You can count on me. I think I will follow Lord Ferdinand’s ditter manual and

start by grasping the apprentices' individual strengths."

Cornelius and I spent the day discussing the training for the apprentice knights, and the next morning I returned to the Royal Academy.

"Oh my. Leonore. What happened at the castle for you to return so early?" Brunhilde asked, coming out from the common room. She gave me a composed smile, but she seemed clearly displeased about something.

"Lady Rozemyne left for the temple right away, so Cornelius suggested that I stay in the Royal Academy until the Dedication Ritual is over," I replied, turning my gaze to Hartmut as he came out as well. He shrugged; something had apparently happened in the common room.

"Brunhilde, Hartmut. Do you have a moment? There is something I want to discuss," I said, pointing at my eyes.

Brunhilde took a deep breath before giving a smile that lacked any of the displeasure that had been on her face a moment ago. "Why, of course."

Hartmut gestured to the side, and together we started walking toward the meeting rooms. As soon as the door shut behind us, Brunhilde narrowed her eyes, her eyebrows trembling in frustration.

"Absolutely infuriating!" she exclaimed.

As it turned out, she was mad at none other than Lord Wilfried. In an example of truly unfortunate timing, on the day Lady Rozemyne had departed for the castle, a letter had arrived from Dunkelfelger's Lady Hannelore. It was an invitation to a tea party, in which she explained that she was hoping to use the opportunity to foster new connections.

"Well, Lady Rozemyne is no longer here. I assume you refused, of course? I know she is an archduke candidate, but we have no other choice. They didn't challenge you to ditter when you sent our response, did they?"

"No, nothing like that," Hartmut said with a grin and a dismissive hand wave. "It was addressed to all our archduke candidates, not just Lady Rozemyne, so Lord Wilfried does not have a choice but to attend. The problem is that he went to Brunhilde." He looked toward Brunhilde, whose normally amber eyes were a little brighter than usual due to her wrath.

“He said this should have been a tea party for Lady Rozemyne, and that he was therefore entrusting us with making the preparations for him. Can you believe the gall?! I am not his servant!”

Proper procedure would have been for Lord Wilfried to consult Lady Rozemyne via letter, and for her to subsequently instruct us to help him. The fact he had completely disregarded this and given us a direct order was unforgivable to Brunhilde.

“Please do calm down, Brunhilde. Recall that Lady Rozemyne did indeed instruct us to assist Lord Wilfried in her absence,” I said.

“This goes far beyond mere assistance. Lord Wilfried says that his retainers do not have time for this because they have not yet finished their classes. I say clearing their schedules is their responsibility! Do you not agree?!”

Brunhilde was completely in the right here. Our instruction was to work with Lord Wilfried’s attendants, not to obey whatever orders we received and to do everything ourselves. Not to mention, it was hard to imagine his attendants simply not having time for this. We had arranged our class schedules around Lady Rozemyne’s library visits, so this was equivalent to them admitting they were useless and incompetent. But perhaps they were fine with that?

“Can you imagine how arrogant one must be to prioritize their retainers’ schedules over everything else, and to give orders to the retainers of another and expect them to obey? That reminds me so much of the way Lady Veronica acted when I greeted her following my debut that I feel sick with disgust,” Brunhilde said with palpable frustration.

I did not know what had happened following Brunhilde’s debut, but I did recall both her and her father, Giebe Groschel, being exceedingly displeased. My own father had even said “I wonder how long this can keep going on” with a defeated, dry smile.

“He must know how much Lady Veronica antagonized and abused the Leisegang nobles, but he’s still acting exactly as he used to. Maybe he thinks he can keep ordering us around even now that Lady Veronica has been removed. He must not want to accept that things are no longer as they once were,” Hartmut said with a dismissive scoff.

Albeit not equally, as Leisegangs, the three of us had all suffered from Lady Veronica's abuse. The fact that Lord Wilfried had been raised under her care meant we hadn't had a good impression of him from the start.

"Perhaps Lord Wilfried looks down upon Leisegang nobles due to his upbringing. I understand we should ideally recognize them as completely separate individuals, but they are simply too alike. Their hair and eyes, of course, but even their speech and actions..." I commented.

Brunhilde and Hartmut nodded. Back when the balance of power had shifted, Lord Wilfried immediately broke away from the former Veronica faction and started treating them how he had used to treat Leisegang nobles in the past. It was necessary to warn them not to approach Lady Rozemyne, but still, it did not feel particularly pleasant to see the archduke's son shut out those who had once supported him. How could one who did not respect his own faction respect nobles of another? I could not help but compare him to Lady Rozemyne, who treated all factions equally even after having been attacked and put to sleep for two years.

Had Lady Rozemyne started treating members of the former Veronica faction with more disdain once she awoke, I would simply have considered her an average noble, but she had fairly appraised the work done by Roderick and the others. She maintained her position even in the face of complaints from Lord Wilfried, which had earned her my respect and resulted in me considering her worthy of my service.

"I get why you're mad, Brunhilde, but we don't need to think of this as following orders from Lord Wilfried," Hartmut said. "We need only use him for our own purposes. There's nothing wrong with promoting our trending products at a tea party between archduke candidates held in Lady Rozemyne's absence. Know what I mean?"

"Yes, yes. I know. I would never slack on my duties out of mere frustration. As Lady Rozemyne's retainer, I will do my job with splendor and aplomb," Brunhilde said, her chest puffed out as though she had completely turned her anger into motivation. She had all the dignity of one raised to succeed Giebe Groschel.

“Not to mention, this tea party is the perfect opportunity to give Lieseleta and Philine some practice. I want them both to get as much experience as possible before Lady Rozemyne’s tea parties. Failing her is unforgivable, but failing Lord Wilfried is merely a source of amusement.”

It was a very Hartmut thing to say, but no matter how irritating Lord Wilfried might have been, he was still an archduke candidate.

Brunhilde scrunched up her face. “I would not put it that way myself... but I do agree, generally speaking. Ehrenfest has not had much opportunity to have tea parties with higher-ranking duchies. Considering that Lady Rozemyne has developed a personal relationship with royalty in a matter of weeks, we will need more practice ourselves.”

Would a tea party with a high-ranking duchy truly serve as good practice...? It was hard not to imagine Philine, a laynoble, becoming teary-eyed with fear and anxiety. Given that she was Lady Rozemyne’s retainer, however, she had no choice but to grow used to it.

“Still, though... A tea party with Dunkelfelger, hm? To think we would receive an invitation from the same duchy that ganged up with other duchies to ambush us on the day we took Schwartz and Weiss from the library,” I murmured with concern. Hartmut instantly shook his head.

“Actually, I looked into this,” Hartmut said. “Turns out that Dunkelfelger has nothing but high praise for the young-looking Ehrenfest archduke candidate who dominated their knights with clever plans. Lady Hannelore, Lord Lestilaut’s little sister, actually wants to apologize for her brother’s rude behavior.”

“I suppose that must be the case if you are saying it with such confidence.”

I still remembered how Hartmut had endlessly needled Cornelius during Lady Rozemyne’s long sleep about the kidnapping being her guard knights’ fault; it was hard to imagine him allowing her to be put in any danger whatsoever. He had certainly thoroughly investigated Dunkelfelger before even thinking about letting this happen.

“I imagine she sent the invitation addressed to all candidates because she has not yet met Lady Rozemyne herself, but... Wait, is Lady Hannelore not a first-year archduke candidate? Surely they would have met each other in class by

now," Brunhilde said.

"Recall that Lady Rozemyne has for the most part only ever spoken about her professors, rarely her classmates," I said. "She was surely so focused on passing that she did not socialize with the other duchies whatsoever."

Brunhilde and I exchanged glances. Lady Rozemyne was skilled in many areas, but she was exceedingly particular in where she drew her motivation from. Perhaps it would be wise to warn her of the potential fallout. It was highly important to deepen one's bonds in the Royal Academy; in particular, it was essential that female archduke candidates search for marriage partners and form diplomatic relationships that would prove useful even after they wed into other duchies.

"Lady Rozemyne was simply unwell this term. Next year, she will surely—"

"Brunhilde, denying reality will change nothing. There is no future in which Lady Rozemyne does not attempt to hide away in the library next year as well. It is better to lose hope now than to cling to it for much longer than is reasonable," I said with a small smile. Forcing Lady Rozemyne to leave her books to socialize was no doubt going to be one of our most significant duties as her retainers.

Following my return, life at the Royal Academy was not completely smooth. Despite Lady Rozemyne's absence, nobles from other duchies were continually requesting information on hairpins and rinsham. While it was perfectly acceptable for us to refuse these, Lord Wilfried was obstinately accepting them all and forcing Brunhilde to handle the necessary preparations, saying that "We cannot refuse invitations from higher-ranking duchies."

To make matters worse, even with Brunhilde doing all the work, Lord Wilfried would often complain about how exhausting it was to attend tea parties with so many women. Her wrath was nearing boiling point, and Oswald was casually ignoring her politely worded protests. Rihyarda would absolutely have scolded him for his incompetence had she been here, but at the moment, he was the highest in status among all adult attendants staying in the Ehrenfest Dormitory.

I continued to listen to Brunhilde's complaining on the side as I started

training the apprentice knights in preparation for the upcoming Interduchy Tournament, as agreed with Cornelius. I glanced over the ditter manual we had received from Lord Ferdinand and decided to begin by gathering information on Ehrenfest's apprentice knights. It was important to know in great detail their strengths, weaknesses, how much stamina they had, and their mana capacities, since ditter involved a set number of players.

"Leonore, how long are you going to make us run?!" Traugott exclaimed.

"Did I not say until you run out of stamina? You still seem to have some left in you, Traugott. Your stamina is splendid."

"Leonore, I can't take much more! My mana is drying up!"

"Alexis, you have enough mana for two more shots, no? Your accuracy always plummets when you are mana-deprived, and this is something I want you to work on."

I had the apprentices train until they reached their limits and then recorded my findings. Plant paper was thin enough that I could stack several sheets on top of each other, which made this work much easier to complete. I gave them my silent praise; trying to record all this information on wooden boards would have required a disastrous mountain of wood.

Dare I say it, but I have gathered some excellent information here.

The bulk of the apprentices were sprawled out on the hills of the training grounds like fish on a riverside, their dead stillness aside from the occasional twitch making the comparison even more appropriate. They were fine, though; the rejuvenation potions just needed some time to kick in.

Hopefully we do not run out.

"Leonore, I've finally finished all my classes too! Please let me join in the training!" Judithe cried, rushing onto the grounds with a broad smile. Her hair was as fluffy and as bouncy as ever.

"Hello there, Judithe. You came at the perfect time."

"No, you don't understand! You're still a second-year, aren't you?! Run! RUN WHILE YOU STILL HAVE THE CH—argh!"

“Rudolf, I see you have recovered. Perhaps you should run to the limits of your stamina once again, this time with Judithe observing also?”

“A-Actually, ma’am, I-I’m not recovered yet!”

“Then be silent and say no more. Now, Judithe. Shall we begin?”

“Um... Wh-What...?”

I silenced Rudolf’s attempted interference and firmly gripped Judithe’s cape. She was panicking now that she had finally noticed the knights scattered around like corpses, but it was too late; there was no escape. She had shown excellent accuracy during our game of treasure-stealing ditter earlier. Her participation in the Interduchy Tournament would only begin after she started the knight course next year, but her ranged skills would dramatically expand the range of strategies at our disposal. It was quite the exciting prospect.

“I am so moved that you would ask to participate in training early. Once I have measured your stamina, we can begin to examine your ranged abilities.”

It did not take long before Judithe was sprawled out at my feet in exhaustion like everyone else. It was unbecoming of a noblewoman to lay upon the ground, but nobody here cared to mention that. Everyone was in the same boat.

“I should have listened to Lord Rudolf... Why didn’t I listen? I can’t believe the training in the Royal Academy is so harsh...”

“Oh my. I heard you were training in Kirnberger, but even so, that is some surprising stamina. You have already recovered enough to speak.”

“Not yet! I can’t speak at all! I’m so weak! Aah!” Judithe cried, her voice brimming with vigor as she frantically shook her head with teary eyes. She truly did recover quickly; she was a perfect candidate to become a knight. Perhaps she would receive Lord Bonifatius’s training just as Angelica had, benefiting and suffering all because of the love he held for his granddaughter.

“Once everyone has recovered, we will move on to repeatedly casting attacks of the same strength using the same amount of mana.”

“What will you do in the meantime, Leonore?” Judithe asked.

“I will return to the dormitory while you are resting to bring more

rejuvenation potions. It does not seem we have quite enough."

I exited the training grounds just as the apprentices began to shriek, "Wait, there's going to be more?!" Professor Rauffen was standing by the exit, presumably having been watching for some time.

"Seems like you Ehrenfest lot are putting all you've got into your practice," he said with a laugh. "I thought you might be resting on your laurels all cocky-like after beating us, but it looks like I was wrong. Good, good."

"There are some arrogant apprentices among us, in truth. Lady Rozemyne said during the game of ditter that it would have been better for us to lose in accordance with our weakness, and now I understand why she had said that. If only the others all understood as well," I said, looking back to the training grounds.

Professor Rauffen gave a confused look. "Oh? Lady Rozemyne said that...? Seriously, who in the world is she, really? What kind of archduke candidate acts like that?"

I wondered the same thing. Lady Rozemyne had studied the written lessons of the knight course to tutor Angelica, and Cornelius had mentioned to me that she had read the books on strategizing that the knight commander had in his estate. I also knew she had accompanied the Knight's Order on extermination missions as a temple shrine maiden in the past, which had given her an opportunity to see the adult knights fight properly.

But was that truly enough for her to give such competent orders? I too studied the knight course, yet it had not occurred to me that my written lessons needed to be connected to real-world examples before Lady Rozemyne pointed it out. And even then, I was unable to come up with strategies as unique as hers.

Perhaps I could have deduced their moves in retrospect and come up with counterstrategies, but in the moment, I would simply have fallen for their plots and gone into a panic. I could not fathom how Lady Rozemyne did it. It was not normal.

"In order for Ehrenfest to move on to the next stage of strength, it is necessary for all of our apprentice knights to face their limits."

I was having them train to their limits for the purpose of gathering information, but what truly mattered was learning how much they could do in actual games. I wanted to know roughly what percentage of their strength in practice they could maintain when it really counted. Furthermore, unlike before when we had narrowly won due to Lady Rozemyne's unusual strategies, our next match would make our opponents' superior strength abundantly clear.

"Hm... In other words, you want a rematch?" Rauffen asked, correctly sensing that I wanted Ehrenfest's apprentice knights to fight Dunkelfelger again for their own sake.

"I wish for them to become conscious of their true strength as soon as possible. However, to Dunkelfelger, I suppose a challenge from Ehrenfest without Lady Rozemyne is nothing but a troublesome waste of time?"

"Nah, I'm a professor. I need to do what I can to help my students get stronger. Not to mention, Dunkelfelger's knights want a rematch with Ehrenfest too. This might be a good opportunity to show them just how much of an impact a single tactician can have," he explained. It seemed that even in the powerhouse duchy Dunkelfelger there were some apprentice knights who cared more about individual strength than coordination and strategizing.

"Well, I will be returning to Ehrenfest in three days, so I shall leave the details to you."

"You're planning to push everything on me...? You seem like you could be a pretty good tactician yourself one day."

"It is my hope to learn from the honorable examples set by Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand. There is still much for me to improve upon, but I shall do my best."

Rauffen raised a surprised eyebrow before guffawing in amusement. After that, he took over the basic training for me.

On the day before I departed for Ehrenfest, Lord Wilfried gathered all the apprentice knights in the common room. "Professor Rauffen requested a ditter rematch against Dunkelfelger," he said.

The sudden announcement sent a stir through the apprentice knights. I pretended to be shocked along with them, putting up a hand to request permission to speak.

“Our overall strength is significantly lower with Angelica and Cornelius in Ehrenfest. Furthermore, we have no clever strategies to surprise Dunkelfelger like last time. It is hard to imagine us beating them as we are,” I said.

Lord Wilfried grimaced. “Are you saying I should refuse? This is a request from a greater duchy. Refusing isn’t an option.”

“Naturally, I understand that refusing is not an option, but winning will surely be impossible,” I said, looking over everyone while nodding.

Traugott shot me a defiant glare. “No, Leonore. This is the perfect chance to show our power! We trained so much. We have to be even stronger than before!”

“Not to mention, we’ve already won once,” another apprentice added. “We may lose this time, but at the very least, we’ll put up a good fight!”

All the knights had done was basic training to learn their limits, but that alone was apparently enough to convince them they were now stronger than Dunkelfelger. A single victory had given them undue confidence, as expected. They needed to experience an utter, crushing defeat.

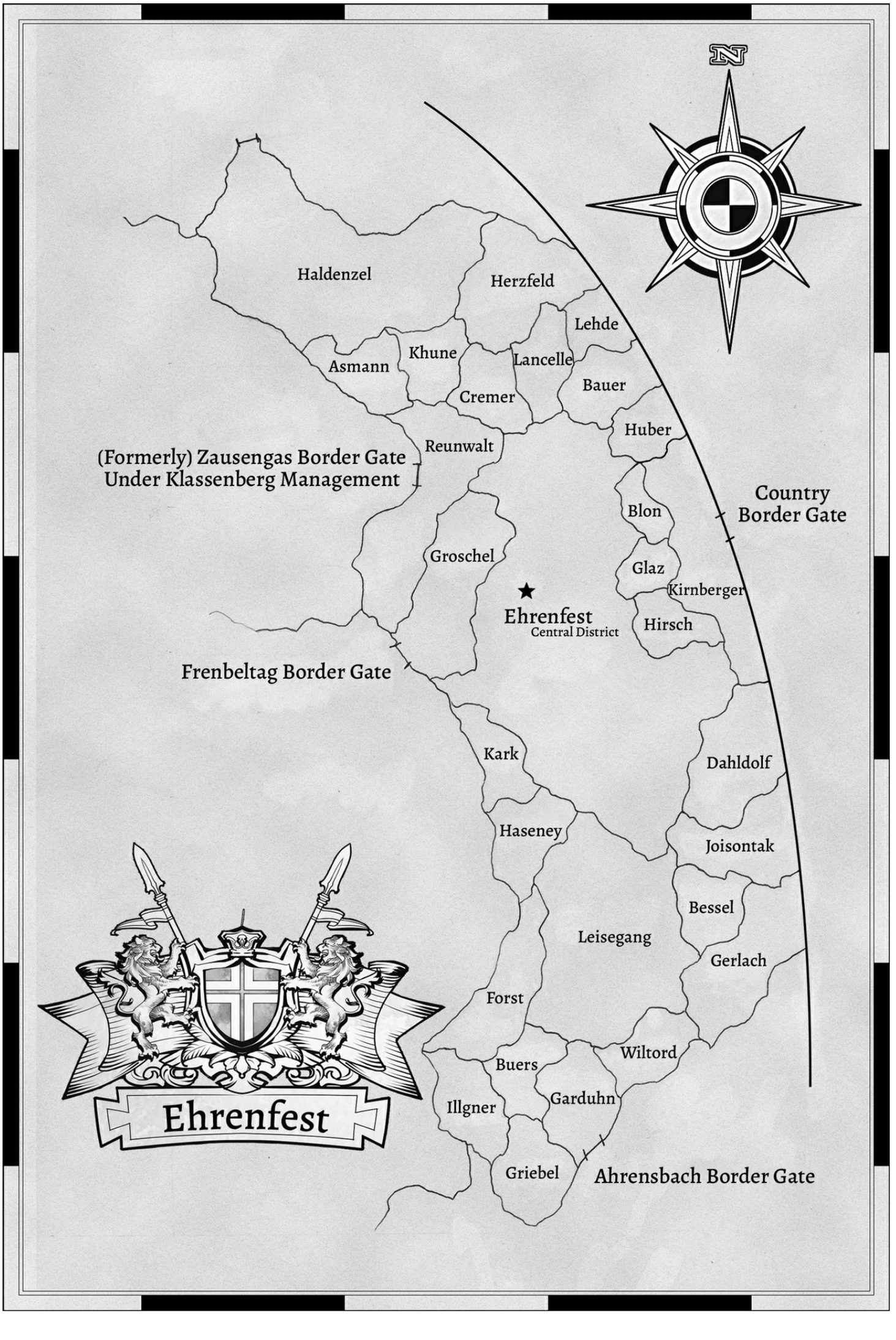
Hearing the motivated words of the apprentice knights, Lord Wilfried gave a satisfied nod. “Leonore, talk things over with Alexis and the others. Then set a date for the match.”

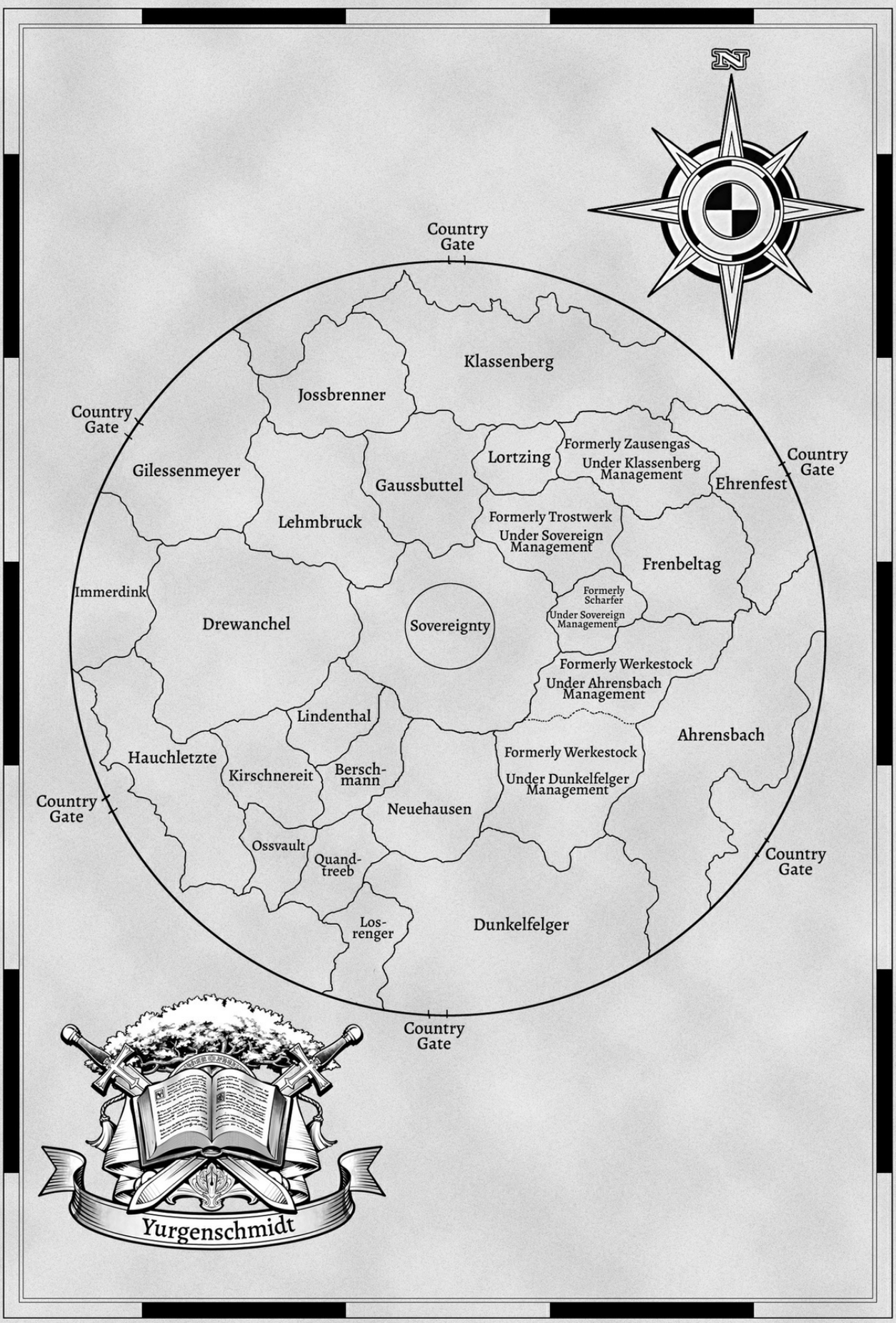
Ah. Now I truly understand Brunhilde’s anger.

It was significantly frustrating to hear Lord Wilfried give me orders as though it were his right, but I swallowed it down and gave him a calm smile. “Unfortunately, I am set to return to Ehrenfest tomorrow. Our previous game ended with Lady Rozemyne’s guard knights playing the key roles, so perhaps this time you can plan things around your guard knights?” My intention was for the game to take place while I was absent so that I wouldn’t have all the tedious work forced onto me à la Brunhilde, so the challenge from Professor Rauffen had come at just the right time.

I will need to take the information I've gathered and plan out training regimens and strategies for the Interduchy Tournament with Cornelius.

With plans in mind for what to do once I returned to Ehrenfest, I stepped onto the teleporter circle.


N
Haldenzel
Herzfeld
Lehde
Khune
Asmann
Lancelle
Bauer
Cremer
Huber
Reunwalt
(Formerly) Zausengas Border Gate
Under Klassenberg Management
Country
Border Gate
Blon
Groschel
Glaz
Kirnberger
Ehrenfest
Central District
Hirsch
Frenbeltag Border Gate
Kark
Dahldolf
Haseney
Joisontak
Bessel
Leisegang
Gerlach
Forst
Wiltord
Buers
Garduhn
Illgner
Griebel
Ahrensbach Border Gate
Ehrenfest


N
Country Gate
Klassenberg
Jossbrenner
Country Gate
Gilessenmeyer
Lortzing
Formerly Zausengas
Under Klassenberg Management
Country Gate
Ehrenfest
Gaussbuttel
Lehmbruck
Formerly Trostwerk
Under Sovereign Management
Frenbeltag
Immerdink
Formerly Scharfer
Under Sovereign Management
Drewanchel
Sovereignty
Formerly Werkestock
Under Ahrensbach Management
Lindenthal
Ahrensbach
Hauchletzte
Kirschnereit
Bersch-mann
Formerly Werkestock
Under Dunkelfelger Management
Country Gate
Neuehausen
Ossvault
Quand-treeb
Country Gate
Los-renger
Dunkelfelger
Country Gate
Yurgenschmidt

Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 4 Volume 2*.

Rozemyne charges straight into the Royal Academy's library, but her behavior is so unlike that of a proper archduke candidate that she earns a scolding from Rihyarda. When doing things you like, always make sure you're on the same page as everyone around you. Otherwise, you might also end up getting an order to return home! (Haha.)

The measuring that Lieseleta and the others were looking forward to ends safely. Due to Rozemyne having taken Schwartz and Weiss out of the library, however, Lestilaut leads a squad to ambush them, ultimately resulting in a game of treasure-stealing ditter.

I'm often told that treasure-stealing ditter resembles Quidditch from *Harry Potter*, but in truth, I based it on a unique kind of dodgeball my daughter played in elementary school. Children truly are an endless source of material.

Rozemyne ends up becoming friends with Eglantine from a greater duchy and even the prince himself, despite her best efforts. Her guardians spend each day in agony as they read the reports, which end up being so bad that they outright order her to come back to Ehrenfest. She has an important conversation with them all upon her return, during which it is mentioned that, with the continued spread of trends among the nobles in the Royal Academy, there will soon be an influx of business with other duchies. Unfortunately, the magic contracts from long ago are getting in the way. What will Lutz and Benno do when Rozemyne cannot even cherish her smallest connections to the lower city anymore?

The two short stories in this volume are from Anastasius's and Leonore's perspectives, respectively.

For Anastasius, I tried writing the internals of a prince going mad with love. He was staring at Eglantine so much that it was honestly a little worrying. Of course, it wouldn't have been entertaining for him to speak only about

Eglantine, so I also included a conversation about Rozemyne and Ehrenfest to provide an outsider perspective.

Leonore's story is about her returning to the Royal Academy while Rozemyne is absent, considering that she headed to the temple almost at once. It always feels fresh to me when I write retainers talking among themselves without her around. My hope is that Leonore's and Brunhilde's perspectives as archnobles feel unique compared to Rozemyne's and Lieseleta's, especially with them both being Leisegangs.

This volume, I asked for illustrations of the apprentice knights displaying their talents during treasure-stealing ditter. There's Leonore, whose calm and rational side contrasts with her burning love for Cornelius; Judithe, who is at first disappointed to learn Angelica's true nature but then respects her all over again upon learning how harsh Bonifatius's training is; and Traugott, who resigns from duty right after being illustrated.

There are also illustrations containing Anastasius, who looks like a model prince; Eglantine, a princess whose appearance is often compared to the Goddess of Light herself; Professor Solange, a chubby but pleasant librarian; and finally Lestilaut, the Dunkelfelger archduke candidate who fought Ehrenfest in treasure-stealing ditter.

Also, the second drama CD has entered production. It's about the lower city characters doing their thing. For this CD, I wrote a short story from Tuuli's perspective titled "An Order from Royalty." It shows Tuuli's reaction to—you guessed it—an order from royalty, how relieved she is at the final product, and finally, a certain something that a group of web novel readers have been extremely curious about.

In addition to the previous voice cast, we now have voice actors for Otto, Mark, Hirschur, and Justus. Please look forward to it.

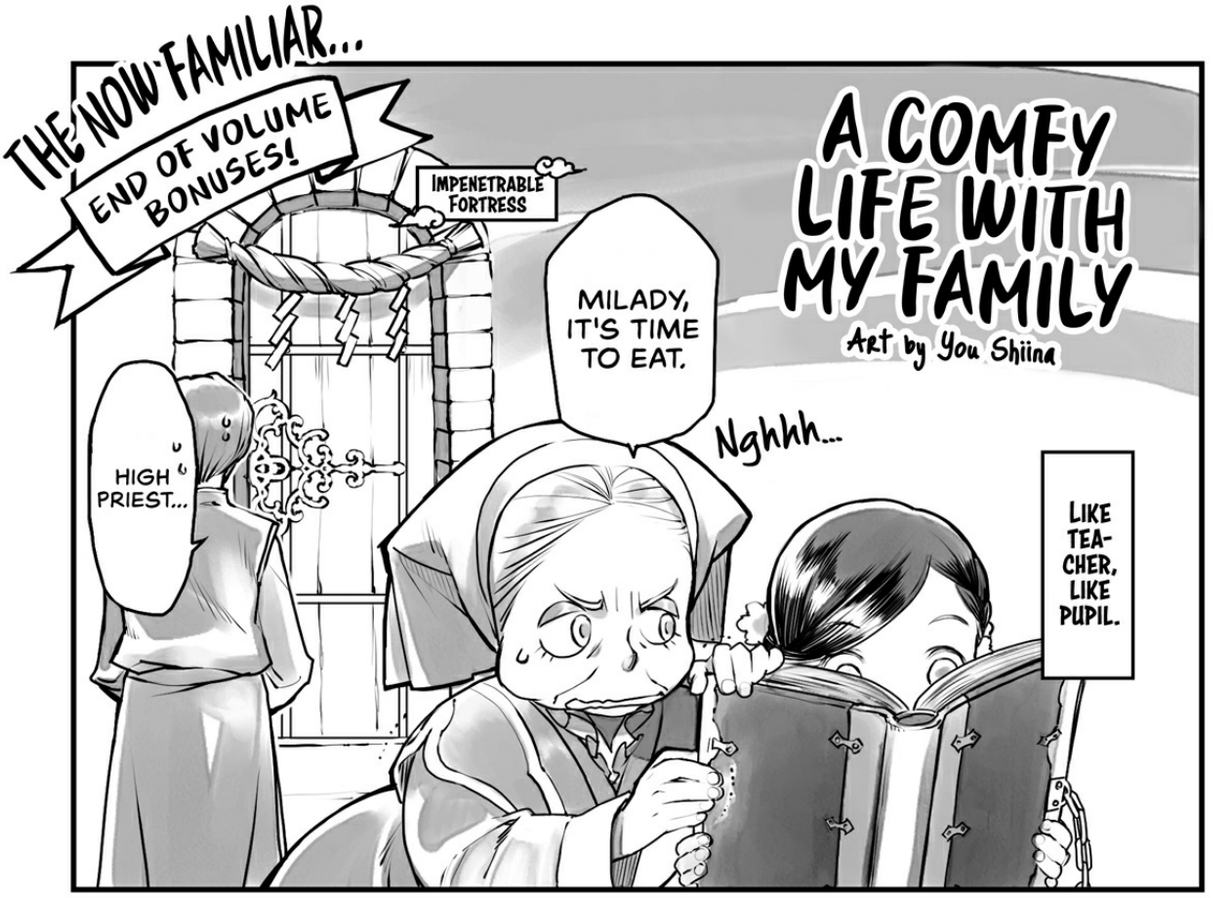
Additionally, a new manga adaptation for *Bookworm* has started, with Ryo Namino drawing Part 3. I am endlessly grateful for the detailed designs she has provided for Karstedt's mansion and the castle, which up until now have only been described through prose. I've seen the first chapter and am very excited for more.

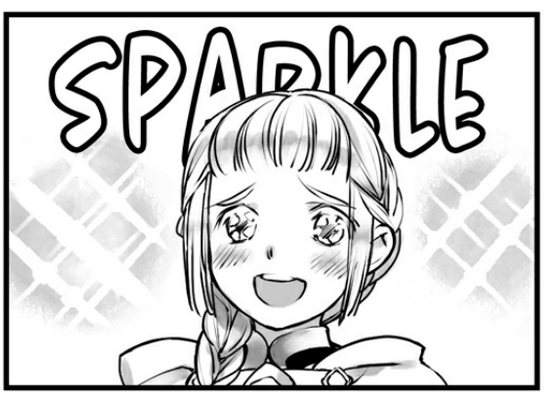
This volume’s cover art has Rozemyne’s guard knights working together during the game of ditter. Perhaps due to facing Lestilaut down, Rozemyne herself appears with an expression that is very firm and heroic. So cool!

Just like last time, this volume’s color illustration is filled with new characters. I absolutely love Leonore and Judithe; they’re both so cute! I imagine drawing all the new characters one after the other is very hard work. Thank you, Shiina You-sama.

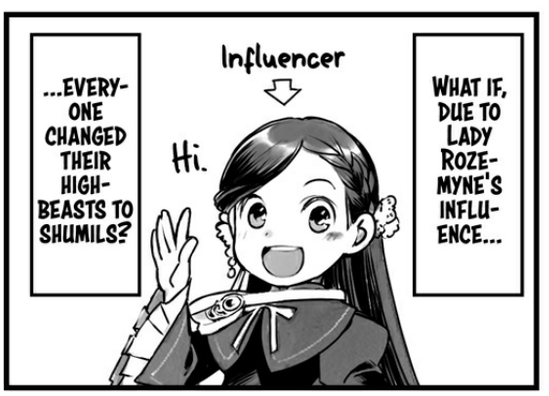
And finally, I offer up my highest thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 4 Volume 3.

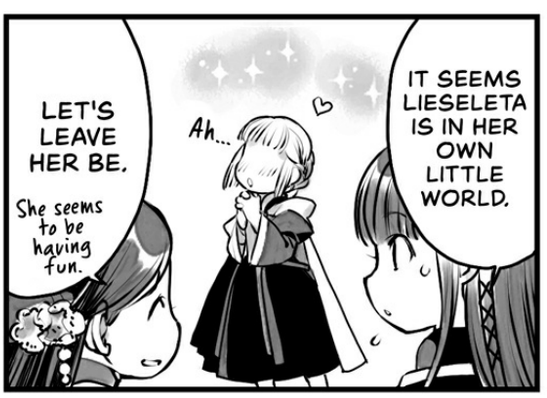
January 2018, Miya Kazuki

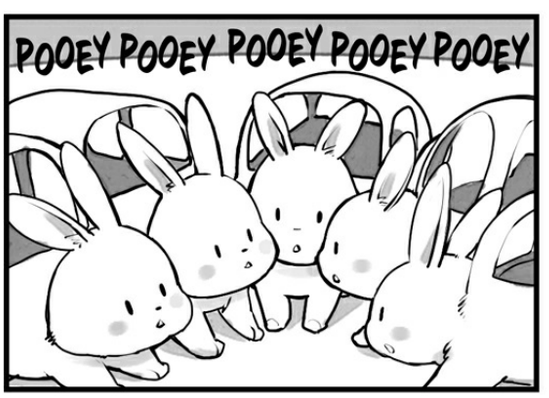




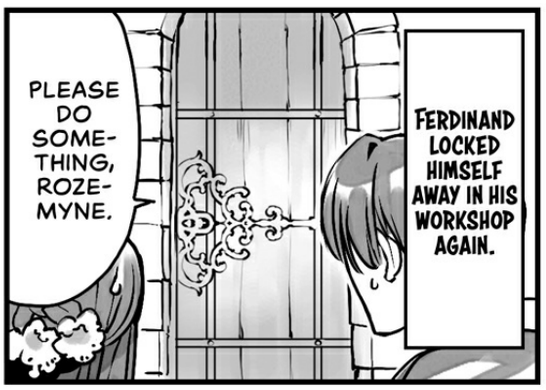
HEALING FOR THE HEART

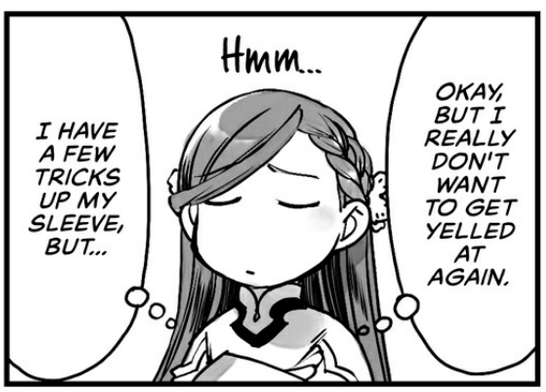


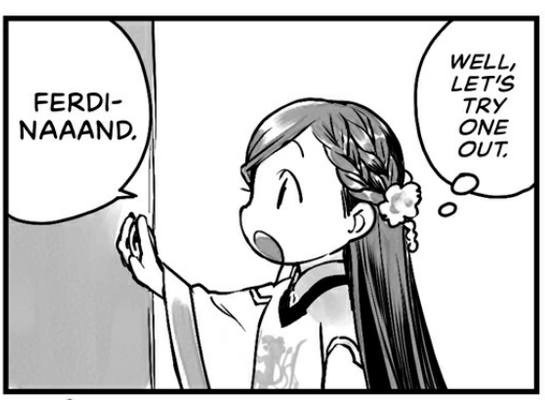


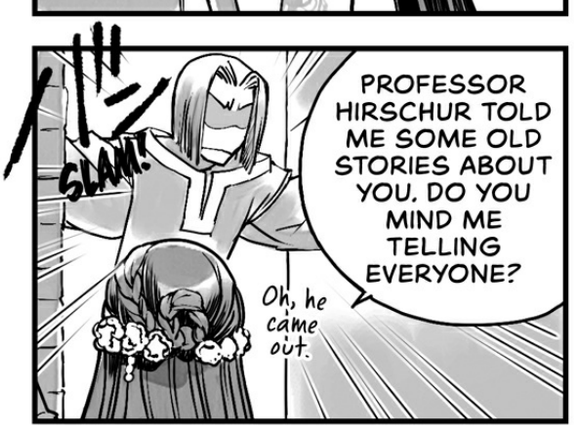


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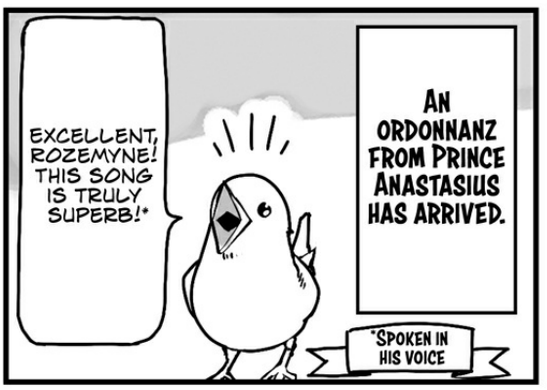


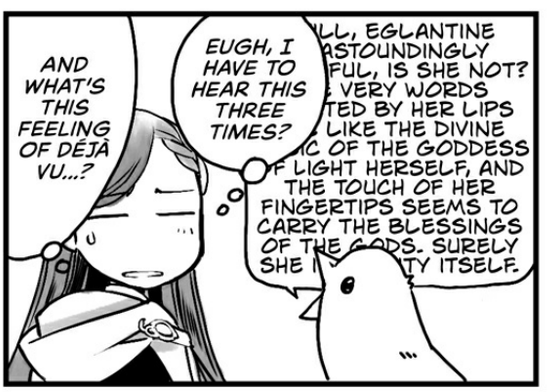


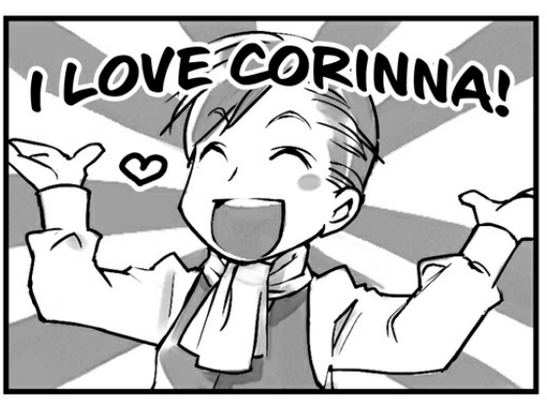


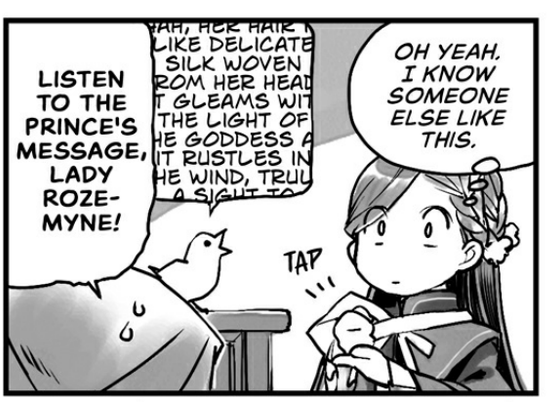


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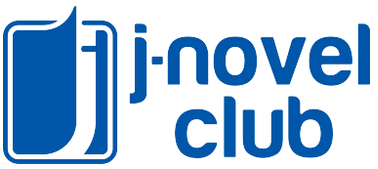








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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 4 Founder of the Royal Academy's So-Called Library Committee Volume 2

by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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