
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. 3
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



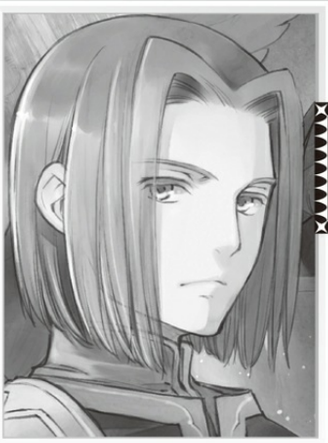
Wilfried

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.



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.



Judithe
A second-year apprentice medknight.

Damuel
A layknight. Stayed in Ehrenfest.

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

Rozemyne's Retainers

Ella……Personal chef.
Hugo……Personal chef.
Rosina……Personal musician.

Rozemyne's Personnel



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.
Traugott……Rihyarda's grandson and a third-year apprentice archknight.
Lestilaut……An archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.
Hannelore……An archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.
Adolphine……An archduke candidate from Drewanchel.
Ortwin……An archduke candidate from Drewanchel.
Detlinde……An archduke candidate from Ahrensbach. Georgine's daughter.



Eglantine
An archduke candidate from Klassenberg.



Anastasius
The Sovereignty's second prince.

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.

Other Royal Academy Figures

Schwartz……A library magic tool.
Weiss……A library magic tool.
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.

Philine's Family

Kashick……Philine's father.
Jonsara……Kashick's new wife.
Konrad……Philine's little 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.

Lower City Family

Gunter……Myne's dad.
Effa……Myne's mom.
Tuuli……Myne's older sister.
Kamil……Myne's younger brother.

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.

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Prologue

Gil watched as snow slammed against the window. There was another blizzard outside; the Lord of Winter was no doubt going on a massive rampage somewhere. Why couldn't the Knight's Order just kill it already? Once it was gone, he could gather the parues Lady Rozemyne loved to eat.

"Kai, bring that box over here. Selim, take the paper from this shelf," Gil instructed. Each breath came out as a fine mist so icy white that he thought it might freeze midair. He paced on the spot, genuinely worried about his toes freezing from the cold, breathing on his fingertips every now and then in an attempt to warm them. Since the Rozemyne Workshop was located in what had once been a storage space, and since it was packed with flammable goods like paper, there was no furnace for them to use.

"Is this all we need to carry?" asked Achim, the gray priest.

Gil gazed across the workshop once more and nodded. The gray priests had picked up all the paper and tools they would need for their handiwork. He stepped outside with the others, firmly locked the door, and then hurried away from the workshop. Now began their work in the orphanage's dining hall.

"Ah, Gil. Thank you for enduring the cold," Fritz said upon noticing his return, taking a momentary pause from leading the others. "Which section will you manage? Is it about time for us to switch?"

Gil mulled over the question. He had been operating as a supervisor up until yesterday, so maybe switching with Fritz was indeed a good idea. They regularly exchanged the position to ensure their reports to Rozemyne were as accurate as possible; two sets of eyes made it easier for them to evaluate how the gray priests were handling their work and pick up on any interpersonal issues among them.

"I will oversee the book-making today. Fritz, please handle the karuta and reversi."

Once they had settled on their roles, Fritz went to a corner where some of the gray priests were working. Gil, meanwhile, moved over to the gray shrine maidens who were busy making books. The books needed to be ready for the end of winter, when they were due to be sold at the castle. The importance of sales day was increasing by the year, with more and more books being needed. Winter handiwork was a very busy time for everyone.

“Now, now, Dirk. Look carefully. You need to make sure the pages are exactly on top of each other,” Delia explained. She had previously served as an attendant to Lady Rozemyne, and now she was teaching her eager younger brother how to help as well. The year prior, Dirk had been constrained to either a corner of the dining hall or a children’s room on the first floor so that he wouldn’t get in the way, but now he was grown enough to follow instructions from the adults.

I might want to include this in my report to Lady Rozemyne.

Lady Rozemyne was especially interested in updates on Delia and Dirk. She couldn’t meet with her own little brother Kamil as family due to a magic contract, so she experienced his growth through Dirk.

“Oh, Gil. Supervising us today?” Delia asked. “Come see how much Dirk has improved. You can tell Lady Rozemyne he’s been doing really good today.” She was enthusiastically gesturing Gil over as she spoke, obsessively praising her little brother in the same way that some parents might gush over their children.

Gil sat down nearby and observed Dirk’s heroic battle with the paper. There was a deadly seriousness in his dark-brown, almost black eyes as he delicately positioned sheet atop sheet, as directed to by Delia.

“Seems like Dirk’s just about ready to join the workshop,” Gil observed. “Might also be able to bring him to the forest once all the snow melts.”

Perhaps because he was conversing with an old friend, Gil reverted to his old, crude way of speaking. He was no longer talking as formally as one would expect from an attendant serving the High Bishop, but Delia didn’t chastise him for it.

“Really? He’s been talking about how much he can’t wait to go to the workshop. Isn’t this exciting, Dirk?”

At this exchange, Dirk began focusing even more intensely on stacking sheets. Delia smiled at her younger brother's efforts before returning to weaving her own stack of paper together with thread, while Gil similarly began his book-making work.

"So, Gil... How is Lady Rozemyne doing?" Delia abruptly asked midway through her work, her eyes focused on her hands as though it were just a casual question.

Gil shot her a side-glance and then shrugged. "You saw her when she looked over the place, didn't ya?"

Delia pursed her lips slightly, having not received the answer she wanted. "Monika said she's so frail now that she can only move with a bunch of magic tools, but she was moving fine when she came here, wasn't she? I'm worried she hasn't actually gotten better. She always pushes herself too far in the weirdest ways, so..."

Delia knew Lady Rozemyne in a way that Monika and Nicola didn't, having served her back when she was still an apprentice blue shrine maiden—back when she was still Myne. She had the sharp instincts one could only develop from spending so much time around Rozemyne's old, honest self. Gil had a stronger bond with Delia than the others, since they both worried about Rozemyne in ways the others didn't.

"They say she can't even move without the magic tools yet, but they're still gonna make her do the Dedication Ritual. She had to deal with nobles in the castle right after waking up, and now, even though she's finally back from the Royal Academy, she's stuck helping the High Priest and making sure he eats. That's messed up, right? I mean, for crying out loud, she spent two whole years in a coma..." Gil grumbled.

"And Fran is letting this happen...?" Delia asked, looking at Gil with searching eyes.

"He and Zahm are sure she'll be completely fine with the High Priest there. Makes me wanna ask whose attendants they really are sometimes."

Gil was pretty unhappy about how many attendants in the High Bishop's chambers showed favoritism toward the High Priest—not only did it make him

uncomfortable, but he deeply felt it was wrong. Still, Ferdinand had control over Rozemyne's schedule, and it was too much of a risk to say anything negative about him in the High Bishop's chambers.

In the end, Gil decided to keep his thoughts to himself. He didn't want Fran and Zahm to become hostile toward him, but he still really wished they would think about Rozemyne first and foremost. The words had kind of slipped from his mouth on this occasion, since he assumed Delia would agree with him.

"Hmm... Well, Fran used to serve the High Priest and was always prioritizing his opinions over everything else. The thing is, though..." Delia looked straight at Gil. Her blue eyes were like quiet forest springs, calm and undisturbed. "If you start ignoring other people's warnings and advice, even out of compassion for Lady Rozemyne, you might end up like me. I never intended to put Dirk in danger, you know."

Back then, Delia had been so stubbornly focused on Dirk that she had ignored warnings from Fran and the others and instead had asked the late High Bishop for help. That very move had put her dear younger brother in danger—the one thing she had so desperately been trying to avoid. Delia didn't want Gil to end up blinded in the same way when it came to Rozemyne. Her warning made him recoil slightly, as though he had been struck in the face.

"We don't know the first thing about noble society," Delia continued. "Despite how sick she is, Lady Rozemyne is going along with the High Priest's suggestion, right? Maybe there's something we don't know about which means she has no other choice. Your work with the Gutenbergs means you're away from the temple more than most of her attendants, so maybe you should talk to Fran and Zahm a bit more to get up to speed."

Delia chuckled to herself at that last remark. She had matured so much that it really was like a smack in the face. Gil had already considered himself an adult, since he had grown bigger and could do his job, but now he was starting to wonder whether he had still been a kid on the inside all along.

"I guess she's with Fran and Monika today..." Gil said.

Lady Rozemyne's temple attendants would eat the leftovers of each meal, but

since Lady Rozemyne always needed someone with her, they couldn't all eat at once. There was a door in the High Bishop's chambers that led to storage space, a staircase for attendants, and the head attendant's room. The last was where the attendants would take turns to eat, and it was made in such a way that they would know as soon as their lady rang the bell for summoning others.

"Ah, Gil. What were you talking to Delia about earlier?" Fritz asked during their meal.

Gil paused for a moment, his gaze inadvertently turning to Zahm. Could he risk speaking critically of the High Priest with him nearby? Zahm soon noticed the eyes on him and set down his spoon with a guarded look.

"Is Delia planning something dangerous?" Fritz probed.

There were many who thought Delia hadn't been punished enough for exposing both the High Priest and Rozemyne to danger. Gil had agreed with them at the time, but he no longer saw her as even a slight threat, nor did he consider her being stuck in the orphanage forevermore a light punishment.

"Delia is nothing but grateful to Lady Rozemyne. She will not repeat her former mistakes," Gil said flatly. He then remembered the advice Delia had given him about talking to others more and returned his attention to Zahm. "She was just worried about Lady Rozemyne being so busy despite having so recently awoken from her two-year slumber. She thinks it's wrong to force her weakened body to move through the use of magic tools, and... I feel the same way. Is it really necessary to put Lady Rozemyne through this?"

Even after receiving Delia's advice, Gil was still dissatisfied with how Ferdinand was handling things. It seemed that Zahm had picked up on this, as he furrowed his brow in displeasure.

"Do you not believe the High Priest?" Zahm asked. "As long as he is here, she—"

"I know the High Priest saved Lady Rozemyne's life. I know he's something else," Gil said, shaking his head as he interrupted Zahm.

"Then you should also know it is safe to leave everything to him."

Gil couldn't bear to hear those same words he had already heard so many

times before. He was grateful to Ferdinand, and it was clear to see he was more understanding than most nobles, but still. It was hard to believe putting such a burden on Rozemyne when she could barely even move was really wise.

"Why did the High Priest make Lady Rozemyne go to the castle and the Royal Academy before she could properly recover? Why is he making her do so much work while she's still sick? You can smile and say she's better now all you want, but I remember her lying limp on the bench, and the way she stiffened with fear when she woke up and first looked around," Gil complained, letting out all the emotions that had built up inside him. His gratitude toward the High Priest for saving Rozemyne was completely separate from his dissatisfaction about how she was being treated.

Fritz frowned, his expression tinged with worry. "Gil, I understand how you feel, but please calm down."

Gil bit his lip. Being told to calm down made him feel as though his opinion was simply being rejected. Just as he was beginning to feel he had no one on his side, however, Nicola spoke up.

"I really understand how you feel, Gil. Lady Rozemyne still can't walk on her own; the only things keeping her upright are the High Priest's magic tools. She can't even take them off when bathing." Nicola likewise knew how frightened Lady Rozemyne had been upon waking up, and she knew from bathing her just how much she was unable to move. "I understand that the High Priest's work and her duties as a noble are important, but I would appreciate it if she could focus on her recovery right now. I don't want to see Lady Rozemyne so sad again."

Gil was immeasurably relieved to have Nicola agree with him. It proved to him that there were others among Lady Rozemyne's attendants who cared more about her than they did the High Priest.

Zahm paused as he considered their opinions; then he looked up in realization, his gaze focusing on both Gil and Nicola. "Fran, the High Priest, and I all want Lady Rozemyne to recover as soon as possible. We truly do. However, one cannot show weakness in noble society. I believe we have different understandings of this."

“What do you mean?” Gil asked.

“You and Nicola have served only Lady Rozemyne, correct? Never have you visited a noble estate. You are truly unfamiliar with the nobility, and you have never witnessed noble society. The High Priest is doing everything he can to ensure Lady Rozemyne’s burden in noble society is as slight as possible.”

Zahm was right that neither Gil nor Nicola had gone to a noble estate before; the only nobles they had met in person were those who came to the temple. They could also hardly disagree that they were oblivious when it came to noble society. All of a sudden, they felt as though they were in the wrong. That only frustrated Gil, who desperately tried to think of some way to argue back.

“But the High Priest has been spending days in his workshop prioritizing his research above everything else,” Gil eventually countered. “He won’t leave or even eat unless Lady Rozemyne comes calling for him, which is bothering everyone, right? Is that an important part of reducing her burden in noble society? He said himself that only he could save her, so I would rather he actually prioritize her recovery.”

Zahm balked, having not expected such an argument. Gil took this opportunity to further press the matter, taking full advantage of the weak point he had revealed.

“I know the High Priest is incredible, but you’re supposed to be Lady Rozemyne’s attendant, Zahm. I just want you to care about her more too.”

Gil was certain of victory. As he prepared to hammer his point home, however, Fritz raised a hand to stop him. “Zahm is not truly Lady Rozemyne’s attendant; it is only natural that he would consider the High Priest first and foremost. You must not hope for him to prioritize Lady Rozemyne as you do,” he said, his tone consoling.



Gil and Zahm stared at Fritz, equally as surprised as each other. Nobody could believe what he had just said, and with such a calm smile too.

“Fritz, what do you mean by that?” Zahm asked. “Are you insulting me?”

“I am simply stating the truth. I mean no disrespect, nor do I think poorly of you. I believe Nicola and Gil will understand as well, though an explanation is required.” With that, Fritz began to speak of the past. “Zahm and I previously served a blue priest by the name of Shikza. He was a highly emotional and violent man, which made serving him quite troublesome. Still, life as an attendant was much better than the alternative—that was especially clear once Brother Shikza returned to noble society and we returned to the orphanage. You recall the terrible state of the orphanage back then, no?”

Gil nodded. He had been stuck in the orphanage himself at the time, so he had never met the blue priest Fritz was referring to, but he remembered just how terrible things had been when they were sent back. That was when more and more attendants were returning to the orphanage, making life instantly harder for everyone. He had wished that someone—*anyone*—would save him, so he was overjoyed when he was taken as Rozemyne’s attendant.

“You, Nicola, and I were saved by Lady Rozemyne, while Zahm was saved by the High Priest,” Fritz went on. “While Zahm later came to serve Lady Rozemyne, he did so at the request of the High Priest, who said she was lacking in attendants. It should come as no surprise then that Zahm’s loyalties remain with the High Priest. There is nothing wrong with that, of course; rather, it goes to show that his status and mindset differ from our own.”

“Oh, I see...” Nicola and Zahm said in unison, both understanding Fritz’s point. Gil understood as well; it was basically the same thing as him working for the Plantin Company as a Gutenberg under Lady Rozemyne’s orders. With that in mind, he could internally rationalize Zahm serving as Lady Rozemyne’s attendant while remaining loyal to Ferdinand.

“I still don’t know about the High Priest hiding away in his workshop all day...” Gil said with a frown. Nicola nodded in agreement, a wry smile touching her lips.

Zahm chuckled. “Perhaps it will be easier if you flip the gewinnen board and

consider things from the opposite perspective. Imagine the High Priest disappearing and Lady Rozemyne spending two years swamped with work, no longer able to read for pleasure. What would you do, then, if the High Priest suddenly returned, and Lady Rozemyne said she wished to dedicate a few days to reading? Would you not consider this acceptable?"

Hearing Zahm's analogy made Gil empathize with why Ferdinand was spending so much time in his workshop, which in turn soothed the anger boiling within him. The High Priest was simply taking a short rest after suffering alone for two years to save Rozemyne. She had no doubt realized that, which was why she was forgiving this minor annoyance.

Fritz gave a relieved smile, aware that Gil now understood. "If you have any requests for the High Priest, ask Zahm or Fran to voice them. It is highly likely he will consider them. For example, requesting that he continue his research only after giving Lady Rozemyne an examination, or something of the sort."

"I will make that suggestion," Zahm said with a grin and a nod.

"Okay. Lady Rozemyne is very anxious about her magic contracts with the Plantin Company being nullified," Gil said. "Please ask the High Priest what he is thinking about that."

"Very well. I shall ask," Zahm replied with a smile. Gil was grateful he was so willing to help.

Rozemyne behaved completely differently when she was talking to Lutz in her hidden room compared to when she was anywhere else. Only those who saw her there were likely to understand she was living as a noble to protect her family and the Gutenbergs. Gil didn't think she needed to keep pushing herself. He wanted her to have somewhere she could smile freely, much like she did when speaking to Lutz, Benno, and the others. Unlike Fran, he wasn't able to accept that this was just the way things were now that she was of a higher status; he wanted to make her beam with joy as she had used to when she headed for her home in the lower city.

I want all that, but I can't actually do anything myself...

Gil cursed himself on the inside, knowing he had in fact hurt Rozemyne by refusing her when she had attempted to pat his head. He had thrown himself

into his printing work, eager to make as many new books as possible in case it made Rozemyne wake up sooner. He had wanted to grow up as quickly as possible—to be treated like an adult—so he had gotten used to stopping Zahm and Fran whenever they tried treating him like a kid. But due to that, he had reflexively done the same with Rozemyne.

He had hurriedly composed himself straight after and knelt as normal, but Rozemyne had still seemed a little sad when she praised him. The truth was that he had been so proud of all the hard work he had put in over the past two years and the amount he had grown that getting a pat on the head had almost broken his heart. As he came to realize that was the last time he would ever feel her kind warmth, however, an unbearable loneliness swept over him. If only he hadn't foolishly rejected her, then she would have kept patting his head and continued praising him.

At the same time, however, the hand that had patted his head was so much smaller than the one in his memories. That thought alone was enough to bring tears to his eyes. Things were no longer as they had once been, back when Rozemyne had saved him, supported him, and watched over him. It was now his turn to support his lady—his lady who was still small and young and afraid.

Rozemyne was anxious about her magic contracts being nullified, and Gil shared those concerns. He still vividly remembered leaving the temple for the first time and walking with Rozemyne to her house in the lower city. That would never happen again. They would never go to that house again. He could feel even his most vivid memories of those old times fading more with each passing day.

Gil continued to eat as he simmered in sentimentality. The next thing he knew, his plate was empty. He cleaned up his dishes and prepared to bring the leftovers to the orphanage; it was his and Fritz's job to bring them their divine gifts and then help with the handiwork. They pushed the heavy carts loaded with large pots down the halls.

"I imagine consulting the High Priest will not save the contracts from being nullified," Fritz said to Gil. "What will you do following the nullification? I believe it is more important for you to think of what you can do to best serve Lady Rozemyne, rather than what the High Priest can do for her."

Gil mulled over the question. What could he do? What would Rozemyne want?

“For as long as I am in the temple, I want to help Lady Rozemyne stay connected to the lower city. Just as Lutz has done by delivering letters,” he finally said.

Fritz paused for a brief moment. “That is a good idea. I am sure both Lady Rozemyne and the Plantin Company will be heartened to hear that.”

At the very least, Gil wanted to support Lady Rozemyne such that the smile she gave when being brought a new book never changed, and so that she never turned entirely into a noble. He had found his goal, and his grip on the cart tightened as he looked toward the future.

The Dedication Ritual and Returning to the Castle

Angelica came after second bell, while I was eating breakfast.

“It somehow feels like so long since I last saw you,” I remarked.

“I had training with Lord Bonifatius. My parents summoned me too, but they gave me permission to stay in the temple.”

Angelica hadn’t yet graduated from the Royal Academy, so her guarding me in the temple was something of an unusual circumstance. The plan had initially been for her to follow me to the temple even if she couldn’t spend the night there, but traveling back and forth from the castle was dangerous with the increasing intensity of the blizzard, so she had asked her parents for permission to start staying overnight.

“I thought that would mean I could also participate in the Lord of Winter hunt, but when I asked Lord Bonifatius, he refused. What a shame...” Angelica sighed, wistfully lowering her eyes. The tragic look on her beautiful, fairy-like face made it hard to believe the reason for her sadness was not getting to take on a dangerous beast in a battle to the death.

At third bell, I moved to the High Priest’s chambers. Such was part of my daily routine here in the temple.

“Ferdinand, that was third bell. It’s time for work,” I called to his workshop door. He stepped out a brief moment later, fixing me with a reluctant glare that had also become part of my daily routine. I glared right back at him.

“I only interrupt you once a day, you know. You should think twice before looking at me like that,” I said. It wasn’t as though I was calling him out because I wanted to either; he had started ignoring the bells entirely while in his workshop, so it was up to me to remind him of the time. He had also blocked out Eckhart entirely, no doubt fed up with his insistent calling. “If you do not wish for me to interrupt you, then might I suggest you allow Eckhart’s voice through again?”

“You come only once per day, but Eckhart calls for me more times than I care to count. It reminds me of Lord Bonifatius from the recent past.”

“Oh? Was Grandfather being a pain?” I asked, trying to recall what points of contact they might have had.

Ferdinand shook his head with a bitter grimace. “It is over now. I do not even wish to remember it.” Bonifatius had evidently done something to *really* annoy him.

Now that Ferdinand was no longer in his workshop, it was time to start work. I took my usual seat and pulled out my stone slate.

“Do you always do work like this here, Lady Rozemyne?” Angelica asked, her eyes wide with disbelief as she looked between me and the stacks of paperwork.

“Ferdinand personally handles all the paperwork in the temple,” I explained. “As the High Bishop, I should technically be doing much of it myself, but I have had no choice but to entrust things to him. The most I can do is assist him with the math, since I still know far too little to approve the paperwork myself.”

“No, no! I think doing this much math is amazing!” Angelica exclaimed, a distinct sparkle in her blue eyes. She had become a knight specifically because she was so bad at her written classes, yet Ferdinand decided to give her work anyway. All those in the High Priest’s chambers shared the workload equally.

“Eckhart, handle this. Damuel, handle these. Angelica, work with Damuel and __”

“I shall guard the door with my life,” Angelica interrupted, sucking in air and clinging to the doorway. She had finally completed her written classes, so the very thought of needing to use her head again made tears well up in her eyes. Ferdinand flatly cut her loose without a moment’s hesitation.

“Ah, yes. Lord Bonifatius did mention that you were a problem child on the verge of failing. Attempting to give work to the incompetent is a waste of time. Let us begin.”

Damuel gave Angelica a look of concern, since she had just been called incompetent and useless, but she showed nothing but relief at not having to do

any work.

Fear not, Damuel. She does not need our concern.

Angelica was the only one in the room not doing any paperwork, and so she planted her feet firmly in front of the door with a stern look on her face. It seemed she planned to do her job as a guard knight with aplomb.

We continued working in silence until fourth bell, which signaled that it was time for lunch. “Ferdinand, please eat before you hole up in your workshop again,” I instructed while cleaning off my table.

Ferdinand, however, simply gave me a steady look. “No, I plan to spend this afternoon giving you a checkup.”

“Wait, what...?”

“I have concluded from last night’s dinner and your work today that your recovery is progressing slowly due to you relying so thoroughly on your magic tools. It was pointed out to me that I have not given you even a single checkup since you returned from the Royal Academy, and... judging by the color of your face, you do not seem to be in particularly good health.”

“O-Ohoho! But I feel perfectly fine!” I exclaimed, trying to mask the truth, but there was no tricking Ferdinand now that his mind wasn’t on his research. A smile played on his lips as he looked at me; it was like he could read every inch of my mind.

Oh no. He’s going to get mad. He’s going to figure out I haven’t been exercising at all.

I desperately glanced around for help, but both Damuel and Angelica averted their eyes, while Fran gave me a slightly frosty smile and asked me what exactly Ferdinand meant by me being in an unhealthy state. Eckhart would always ally with Ferdinand no matter what, so I couldn’t expect any help from him either.

I was alone. Threat Level: Dragon.

“Fran, I will visit her chambers in the afternoon.”

“Understood. We shall be waiting.”

Fran, don’t make plans without me! I haven’t even said anything!

I protested on the inside, but of course, nobody could hear it. Meanwhile, those serving Ferdinand were all cheerfully rejoicing over his research frenzy having calmed down a little.

“Now, Rozemyne. Return to your chambers and finish lunch,” Ferdinand instructed, having decided my afternoon plans before I could find any allies.

“I believe you should focus on your research, Ferdinand. We must hurry to finish Schwartz’s and Weiss’s clothes, after all.”

“You are the one who said those can wait until next winter.”

Ah. Aah! No! I did *say that! Why do I have to be so dumb?!*

“Um. Wait, wait. Professor Hirschur really needs her magic tools fixed and sent back soon.”

“I have already fixed them.”

Whaaat? Really? Already?

“What about arranging the songs, then?” I asked, almost grasping at straws. “Those must be completed before I return to the Royal Academy, do not forget. The song for the Goddess of Light in partic—”

“I will arrange the song tomorrow afternoon while I direct your harspiel practice. I imagine you think you have escaped practice by leaving your personal musician behind, but that is not the case.”

He saw right through me?!

“Why, I would never think that... Ohoho... hoho...”

“Rozemyne, know when you are beaten. This is disgraceful. The plans have been made; return to your chambers and eat. Remove your magic tools before I arrive.”

“...Fine.”

I exited the High Priest’s chambers and trudged back to my own. As expected, I hadn’t been able to trick him. Maybe it wasn’t too late though. Maybe I could bust out some weights and train enough for my slacking to go unnoticed.

“Fran, why did you accept his visitation without my permission?” I asked,

venting my unjust anger on him with a glare. He met my frustrations with a calm smile.

“Now that you have met with the Plantin Company, you have no plans until the Dedication Ritual. Would it not be best to finish this checkup as soon as possible? I, too, am worried about your health, Lady Rozemyne. This will ease my own concerns as well.”

Fran had spoken to my other attendants about checking up on me, since their last update on my health was before I departed for the Royal Academy, and they had all agreed it was best to entrust things to Ferdinand. It felt like they trusted him more than me, considering that he had spent two years managing my health in the jureve. My defeat was absolute. There was simply no room for me to refuse.

“The High Priest is surrendering some of his research time for your sake. That shows just how worried about you he is, Lady Rozemyne. His words are harsh, but he is a kind man at heart,” Fran said, respect and admiration clear in his eyes.

No, no, nooo. There’s no kindness here. Ferdinand gave a nasty grin the second he sensed my terror. You’re being brainwashed, Fran! He’s getting in your head!

I gazed up dismally, realizing that I should have ignored Eckhart’s plea for help and allowed Ferdinand’s attendants to suffer until my muscles and stamina had recovered.

Another blunder on my part... Please, Ferdinand! Please return to your impenetrable fortress!

After lunch, I used my borrowed ordonnanz to ask Ottilie to prepare for my meeting with Giebe Haldenzel. With that done, Monika and Nicola began removing my magic tools. My body got heavier in an instant, and I fell onto the chair behind me with a *thump*.

“Lady Rozemyne! Are you okay?!”

“I’m quite alright. There’s no need to worry.”

“‘No need to worry’? You immediately went limp and became unable to

stand,” Nicola and Monica said, gripping the magic tools in their hands as they peered down at me with teary eyes.

I tried waving a hand to indicate that I was fine, but my arm didn’t quite do as I wanted. It was only once I focused on my mana, wrapped my body in it, and enhanced myself that I could move properly.

“It simply took me a moment to get used to not having the magic tools,” I assured them. “See? I am just fine.”

“It was shocking to see you collapse like that... Are you truly okay?”

I stood up and showed that I could now move normally. Nicola and Monika relaxed at the sight, overcome with relief, and then changed my clothes as normal. All that remained now was to wait for Ferdinand.

“Rozemyne, cancel your enhancement magic,” Ferdinand said with a sigh as he entered. I averted my eyes; he had seen through me the instant he walked in. “Or would you rather endure an attack powerful enough to force you to cancel it?” he quietly added with a cold expression.

I speedily canceled my enhancements the second I saw his schtappe appear in his right hand. At that same moment, Angelica stepped between us with Stenluke at the ready.

“Ferdinand, it’s cruel of you to rely on violence!” I protested, poking my head out from behind Angelica. He scoffed dismissively.

“Do not blame me for your ignorance. My words were merely a euphemism requesting that you do not waste my time.”

“I’ve never heard a noble euphemism like that before! In fact, it doesn’t even sound like one!” I took a seat as I continued to complain, since it was much too painful trying to stand without magically enhancing myself. Angelica bobbed her head in agreement as she continued to wield Stenluke.

“Then you have not studied enough,” Ferdinand said with an exasperated headshake.

Angelica widened her eyes with a start. “Oh. You’re right. I didn’t know there was a euphemism like that either,” she said as she stepped away. My shield was

gone.

Wait... Don't just abandon me like that...

Ferdinand watched my attempts to cling to Angelica before turning away. "Eckhart, you may train with Angelica in the plaza by the Noble's Gate. Angelica, your body will grow dull if you remain inside all day, no?"

"Wait, I can go outside?!" Angelica exclaimed.

"Damuel will suffice. Do not return until I summon you by ordonnanz."

"Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!" Angelica replied. She then excitedly left with Eckhart. Why was she abandoning me when I had explicitly wanted a female knight for checkups like this...?

Angelica, you big idiot! Don't let yourself get manipulated so easily!

"Hm. She has the loyalty to wield a blade against me without hesitation, but she is shockingly brainless," Ferdinand observed. "Rozemyne, should you truly trust a half-wit like her to serve as your guard?"

"I might have defended her this morning, but I feel incredibly uncertain all of a sudden..."

Fran lifted me up at Ferdinand's instruction and set me down on a chair. I then moved my arms and legs as I was told to. It was surprisingly arduous and even painful without enhancements.

"Good grief. You didn't train at all in the Royal Academy, did you?"

"A lot happened. I was busy every day."

"The reports indicated you spent every single day during the latter half of your time there visiting the library."

"Yes, that is what I was busy with. The walk to and from the library was my exercise."

"While it is important to show no weakness in the Royal Academy, here you need not fear attacks. Focus on your recovery while you are in the temple," Ferdinand said, ordering me to practice whirling with my magic tools and then remove them for rehabilitation, on top of my harspiel practice. "The Dedication

Ritual involves using large quantities of mana, and your offering will be more efficient without your enhancement tools on. You will want to grow strong enough to move on your own before then."

"I should be fine enhancing myself without any tools. I've actually gotten kind of good at it."

"It may not be fine. You still lack experience."

Once my checkup was over, my grueling days of rehabilitation began. Ferdinand had remarked in all seriousness that my continuing to use magic tools would make me dependent on them for the rest of my days, and so my attendants—starting with Fran—were desperate for me to recover. I appreciated their love and concern, but there was one thing I wanted to shout in their faces.

PLEASE! Open your eyes and realize he just wants more time alone to do his research! You're all getting fooled!

I started exercising as per the schedule Ferdinand made for me. It started with me removing the magic tools and raising my legs while moving my arms around, but since I wasn't at all used to moving without the magic tools, I ended each day completely exhausted. Not to mention, with Ferdinand working as my temporary harspiel instructor, I was being forced to practice at a much higher level than usual.

"Guhhh... I want to go back to the Royal Academy. That place is a paradise. There's a library there, for starters, and rather than drowning in work, I can actually relax."

"The more freedom you are allowed, the more those around you suffer," Ferdinand replied. "You will be returned to the Royal Academy only when the Interduchy Tournament demands it. It is too dangerous for you to participate in winter socializing before you have learned more about noble society."

"That's so mean..." I wept. "My library is waiting for me."

Ferdinand shook his head, his expression completely flat. "I have a contingency plan that is marginally crueler than this," he said dryly.

What the heck?! That's terrifying!

The morning of the Dedication Ritual was busy. Once my body was cleansed, I was dressed in ceremonial robes, and a flower hairpin of white and red was pushed into my braids. My magic tools had already been removed, which meant I was using enhancement magic to move.

As my way of visualizing the enhancements, I called forth, uh... those, you know... Those things professional cyclists wear. Bodysuits? Bodysuits. I was, in short, wearing a tight bodysuit of mana. Ferdinand had said the enhancement tools were there to help me learn enhancement magic for myself, and since I had kept them on near constantly, I certainly had gotten better... albeit at the cost of my muscles and stamina.

“What do you actually do during the Dedication Ritual?” Angelica asked. In response, Damuel explained that the priests would pour their mana into small chalices, which would then be distributed to the giebes of Ehrenfest during Spring Prayer. He had gotten pretty good at coming up with simplified explanations for her, thanks to all his experience teaching in the Raise Angelica’s Grades Squadron.

“You sure are something else, Damuel. You’re able to help Lord Ferdinand with his work, even though you’re a knight. I never thought Lady Rozemyne’s knights would need math skills too,” Angelica said. It turned out that whenever she had tried to get involved in such work in the past, the process had ended up taking twice as long to actually finish. Her parents had thereby concluded that the best way for her to help was to not help at all.

“I’m more impressed with how you show no hesitation at all when it comes to protecting Lady Rozemyne,” Damuel replied. “I am grateful to have you by my side. I would never have thought to draw my sword at Lord Ferdinand.”

Damuel had immediately understood Ferdinand summoning his schtappe as one of his usual bluffs, and so he hadn’t moved to protect me. In a way, that was unacceptable for a guard knight; it was their job to protect their lord or lady when a weapon was drawn in their presence.

“One might have even called you a perfect guard if you hadn’t so easily been lured to the training grounds...”

“I shall not be bewitched next time!” Angelica declared. Her expression was sharp and heroic, but the glee with which she had chatted with Eckhart about strength and training implied she would take the bait again faster than any fish.

“High Bishop, the High Priest is calling for you.” A gray priest had arrived to fetch me, and so I started making my way to the ritual chamber, taking extra care not to step on my own robes. As only priests could enter, my guard knights remained stationed outside the door. Eckhart was also in position, so I could guess Ferdinand was already inside.

The ritual chamber was filled with the aroma of the incense burning by the altar. Kampfer, Frietack, and two other blue priests were already present, holding feystones given to them by Ferdinand.

“High Bishop, we are relieved to see you well again,” Kampfer and Frietack said together, having been entrusted with helping Ferdinand over the past couple years. I thanked them with a smile, though I was certainly taken aback; I hadn’t expected any of the blue priests to be so happy to see me awake.

“My attendants tell me you two have been working very hard in my absence,” I said. “You have my thanks.” I then walked over to the altar, knelt before it, and placed both hands on the red cloth spread along the floor.

“I see everyone is ready. We shall now begin,” Ferdinand said. Acknowledging that prompt, I sucked in air and started to recite the prayer.

“I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world,” I intoned. The five men behind me repeated the chant in low voices that reverberated throughout the ritual chamber.

“O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, O mighty Eternal Five who rule the mortal realm, O Goddess of Water Flutrane, O God of Fire Leidenschaft, O Goddess of Wind Schutzaria, O Goddess of Earth Geduldh, O God of Life Ewigeliebe. We honor you who have blessed all beings with life, and pray that we may be blessed further with your divine might.”

As I continued the prayer, I started to feel the mana drain from my body. The red cloth sparkled as it sucked in my mana, which then turned into waves of radiant light that flowed to the altar. The feeling and the sight were both familiar to me by now. Light streamed from behind me as well, and as if caught

in the momentum of their waves, more of my own mana was pulled out.

Oh no! My bodysuit... It's coming away!

The thin layer of mana supplying my enhancements felt as though it was going to be sucked away too. My eyes shot open; it was like my bodysuit was being torn from my body. No matter how hard I tried to resist, the waves of mana coming from behind were simply too powerful. The mana I tried to use to strengthen my enhancements was getting sucked up by the red cloth before it could do what I wanted it to.

Ah! Aah! Nooo! It's gone!

Just as I feared, the mana surrounding me was stripped away and went flowing down the cloth. It wasn't something I had anticipated at all.

I'll need to recast the enhancements once the ritual is over...

I rested my cheek against the floor, going limp as the mana continued to drain from my body.

"That should do," Ferdinand announced. "The mana flow was quite efficient today."

The other blue priests stood up, sighing with relief. I gathered up some mana in an attempt to recast my enhancement magic, but since my hands were still on the cloth, it was merely sucked right out again.

"The ritual is over," Ferdinand repeated.

At those words, I collapsed entirely. The fact that I had already been genuflecting meant I pretty much just slumped over to one side, so it didn't hurt very much, but the blue priests still started to panic.

"Calm yourselves. This is not a problem. I know the cause," Ferdinand said quietly but resolutely. The ritual chamber fell silent at once. "Leave so that the High Bishop's attendants may enter."

The blue priests left at once to summon my attendants, leaving me alone with Ferdinand. He sighed. "Fool. Did I not say it was still too much for you?"

"Ngh... Is now really the time to be lecturing me?"

“Your memory is poor enough that you forget even my most important warnings in the blink of an eye. Giving a lecture at a distinctive moment like this is in fact crucial, since it is far more likely to leave an impression. You will at times be put in positions that prevent enhancement magic from functioning. At the very least, you must learn to predict such situations.”

“I’ll take my training seriously and work on my muscles, just as you told me to. Okay? Now please help me.”

“Have you learned your lesson?”

“Absolutely.”

Ferdinand helped me up and then handed me over to Fran, who had rushed in with a panicked look on his face.

“Fear not. She simply did not expect to be in a situation where she could not use enhancement magic,” Ferdinand explained. “Her health is not an issue. She will be fine once she returns to her room and puts the magic tools back on.”

“Understood. One can never truly trust Lady Rozemyne regarding her health,” Fran replied, in awe at how quickly I had ended up incapacitated. His remark made me sadly hang my head.

Because I had poured so much mana into my enhancements, we were able to fill the small chalices much sooner than expected—the process took us only three days to complete, rather than five. And despite the drama of my collapse, it really had just resulted from my being unable to use enhancement magic while my hands were on the red cloth. It was different from the past, when I would get sick with a fever.

It was when Ferdinand gave me another checkup and said, “Good. You are toughening up a bit,” that I noticed the change in my own body.

“What should I do next?” I asked. “I want to carry this momentum all the way to becoming fully healthy.”

“Hold it. Nothing good comes from you trying so hard. I can easily envision a future in which you overdo your exercises and collapse again,” Ferdinand said. He then spoke at length about how even too much of a good thing can be dangerous. I was more than a little familiar with what he was talking about, so I

listened to his lecture without protest.

“It would be good for your health for you to continue training here, but you need to learn a bit more about socializing before you return to the Royal Academy,” Ferdinand continued. “Our hands are tied. We are to return to the castle.”

And so we began preparing to move from the temple to the castle. Ferdinand had with him boxes containing things for both his work and his research, and there was enough that I needed to make Lessy into a bigger bus than usual to accommodate it all.

“Over half of this is work related to your needs,” Ferdinand noted, gesturing to the luggage. “I expect no complaints.”

I personally wanted to keep Lessy as small as possible, since he got knocked about by the blizzards more when he was bigger, but there was no helping the situation. After all, I was the one who didn’t want to leave the documents on Schwartz and Weiss, Hirschur’s magic tools, the sheet music, and my harspiel at the temple.

“Do come save me if the blizzard forces me off course,” I said.

“You can handle that yourself. Simply pour more mana into your highbeast. Do not bother me more than you already have.”

“Ngh. Fine.”

Mother, please see the truth! See that Ferdinand has neither the kindness nor the sweetness you write about in your knight stories!

We returned to the castle amid the intense blizzard. I burst through the door that Norbert was holding open, and it was shut behind me a moment later.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne,” Norbert said, taking my hand and helping me down from Lessy. He had already given out instructions, it seemed, as servants appeared from seemingly nowhere to start taking out the luggage from my Pandabus. He wasn’t the only one who came to greet me, however.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne,” Elvira echoed, appearing with her retainers to welcome me back to the castle. “I have been waiting for you. Shall we go

elsewhere and leisurely discuss matters of printing?”

Mother and Printing in Haldenzel

“Now, let us hurry and get you changed,” Rihyarda said. “Lady Elvira is waiting.” She speedily started removing my warm layers of clothing the moment we returned to my room. “Once we have gotten you changed, we shall go to the parlor in the main building with the box containing a gift for Lady Elvira. Everything has been prepared ahead of time.”

Elvira and I would be discussing books that needed to be kept private, so I was bringing only Ottilie as my attendant and Angelica as my guard knight. Ottilie was on good terms with Elvira; they were friends who often met in private, and it seemed Elvira had personally asked if she would become my attendant when I first came to the castle way back when.

Rihyarda, meanwhile, had to stay behind and put away all the luggage I had brought back from the temple. Ferdinand had instructed that Hirschur’s things be stored in my room.

“Rihyarda, these boxes have been processed, while these have not.”

“Do not worry, milady. I can tell that from the tags on them.”

“Thank you for having me,” I said as I sat down.

Ottilie smiled in response. “This tea party was permitted so that you might find comfort in your family, so do feel free to be more casual,” she said.

Once Elvira had sipped her tea and taken a bite from each type of sweet, our meeting could finally begin for real. When I met her gaze, I noticed there was a sparkle in her dark-brown eyes.

“Rozemyne, have you read my books yet, pray tell?”

“Not entirely, I’m afraid. I’ve completed only one knight story. I have not yet spent a full day in the castle, and there was a note saying that I needed to keep them in my room,” I said, indicating that I had followed her instructions to the letter.

Elvira nodded in satisfaction. “Keeping them secret is what matters most. The public must not learn of them.”

“I did thumb through them, though, and I must say... Mother, you found an excellent illustrator. The art truly took me by surprise.”

By which I mean, Ferdinand was much too sparkly. I smiled, keeping my thoughts secret.

Elvira’s face positively lit up at my words. “Ohoho. I did, didn’t I? I ordered those pictures as soon as I found the illustrator. No love story is complete without illustrations of such beautiful people.”

It seemed that Mother had been motivated to make a collection of romance-focused knight stories after seeing my own collection, in particular the illustrations modeled after Ferdinand that Wilma had provided.

“But Mother, since you need to hide these books from Ferdinand, aren’t you limiting who you can sell them to? Did Giebe Haldenzel give permission for this despite knowing it would harm sales?”

“The books I gave you were specially made for my friends. Those sold in Haldenzel contain illustrations by another artist, so there is no problem whatsoever.”

Wait... So they’re the same books, just with different illustrations? Is it just me, or would that be a real pain in the neck for Gil and the others to work around...?

As far as I was aware, the Rozemyne Workshop had handled the first batch of printing to accommodate Elvira’s needs. I had been given a report that said she had taken all the evidence for herself, leaving not even the messed-up printing mistakes behind, but I hadn’t heard about them struggling to deal with two separate sets of illustrations.

“I received no reports of there being two sets of illustrations,” I noted, “even when I spoke with those from the workshop directly.”

“I made sure to emphasize to the Plantin Company that this information was not to be leaked under any circumstances. I was curious to see how well they could protect their secrets, and I am pleased to see that the Rozemyne Workshop has quite faithful workers indeed.”

After sipping her tea with a satisfied smile, Elvira continued. “I knew that the Plantin Company took keeping their customers’ secrets seriously, but it was impossible to say how long that would last with those in the temple workshop not reporting matters to Lord Ferdinand. But for them to have not told you either, Rozemyne, I can be sure they will take the information to their graves. That is quite the relief.”

Elvira went on to praise my subordinates as being quite excellent.

“Haldenzel’s entire printing industry might collapse should Lord Ferdinand learn of these books. Goodness, my brother would never let me hear the end of it,” she said. It turned out that the love stories printed in Haldenzel were selling even better than the giebe expected, so he intended to keep pushing the printing industry further. “I hope to next write a book about Lord Ferdinand’s days in the Royal Academy. I fear that even deceptive illustrations will not be enough to cloak their nature, however, and so I have been too afraid to begin.”

“Erm, I do think he would notice that. It’s much too dangerous.”

The legends about Ferdinand’s time in the Royal Academy contained so many shocking twists and turns that they were almost hard to believe. It would make an excellent book for sure—an excellent series, even—but there was no way the man himself wouldn’t recognize his own life story.

“Ferdinand continues to be brought up at the Royal Academy even today. He is no doubt a frequent topic at tea parties, though at the same time, there are some who dislike him being mentioned. I gathered information on it, Mother, if you would care to look,” I said, having Ottilie bring out the box that would serve as my gift. Inside were the collected tales about Ferdinand, which Roderick had desperately organized together after everyone worked so hard to gather them.

“Oh my!” Elvira exclaimed. “What a splendid gift.” She opened the box at once, wasting no time in looking over its contents.

You know, I want to read Mother’s books too. Though preferably without the Ferdinand illustrations.

Elvira truly did love to learn about Ferdinand. As she read through the data, she made comments like, “Oh, so this is how that event is spoken of in the records,” and, “The romance is the most important part, yet there is no

mention of it here!” She speedily organized it all into information she did and didn’t already know.

“Most of what I know about Lord Ferdinand comes from Eckhart, so I do enjoy seeing how other duchies speak about him,” Elvira said after finishing her initial glimpse over the papers. As more and more time passed since Ferdinand’s graduation from the Royal Academy, the tales about him grew more and more exaggerated, which made for some especially interesting stories.

“This information was put together by a first-year named Roderick,” I said.

“Would that perhaps be the mednoble from the former Veronica faction who tricked Lord Wilfried at the hunting tournament?”

“I’m impressed you remember, Mother.”

I really hadn’t expected her to remember Roderick. I blinked in surprise, which gave Elvira an opportunity to set down her cup and look at me with concern.

“Rozemyne, you must not forget your enemies. They are dangerous.”

I knew that Roderick himself wasn’t dangerous, and this seemed like my best opportunity to convince Elvira to change her mind.

“Roderick is not malicious. He was simply misled by his parents.”

“Oh, yes. Certainly. But the most dangerous people of all are those who bring you misfortune with no malice. It is much easier to defend against clear enemies with blatant malevolence, but the world is rarely so simple,” Elvira said, her tone like that of a parent lecturing a stubborn child. “Mednobles and laynobles will come flocking our way for their own benefit once they confirm we have grown in size. Protecting themselves by clinging to more powerful forces is their way of surviving. I have no intention of criticizing this behavior, but it is the reason they cannot be trusted.”

Considering how dramatically status changed the way one was treated in the world, it only made sense to look for safety by clinging to the most powerful faction possible. Mednobles and laynobles simply thought differently than the archducal family and the archnobles, who instead had to strive to be leaders and trailblazers.

“Rozemyne, you often base your decisions not on what is best for you, but on your feelings. You have taken your favored laynobles as retainers, but I am deathly afraid they will betray you if the balance of power were to ever shift again.”

“They would never... Damuel and Philine both serve me well,” I said. Neither of them were the type to betray the one they served. Damuel especially had risked his life on multiple occasions to protect me; were he the type to even consider betrayal, I would already be dead.

As I shook my head in their defense, Elvira nodded. “I know. Damuel and Philine are truly loyal to you. I gathered enough evidence to leave no room for doubt there,” she said.

I widened my eyes. She had somehow gathered enough intelligence to prove Philine’s loyalty despite me having only taken her as an attendant after leaving for the Royal Academy.

Elvira gave me a very noblewoman-like smile. “You mustn’t underestimate my information network, dear.”

“Lady Elvira was quite a skilled scholar in the past,” Ottilie explained, also smiling as she exchanged a glance with her friend.

I thought back to how the apprentice scholars in the Royal Academy were pulling out all the stops to gather and organize information. It was a bit late for me to be realizing this, but only now did it strike me just how skilled Elvira was at gathering intelligence from tea parties and all sorts of other places.

“I imagine that, unless you commit some terribly offensive blunder, Damuel’s and Philine’s loyalties will never wane. However, you must not think that mindset can be applied to other mednobles and laynobles.”

“If you insist...”

I had wanted to justify taking Roderick as a retainer by striking Elvira at her weakest point—her love for the legends of Ferdinand—but that had evidently backfired. She had instead warned me not to trust others so easily, reinforcing that I was not to take him as a retainer.

“Furthermore, it is tradition to pay those of an opposing faction about sixty

percent of what you would pay someone of the same faction," Elvira said. "This amount is then slowly raised in accordance with their efforts."

"Wait, what?"

"You symbolically demonstrate fairness by paying those of opposing factions while nonetheless showing favoritism to your own, putting people in a position where they feel changing to your faction is in their best interest. There is no point in professing membership to a faction if everyone is treated the same. Not to mention, none of your allies will delight in being treated the same as your enemies. You have little appreciation for your faction, but if you do not learn the ways of politics, you will make your existing allies very displeased."

Just how much of my Royal Academy antics were leaking out? Neither Sylvester nor Ferdinand had lectured me about this.

"Are you thinking it is strange that I know about your time in the Royal Academy? Rihyarda gave her reports after you left for the temple. Given Hirschur's constant absences and unreliability, we are discussing whether we should send someone else to help manage the dormitory."

"A manager...?" I asked.

Ehrenfest had garnered very little interest from other duchies in the past, so its leaders had predicted my products would hardly spread at all during my first year, no matter how hard we pushed them. And yet, my blunders had resulted in me forming surprising relationships with all the most powerful and influential people in the Royal Academy: professors, archduke candidates from greater duchies, and even royalty. Ehrenfest needed as much information as it could get on higher-ranking duchies before the Archduke Conference, but with Hirschur so fervently researching Schwartz and Weiss, she was completely useless.

"Someone eventually suggested that we might need a person in the Royal Academy to report on your every action," Elvira noted. "That someone being Lord Ferdinand, of course."

Is that the "marginally crueler" contingency plan he was talking about?! Assigning someone to the Royal Academy specifically to control me?! That's not marginally crueler; that's way crueler!

As I cradled my head with despair, Elvira dropped her eyes back to the papers detailing the legends about Ferdinand and let out a dreamy sigh. “Still, to think this much information about Lord Ferdinand still lingered in the Royal Academy...”

“Indeed. I was as surprised as you are,” I said. “According to those who gathered the intelligence, the current situation is that people from other duchies know more about Ferdinand than those from Ehrenfest.”

As it turned out, not many people in Ehrenfest had openly discussed Ferdinand since he went to the temple. Damuel respected him, but most students nowadays didn’t even know he existed. Most students in the Ehrenfest Dormitory viewed the legends about Ferdinand with skepticism, asserting that they were exaggerated or even misattributed. I had to admit, not even I could tell whether the stories were true.

“Why do they know so much more than we do?” I asked.

“Lord Ferdinand’s grades were so high that he earned Lady Veronica’s wrath. All those in Ehrenfest feared to speak about him,” Elvira said, looking down joylessly.

Ferdinand wasn’t Veronica’s son by blood, but he had been baptized as the archduke’s son and made an archduke candidate. Veronica’s two daughters had already been wed to other duchies by the time he was baptized, leaving only two candidates in Ehrenfest. Ferdinand would be the next archduke by default if something happened to Sylvester, and even if something didn’t, his grades were impressive enough that his name was known across all the other duchies. Sylvester, meanwhile, had zero motivation and generally left his work to Ferdinand.

In other words, there was more than enough reason for Veronica to fear Ferdinand rising to power.

“She treated Lord Ferdinand viciously ever since his baptism, but her cruelty only grew worse when the previous archduke fell ill. The more excellence Lord Ferdinand showed, the harsher she treated him. Nobody could interfere to help him either. Eventually, Lord Sylvester recommended that he flee to the temple.”

That reminded me—I had heard that, since Ferdinand had entered the temple a short while before his father passed, he hadn't been able to attend the funeral as his son. The thought that he hadn't even gotten to see him one last time really made Veronica seem unreasonably callous.

"If only he had stayed in the castle for a bit longer, he could have been there when his father died..." I sighed. "I feel so bad for Ferdinand."

Elvira paused for a brief moment before responding. "He likely did see him. The official announcement was not long after Lord Ferdinand entered the temple, so we can conclude that he actually climbed the towering stairway sometime before then."

It turned out that funerals for archdukes were carried out after the Archduke Conference. Their deaths were reported at the conference, and their funerals were held after the next archduke had been selected and returned to their duchy. Neighboring archdukes and nobles would come to attend the funeral, so time-stopping magic was used to preserve the corpse. This resulted in there sometimes being sizable gaps between the death itself and the date of its public announcement, which was why Elvira presumed Ferdinand had been able to see the body.

I sure hope so, at least.

"And now Lord Ferdinand can live to his fullest, without hesitating in the public eye," Elvira said. "That is all I could ever ask for."

"Why are you so invested in Ferdinand, Mother? Things may be different now, but was it not dangerous to publicly support him in the past?" Assuming that Veronica had indeed ostracized Ferdinand as harshly as everyone said, showing him any support at all was surely enough to earn her displeasure.

"Perhaps I should explain. It is not particularly a secret, but considering that Lord Sylvester and Lord Wilfried are involved, I do not know whether I should speak so freely. Oh dear..." Elvira said, placing a hand on her cheek and tilting her head.

Ottilie took this opportunity to say her piece, sadly lowering her eyes while refreshing our tea. "Lady Elvira was likewise ostracized by Lady Veronica."

“You were?” I asked.

“My mother was Lady Veronica’s older sister, you see, though they did not share mothers.”

“You mean my grandmother on your side?”

I had been given a list of noble names to memorize before my baptism, but it hadn’t specified how they were all related. Plus, the only family tree I had seen was centered around Karstedt’s side of the family. My knowledge about Elvira’s side was painfully scarce as a result. At most, I was aware that Veronica had been on very bad terms with her half-brothers and sisters, to the point that they had refused to take her younger brother Bezewanst’s possessions following his death. It had never even crossed my mind that Elvira might be on that side of the family.

“The fourth archduke’s son was my grandfather. His marrying Gabriele, the Ahrensbach archduke candidate, is widely considered to be the root cause of this current dispute.”

Gabriele had fallen in love with Elvira’s grandfather after he had treated her kindly at the Interduchy Tournament. She had an unfortunately small mana capacity for an archduke candidate of a greater duchy, but since Ehrenfest had even less influence then than it does now, that didn’t matter. She had used her father’s authority as the archduke of a greater duchy to force the marriage to happen whether Elvira’s grandfather wanted it or not, which ultimately resulted in his first wife—Elvira’s grandmother and the daughter of Count Leisegang—being demoted to his second wife, despite the fact they already had two children together.

The fourth archduke feared the consequences of such an insult, particularly with Count Leisegang having been the leader of the most powerful faction in the duchy during the rule of the fourth archduke. He was likewise concerned that Ahrensbach’s influence within the duchy would grow large enough to cause problems. It was for these reasons that he removed Elvira’s grandfather from the archduke candidacy and awarded him the title of Count Groschel, while choosing Bonifatius’s father as the next archduke. Count Leisegang’s fury was subsequently contained when Bonifatius wedded another of his daughters.

Ngh. I'm literally drawing out the family trees here, but they're just too complicated. My head's starting to hurt. The bloodlines are getting all mixed up.

Ironically, it seemed that Gabriele found living in such a backwater countryside duchy unbearable, and she constantly yearned to go back to Ahrensbach.

Gabriele bore three children in her lifetime. Her first was a boy who ended up having the most mana of all his siblings, and due in part to support from Ahrensbach, he was praised as a potential candidate to succeed Count Groschel. Her second child was Veronica, whose mana capacity was extraordinarily greater than the low average in Ehrenfest. It was only natural that she would be raised to serve as the first wife of the next archduke. The third child, whom Gabriele birthed while ill, had much less mana than one would expect of an archnoble. He was unable to rely on Ahrensbach's support, and so he ended up being sent to the temple.

It was during this grueling third birth that Gabriele ultimately passed away.

Years went by, and the first son passed away also. Veronica began keeping in close contact with her fully blood-related younger brother in the temple, doting on him and developing a relationship in which they both completely relied on one another.

"Lady Veronica became the first wife of the sixth archduke, and it was then that she truly began abusing her half-siblings. Though it was certainly easier for her to target her young nieces and nephews than her older brothers and sisters. My brother and I suffered greatly through a variety of creative means."

For the most part, Veronica couldn't be too blatant in her abuse—after all, they were still children of Giebe Haldenzel—but she would invite Elvira to girls-only tea parties and harass her in a variety of awful ways.

"My grandfather regretted this state of affairs, so he tried to protect me by wedding me to Lord Karstedt. This in turn granted me independence from Veronica."

It was thanks to the marriage that Elvira had been able to make a faction composed of those ostracized by Veronica, protect Florencia when she was wedded from Frenbeltag into the family, and support Ferdinand when he was

abused for being the son of a mistress.

“When the previous archduke climbed the towering stairway, Lady Veronica’s treatment of Haldenzel grew even harsher, since it is ruled by my older brother. Do you recall that Haldenzel is the northmost province in the duchy? The winters there are much harsher than the ones we experience here. Raised taxes are a matter of life and death for its people.”

Despite the entire duchy having been drained, Haldenzel alone received no exceptions whatsoever. It suffered far more than any other province in the duchy, even when taxes were raised for everyone.

“My brother says you have saved him and his people, Rozemyne.”

It was only after I joined the temple as an apprentice blue shrine maiden that Haldenzel started receiving chalices filled with mana, which increased crop production throughout the province. Veronica and Bezewanst were then punished for their crimes, and the Florencia faction—led by the giebe’s younger sister, Elvira—became the most powerful faction in the duchy. New life had truly been breathed into Haldenzel.

“On top of all that, the books my brother helped to make in part out of gratitude alone have sold much better than expected,” Elvira explained. “He now wishes to spread printing all throughout Haldenzel.”

“That is quite exciting to hear,” I replied.

However, as obvious as it was, one needed paper to print things. They had planned to make plant paper workshops along with the printing workshops, but my falling into a coma had prevented them from doing so. The same went for other giebes who had heard of the success in Illgner and wanted to try paper-making themselves.

“Not to mention, the magic contracts bind even the sale of paper, no?”

The magic contracts for merchants I had signed worked only within Ehrenfest, but with the exact limits of the magic being fuzzy at best, people had no choice but to sell through the Plantin Company. That worked decently enough at the moment, given that there weren’t all that many books, but it couldn’t last forever. Elvira also wanted the magic contracts nullified, and when I realized

that, I unconsciously clenched my fists resting atop my lap.

I don't wanna nullify the contracts I made with Lutz and Benno...

Benno had put his all into thinking of a way to ensure I could meet with them and maintain relationships with the lower city even once I was taken to the Noble's Quarter. Lutz had likewise steeled his resolve and signed the contracts even though doing so put him in danger. I was really against the nullification, and that must have shown on my face, as Elvira gave me a consoling smile.

"Rozemyne, you have surrounded yourself with people of the highest moral caliber."

"...Huh?"

"No matter how much my brother interrogated the Plantin Company about the magic contracts, they obstinately repeated that he would need to ask Aub Ehrenfest for details. It seemed doing so was necessary to protect your past, as you signed it while living in the temple as a shrine maiden."

Benno had refused to speak of the contract even when surrounded by archnobles. Knowing that made me so happy and proud of him and Lutz that I couldn't help but nod a little.

"However, the contracts are far too small to protect you now. Do you not need new ones to suit your current status, as books and printing spread throughout the country?"

"A new contract...?"

"Indeed. Your relationship with the Plantin Company will not change, even if the former contracts are nullified. Am I not right in saying that you need only sign new contracts?"

My relationship with the Plantin Company wouldn't change just because the contracts did. I simply needed to sign new ones. Elvira was right about that.

But those won't be contracts between Myne and Lutz...

I kept those words to myself and merely sighed instead.

Winter Socializing

As I began living in the castle again, I received so many invitations to meetings that Ferdinand and my attendants had their hands full just trying to organize them all. The requests were from nobles wanting to get involved in the printing and paper-making industries, but since I couldn't tell who was acceptable for me to meet with, Ferdinand and the others were handling that also.

In the meantime, Elvira dragged me to a tea party alongside Florencia and Charlotte. Once there, I was bombarded with so many questions about printing and mana compression by wives looking to promote their husbands and houses to me that my head started to spin.

For the first time, I learned that Elvira and Florencia always held meetings after their tea parties to dissect everything that was discussed. They double-checked the rumors, examined the topics flying around, and organized what they wanted more details on. Charlotte and I were accompanying them to find out more about gathering intelligence.

"Rozemyne, Charlotte. Which topics did you take an interest in?" Elvira asked.

"I was surprised to hear how many were about my sister. The air feels much different from last year." Charlotte responded at once, but I needed time to think; I hadn't yet paired the names and faces of the nobles who had attended with us.

"As for me... It seems mana compression has become quite the hot topic. Have all those requesting to be taught the method been looked over?" I asked.

"Indeed. We have already made preparations for many to learn it; we just await your permission. In that regard, how were Wilfried and his retainers at the Royal Academy?" Florencia asked, as worried about her son as one would expect. I went ahead and explained that he was working hard and doing his best to keep the dormitory together.

"That said, I still cannot say whether it would be best for him to learn my

compression method. I believe the final decision will depend on how the tea party with his cousins goes."

"I am ever so worried. It was Lady Detlinde who invited him, correct? The Ahrensbach archduke candidate who looks just like Lady Georgine, with blonde hair and green eyes? She also looks much like Lady Veronica."

I had never met Veronica, but she apparently had blonde hair and green eyes also. Thinking back on the nostalgic look Wilfried had given Detlinde, I could understand why Florencia was so worried.

"He will surely be fine," I said, attempting to console Florencia. "We carefully discussed everything that could come up at the tea party. Not to mention, he has been consulting Lord Ferdinand for help."

This time, however, Elvira furrowed her brow with worry. "I am personally more concerned about Lamprecht. He was not given permission to marry the Ahrensbach archnoble. It was a necessity due to interduchy politics, but I do hope that Lord Wilfried is not attacked by Lady Detlinde in response to that."

Veronica had been in power for a long time during the period when Lamprecht was attending the Academy, and socializing with Ahrensbach had been highly encouraged. Times had changed, however; in the current political climate, there was no helping the archduke not giving his approval. It was important to show utter sincerity to one's significant other to indicate that any such decisions weren't due to a sudden change of heart, but all in all, refusing a marriage due to interduchy politics was actually the most peaceful way to end things.

"Ahrensbach is of a higher status than Ehrenfest, and her parents were never pleased about her pairing with Lamprecht," Elvira remarked. "I was deathly surprised, then, when Ahrensbach latched on to their relationship so firmly. The next Archduke Conference is going to be quite the stir, I fear."

"We must start planning around this now," Florencia agreed. "My brother in Frenbeltag will likely be requesting support once again."

"There will also be discussions about trade among duchies, correct? Royalty and greater duchies alike are interested in Rozemyne's trends. We simply do not have enough information here."

Sorry... I didn't know Ehrenfest knew so little, and Sylvester just told me to "spread the trends" without any further instruction.

"Still, now that Rozemyne is awake, I feel our faction is swelling in size all at once," Charlotte noted. "This is perhaps due to everyone learning that we can once again proceed with mana compression and the printing industry."

"Charlotte is correct. Mednobles and laynobles are flocking our way, since they must join our faction to learn the mana compression method," Florencia said. I didn't know enough to be able to compare the situation to the previous year, but our faction numbers were apparently shooting up.

Elvira smiled. "Skillfully flaunting what rewards await your allies is very important, Rozemyne."

And so, as we attended tea parties for girls, I was taught how to gather and organize information, as well as how to instruct scholars to gather intelligence in my place. Charlotte listened in with a serious expression, as she would need to do the same next year when attending the Royal Academy. As her older sister, I had to focus to maintain my lead.

"Rozemyne, it is important that you also gather as much information as you can during Royal Academy tea parties, and that you report what you learn to us," Florencia said. "We need to know as much as possible before the Archduke Conference."

I could practically feel the question mark pop up above my head. "Will I not be returning right before the Interduchy Tournament?" I asked. "That is the day before the graduation ceremony, so will I even have time for tea parties?" Ferdinand had said they wouldn't be sending me back to the Royal Academy until the very last minute due to my poor socializing skills, so I hadn't thought I would have the time to gather information at tea parties.

"I believe it is better for Rozemyne to return sooner than that, both to gather information and to prepare for the Interduchy Tournament itself. The socializing period is when archduke candidates are needed most, would you not agree?" Florencia asked Elvira.

"Lord Ferdinand does not seem comfortable sending her back early. She is likely to cause problems there, no?"

Florencia and Elvira exchanged glances before simultaneously rubbing their temples, agonizing over how to deal with me. I apologized internally.

Sorry for not really getting how nobles think yet. I'll do better next time!

I clenched my fists, resolving to follow their lessons well, and it was then that a recent warning from Ferdinand echoed through my mind: *"Nothing good comes from you trying so hard."*

"Rozemyne, how many workshops can be made from spring till autumn?" Ferdinand asked, having summoned me for questioning once all of my meeting requests had been sorted through. Many nobles wanted permission to construct paper-making workshops, but we were limited in how many we could make at once, since there were only so many instructors at our disposal. That is to say, we didn't have many workers who could teach others.

"A printing workshop can only be established once all the parts for a printing press have been made, most of the Gutenbergs have been mobilized to handle the setup, and all the techniques have been taught," I explained. "I do not believe all these criteria can be met this year—we have not sent orders for any new presses to be made, and I am planning to go to Haldenzel in the spring."

Printing workshops needed the cooperation of a local smithy and a carpentry workshop, as well as the assistance of the Merchant's Guild in preparing the ground floor. The best we could do this year was decide the order in which we would fulfill the requests in the future.

"I would like to postpone meeting the nobles who wish to establish printing workshops so that I might instead prioritize meeting with those who wish to establish paper-making workshops," I concluded.

"Are you not limited in how many of those you can make?"

"I believe we can establish a decent number of workshops if we simply teach them to create volrin paper with the current recipe, rather than spending a year to develop specialized paper as we did in Illgner. Though of course, considering how much traveling the Plantin Company will need to do, we will not be able to prepare *that* many."

When establishing a paper-making workshop, a member of the Plantin Company absolutely needed to be sent to install a local branch of the Ehrenfest Paper Guild in that province. There also needed to be an instructor present to teach the actual process. The problem was, there weren't many members of the Plantin Company capable of doing such work, nor were there many gray priests who could serve as instructors. Even borrowing instructors from the workshops in Hasse and Illgner would allow us to set up at most three workshops per year.

"Are there many nobles who wish to distinguish themselves by creating their own specialized paper?" I asked.

"They may do the research on their own," Ferdinand said, no doubt thinking it would be more entertaining that way.

Maybe this is hard for a mad scientist to understand, but not everyone loves research.

"I understand your position," he continued. "In order to accelerate the construction of workshops, I will consult Illgner to see whether they can spare any instructors. This is our highest priority."

We were due to be meeting with Giebe Illgner, so I decided to speak with Damuel. I took out the two sound-blocking magic tools I was borrowing before turning to him amid the rest of my guard knights and attendants.

"Damuel, if you would find seeing Brigitte again too painful, I do not mind giving you the day off."

"...I will do my job."

"Are you certain?" I asked, having noticed his face stiffen at the mere mention of her name. "Are you not suffering from, uh... a broken heart?"

Damuel widened his eyes. "Lady Rozemyne, where did you even learn that phrase?! Oh, it must have been at those tea parties..." He had jumped to a conclusion, despite me having known the phrase from elsewhere. I waited for a response as his eyes searched for words which he eventually found. "It is less that I have a broken heart, and more that I regret my actions. My crass

thoughtlessness resulted in Brigitte bringing shame upon herself. I regret that beyond words."

"I heard from Ferdinand that your marriage would have been problematic due to your status, but I still do not entirely understand what he meant. What exactly would have been problematic?"

"I did not understand myself until I was scolded by my older brother. I had failed to realize that my superiors and family understood the situation differently."

As it turned out, he had planned to continue living in the Noble's Quarter and serving as a guard knight even after marrying Brigitte. He had thought it was obvious that he would continue as my guard knight until I relieved him of duty myself, considering that I had protected him in the past and taken him under my wing despite his grave mistake.

However, his family and others hadn't thought the same. As far as his brother Henrik was concerned, by not going to Illgner, Damuel was foolishly abandoning the incredibly good fortune that had connected his laynoble family to land-owning mednobles.

"My brother called it sheer foolishness for me to think of marrying Brigitte, for I did not know how to lead a life that would satisfy the younger sister of a giebe. And most of all, while marrying into her family in Illgner would see me rise to the status of a mednoble, her marrying into mine would result in her being brought down to the status of a laynoble."

Damuel had not thought through the consequences that would arise from Brigitte becoming a laynoble, and it was only when Henrik had started to list them one by one that he truly understood. For one, she would need to interact with her friends, family, and quite literally everyone else in an entirely different manner than what she was used to. She would also need to learn laynoble social practices, and her children would be treated as laynobles too.

"That would certainly be a considerable burden on her..." I muttered, biting my lip at the thought of status having driven a wedge between my own family and me, preventing us from treating each other as equals. They had needed to kneel before me, use polite language, and speak as though I were someone else

entirely.

“Furthermore, Brigitte’s former betrothed used the canceling of their engagement to begin sending abuse, and at the time, there were almost no laynobles supporting Illgner as government officials. I had heard that Giebe Illgner had resorted to flying around his own land, though I had not understood what was truly going on.”

Damuel had been largely unaware, having traveled between the temple and the knight dormitory without ever really visiting the family estate. Henrik, however, was a scholar. He knew the situation well, since it was such a popular topic of conversation, and thought it obvious that Brigitte would use her marriage as an opportunity to return to Illgner and support her older brother.

“Would it truly have been feasible for Brigitte to live in the Noble’s Quarter as a laynoble, unable to even properly consult her family for help when she needed it...?” Damuel continued. “It was not until my brother told me I was expected to quit my duties as a guard knight and marry into her family that I realized how little I had considered how much her life would change with me.”

Serving as a guard knight was an honorable position, but one far above what a laynoble like Damuel would normally hold. It turned out he was actually the target of much jealousy due to having learned my mana compression method and increased his mana so considerably. Many were saying he should be replaced with a mednoble or an archnoble.

“I can never be relieved of duty, since I know of your full past in the temple, but only a few are aware of that. Neither my brother nor Brigitte knew, and so she too thought it was obvious that I would marry into her family. They could never have considered these facts that we take for granted,” he concluded, hanging his head.

“To think that a difference in status would pose such incredible difficulties... I had assumed things would work out simply due to your mutual love.”

“Embarrassingly enough, I had as well. I had assumed it would all work out so long as I could match her mana capacity. I simply did not think things through enough, and despite having proposed to her myself, I ultimately refused her on the basis of not going to Illgner.”

What in the...?! You *turned* her *down? Sorry! I thought for sure it was the other way around. That was prejudicial of me.*

"I'm sure you'll find someone perfect for you soon, Damuel."

"Do you say that knowing my mana capacity has grown great enough that there are practically no laynoble women who can match it?" he asked, staring at me flatly. I promptly averted my gaze.

"Um, w-well... As children learn the method, there will soon be many laynobles with capacities compatible with your own. You will soon have cute girls all over you. P-Probably."

"They will be too young. By the time your classmates are of marrying age, I will already be midway through my twenties," Damuel said. He was despondent, but I had heard such an age gap wasn't particularly rare among nobles. He would be fine so long as he continued to push himself, though he would certainly be the one putting in the work.

"You have until then to raise your mana, save money, and develop the charms of an adult man. You can, er... manage. I will do all that I can to support you."

"You're not going to introduce me to someone in the same way that Lady Elvira found someone for Brigitte?!" he asked, looking at me with such sympathy-inducing eyes that I felt obligated to ask whether he wanted me to speak to Elvira about finding someone for him too. He responded with an immediate, "Yes, please."

That worked for me.

On the day of my meeting with Giebe Illgner, I entered the meeting room with Ferdinand, my attendants, and my guard knights, Damuel included. Already waiting inside were Giebe Illgner and his wife, as well as Brigitte and her husband. Brigitte appeared to carry herself in a much softer and more feminine manner than before, perhaps because she was now married. I was relieved to see that the calm smile on her face was one of contentment.

Brigitte's husband, the only person here I was meeting for the first time, stepped forward and knelt before me. "Lady Rozemyne, may I pray for a

blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?" he asked.

"You may."

"I am Viktor, husband to Brigitte. It is an honor to meet you."

Viktor had a peaceful disposition, and the way he carried himself made it immediately apparent he was a scholar. His skills were no doubt essential in Illgner, where scholar-officials were very desperately needed. He seemed to fit in not just with Brigitte but with Giebe Illgner too, making him pretty much a perfect match.

Talk about a catch. Good job, Mother. I'm impressed.

I nodded to myself as I looked over Viktor, and it was then that I noticed a familiar face standing behind Giebe Illgner with a diptych in hand. The way he conducted himself wasn't quite the same, but there was no doubt in my mind—it was Volk, the former gray priest. Never had I expected to meet him here in the castle. My eyes widened in surprise, and he returned a warm smile upon noticing my gaze. It was improper for me to speak to him here, however, so I turned my attention to Brigitte.

"It has been a long time since we last spoke, Lady Rozemyne," she said.

"I am glad to see you are doing well."

"My one regret is that I did not wait for you to awaken before I married."

Brigitte had personally wanted to delay her marriage until then, but Elvira had suggested she speed things along so that Illgner could get the help it needed as soon as possible. It was in their best interest to develop their trade and secure sales while they lacked business rivals, and they were advised to make as much paper as possible before Haldenzel started printing.

"Although we married, we have had no time for newlywed life—Illgner is suffering quite happily as Lady Elvira and the Plantin Company push your businesses further and further," Brigitte continued.

Viktor smiled and nodded. "We have invested our all into developing new paper, since Illgner was fated to lose its advantageous position when you

awoke, and other provinces began establishing their own workshops."

"It is thanks to your support and paper-making workshops that laynobles have returned to the province and made operation feasible, Lady Rozemyne. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts," Giebe Illgner's wife added, kneeling in front of me as well. "We would like to gift you this paper. It is newly developed and made from rinfin, a tree far more common in Illgner than volrin. It may serve as material for the waxed paper the Plantin Company seeks. Please use it for your research."

She presented me with paper so thin it was almost see-through, carefully stacked and wrapped in cloth so that the sheets would not be damaged by the hard, smooth paper that was Illgner's specialty.

I carefully pulled away the cloth and picked up a single sheet. The craftsmen had gotten much more skilled during my two-year slumber, and seeing the expertly made, super-thin paper made me break into a smile. This was a far cheaper alternative to the trombe paper we were currently having to use, which would naturally lower the cost of printing as well.

Books are going to become cheaper! Heck yesss!

"I thank you ever so much. I will start experimenting at once to see if this can be used as wax stencils in the workshops," I said, wishing to happily rub the new paper against my cheek but contenting myself with just touching it normally.

Brigitte lowered her voice. "Lady Rozemyne, I do not know if this information will be useful, but paper made from the nanseb feyplant acts in a very similar fashion to a magic tool."

"Paper made from feyplants has retained such attributes in the past. What did you discover?" I asked, being deliberately vague so as to not explicitly reveal that trombe paper was harder to burn.

According to Brigitte, their workshops were ripping up torn sheets, boiling them, and then using them to make new paper. When they ripped up nanseb paper, however, they found the scraps would very slowly start moving toward the largest piece.

“We are reporting this quirk in hope that you or Lord Ferdinand may find some proper use for it,” Brigitte said.

“We shall buy the paper. Do you have any with you now?” Ferdinand asked without missing a beat. His burning passion for research had not yet cooled; he bought the paper in an instant, not even asking its price first.

“We have brought ten sheets for demonstrative purposes, but we must sell the paper through the Plantin Company. You will need to wait until spring before we can give any to you.”

“I see. The Plantin Company will soon be summoned by Aub Ehrenfest, and I will negotiate its sale then. You will be contacted when the date is decided.”

Giebe Illgner had thought they would need to wait until spring for the nanseb paper to be sold, and so he was visibly pleased to learn this was not the case. In stark contrast, Ferdinand hardened his expression. Viktor straightened his back at once, while Volk re-adjusted his grip on his diptych and stylus.

“Giebe Illgner. Now that Rozemyne has awoken, we are to begin spreading the paper-making industry throughout Ehrenfest,” Ferdinand announced. “To that end, we must send out members of the Plantin Company and gray priests from the temple workshop, as we did when establishing things in Illgner. However, we lack the necessary personnel. We want you to lend us three or four of your paper-making craftsmen so that they may begin teaching others.”

“That is... quite a difficult request, Lord Ferdinand.”

Rather than Giebe Illgner, Viktor was the first to answer. He was largely in charge of the paper-making industry in Illgner and explained that they lacked the manpower required to comply with such a request. At the same time, he expressed his hesitancy to aid with the creation of rival businesses.

“Viktor, you are not wrong in what you say, but Illgner exists as it does now entirely thanks to Lady Rozemyne’s knowledge and technologies,” the giebe interjected. “If she wishes for our help, I am prepared to meet any request she may have. Lady Rozemyne, please tell us what you need,” he said, encouraging me with a smile.

Brigitte nodded in agreement with her brother. I could feel a sudden warmth

in my chest; I was glad to have people willing to accept my requests.

"I wish to establish more paper-making workshops, but we do not have enough people to accomplish this in multiple provinces. We hope to borrow workers from Illgner to solve this problem," I explained. "That said, while we lent Illgner gray priests for an entire year to research specialty paper, we will only be teaching the other provinces how to make volrin paper. We plan to visit several locations from spring to autumn, and our stays in each one shall remain brief, so you will not need to teach them to make any other kinds of paper."

"Establishing more paper-making workshops is our highest priority due to upcoming business with the Sovereignty," Ferdinand added. "Other provinces can use local materials to produce new forms of paper at their leisure, but your supremacy will not falter."

Viktor's expression softened. "I now understand the true significance in Lady Rozemyne supporting Illgner with gray priests for one year. We shall do what we can for Ehrenfest."

And so it was decided that we would discuss it in more detail together with the Plantin Company, when we met with them to purchase the nanseb paper. *Good luck, Benno. You're about to be surrounded by nobles again.*

As I sent Benno a silent prayer, Damuel stepped away from the door he was guarding and approached Rihyarda with a stiff expression. A message had apparently come for us, and if the way Rihyarda's eyebrows shot up when she received it was anything to go by, it was an important one. She walked over to Ferdinand at once.

"Excuse me for interrupting the meeting. The Knight's Order has sent word that the Lord of Winter has appeared."

Ferdinand stood up immediately, his chair scraping the floor behind him, and all of my guard knights except Damuel braced themselves. I thought back to my previous experience hunting the Lord of Winter—it was a task that had involved most members of my family, Karstedt and Eckhart included. I wanted to assist them with a blessing, even if it would only help a little.

"Ferdinand, will you need my blessing?" I asked, looking up at him.

“It would help. Apologies, Giebe Illgner, but we must bring this meeting to a close.”

“Understood. We cannot take any more of your time. If you’ll excuse us...” Giebe Illgner replied, standing up with his wife. Viktor patted his own wife on the shoulder with a wry smile.

“You look on edge, Brigitte, but I believe you are a knight no longer,” Viktor said. “It seems the familiar faces and atmosphere made her forget that fact,” he continued, eliciting a smile from Brigitte that was both embarrassed and sad.

“We will leave so as to not interfere,” Giebe Illgner said. “We pray for your success in battle.” He and everyone else began to leave, but there was still one more question on my mind.

“Volk.”

He turned around, looking stunned, having never expected me to actually address him here.

“How are things with your wife?” I asked. “Have you found happiness in Illgner? I sometimes find myself worrying about that even now.”

Ferdinand shot me a sharp glare, but I hadn’t been able to help myself. Volk was the first gray priest I had ever sold to another—not as a laborer, but as a free man, so that he could get married. His life in the temple meant he had known nothing of either family or marriages, and so I often wondered how his life was going now.

Volk knelt gracefully before me. “I took your sage advice well to heart, Lady Rozemyne. Rather than endure all of my problems in silence, I regularly speak with Carya so that we may work together and find compromises. While you were asleep, we were blessed with a child, and I was able to learn the true meaning of the word ‘family.’ I experience moments of joy each day, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart for guiding me down the path of happiness.”

He spoke with pride, wearing the expression not of a gray priest serving his lord but of a father supporting his family.

The End of Winter and the Summoned Merchants

“Damuel, prepare to leave for the hunt. We will gather in this room when ready and then depart for the training grounds. Rozemyne, wait here!”

Only adult knights could participate in the Lord of Winter hunt, so apprentices were not taken along. Angelica, despite being permitted to accompany me to the temple, was also instructed to remain behind.

Having been told to wait with my apprentice guard knights, I sat back down in my chair and waited for Rihyarda to return with my warmer clothing. Giebe Illgner and the others had long since left the room.

“I think the apprentices in the Royal Academy would learn much if they were allowed to watch,” I mused aloud once Rihyarda had returned.

“Something so dangerous would never be allowed, milady.”

“I suppose so. The knights will already be carrying extra luggage, and it would be dangerous to place even more of a burden on them.” While it was true that the apprentices had much to gain by watching the impressive coordination of the Knight’s Order, it wasn’t wise to bring meddlesome students to such an intense battle.

If only we had video cameras or something...

Ferdinand and Damuel soon returned wearing their armor and capes.

“I see you waited,” Ferdinand said. “Good. We must depart for the training grounds.”

I opened Lessy so that Rihyarda and my guard knights could climb inside; then we raced through the intense blizzard, focusing on the colored capes ahead of us so that we wouldn’t get lost.

When we arrived at the training grounds, the knights were already lined up and waiting. Karstedt, Eckhart, and Lamprecht were among them. I waved, and they looked at me with surprise.

“Apologies for the wait,” Ferdinand said, spurring everyone to kneel. I climbed out of my highbeast and stood next to him. “It seems that the Saint of Ehrenfest wishes to pray to the gods and give everyone a blessing.”

I stepped forward to the kneeling knights and took out my schtappe. I then thrust it up into the air, pouring in enough mana to bless as many people as possible as I prayed to the God of War.

“O God of War Angriff, of the God of Fire Leidenschaft’s exalted twelve, I pray that you grant them your divine protection.”

A familiar blue light shot out of my schtappe and rained down over the gathered members of the Knight’s Order. The prayer had taken more mana than I had expected, presumably because of all the people here, yet I didn’t feel as tired as I had during the previous Schnesturm battle. I absolutely had more mana now that the jureve had melted so many of the mana clumps inside of me.

“We owe our thanks to the saint for her blessing,” Ferdinand said. “Now, do not leave the northern building until the hunt is over. Apprentice knights, keep a close eye on her. Is that understood, Cornelius? Rihyarda, I entrust you in my absence.”

“Yes, sir!”

“I understand, my boy.”

Having been told to head back to the castle first, I once again climbed into Lessy, this time only with Rihyarda. My apprentice guard knights would be taking the lead on our return journey. As I flew up into the air, using their capes as my markers, I heard a shout for the knights to stand at the ready.

Charlotte and I were forbidden from leaving the northern building until the hunt was over. This was because the bulk of the knights had departed, leaving fewer guards, and the northern building had a protective barrier that would keep us safe. That was fine with me, since it meant I could read or have tea with Charlotte. In fact, my time in the northern building was the most relaxed I had been since waking up from my coma.

I was midway through having tea with Charlotte. I certainly couldn’t have

refused, given how cute her invitation had been:

“Despite having finally returned from the Royal Academy, you departed for the temple right away. And then you were busy with socializing. I want to have a tea party with just the two of us, dear sister.”

Now that I thought about it, I hadn’t had a private tea party with her since the time Wilfried had interrupted us two years ago.

“Both Father and Mother stay in their rooms until the hunt is finished, so I have always looked forward to the Lord of Winter appearing,” Charlotte confided. It seemed these were the precious few days she was able to spend with her parents during winter socializing. She told me a lot about her life, and while she often brought up Melchior, Wilfried basically never came up; he had been raised not here in the northern building, but in the eastern building where Veronica lived.

“It is so sad for siblings to be kept separate,” I said.

“This is all I have ever known, so I have never found it particularly sad. That said, Grandmother was always so kind to Wilfried despite being so harsh with me, and I found myself painfully jealous of that.”

Veronica had apparently been quite harsh to Charlotte, displeased that she resembled Florencia so closely. I didn’t have much to say in that regard, since I had been raised in the temple. The story was that Ferdinand had looked after me at Karstedt’s request, and that I had gone to the temple at such a young age that I didn’t even know what my mother looked like. I answered in as few words as possible, conscious that saying too much would result in me letting something slip, which Charlotte thankfully interpreted as me being hesitant to speak of painful memories. She changed the topic out of consideration.

“Let us speak of the temple another time. More importantly, dear sister, what would you want to do upon becoming archduchess?”

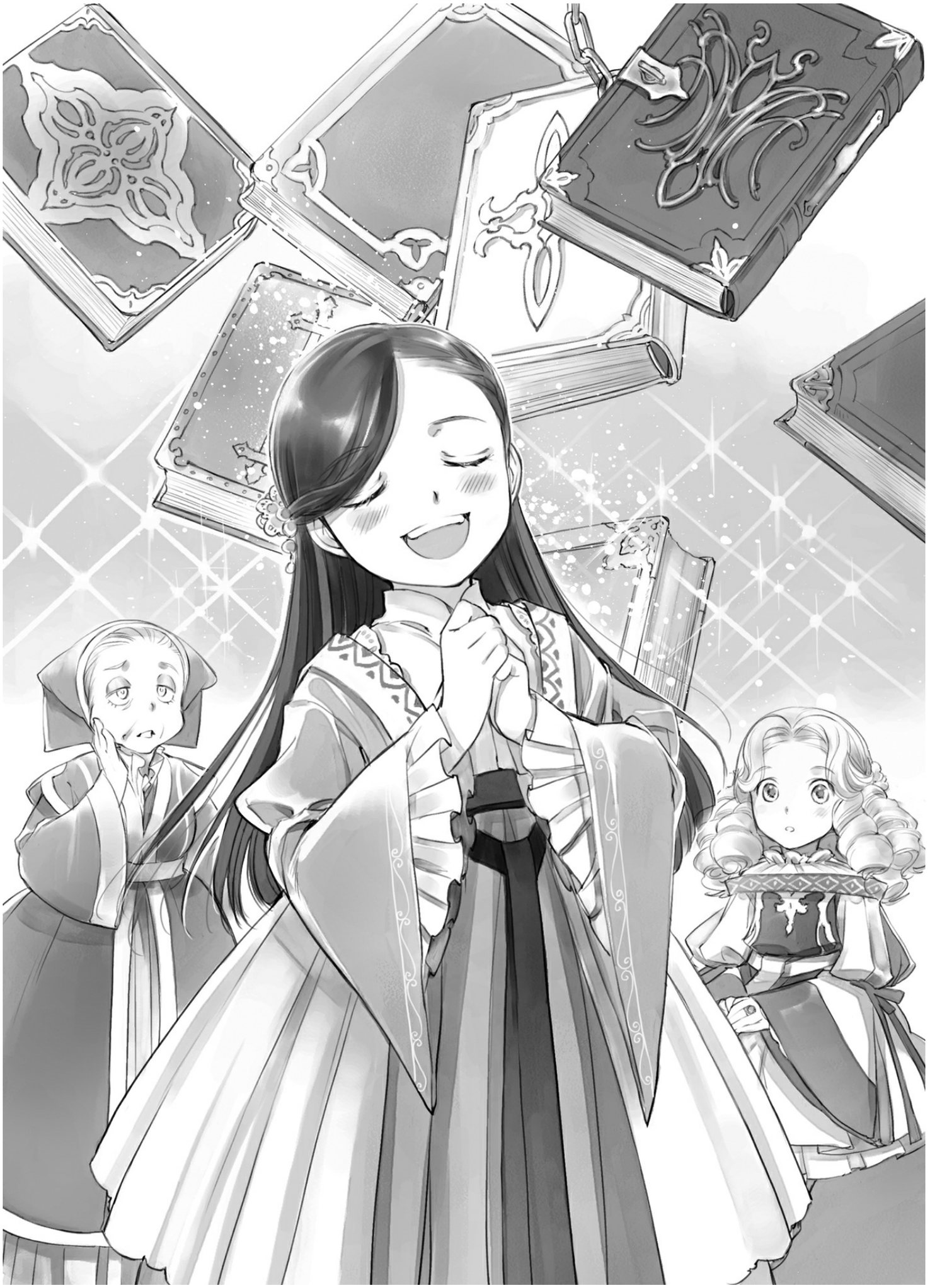
“What a strange question. I am not going to become the archduchess, remember?”

“As an exercise, one of my tutors has asked me how I would rule the duchy were I to become archduchess myself. I am simply curious to know how you

would answer.”

Oh, is this like when kids talk about what they want to be when they grow up? Nothing politically serious—just hopes and dreams. Okay. Well, there’s only one answer I can give!

“I would make the duchy a paradise for readers. It would become the capital for books, one filled with printing workshops that would receive and print manuscripts from far and wide. It would be a duchy of joy where every workshop would produce new books every day of every month, and there would be a law that a copy of every book must be donated to the archduchess so that I could read them before anyone else. My library would steadily expand, to the point of additional buildings needing to be constructed. All the people would be taught to read and to love books, and everyone would be able to read as they pleased. Aah, how wonderful! How blissful! That would be my paradise.”



Eep! Oh no! I'm weirding her out!

Charlotte was gazing at me in complete bewilderment. It seemed that I had gotten a little too heated.

"B-But that is just a dream, of course. I do not expect it to come true anytime soon. Though I will spare no effort to make it a reality one day..."

"You truly do love books, don't you, Sister?" Charlotte giggled, looking at me with the gentle smile of one who felt the need to be mature around their quite strange older sibling. My apprentice guard knights and attendants seemed to be barely containing their laughter, while Rihyarda wore a look of complete exasperation.

Aaah! Nooo! I messed up! I should have said something cooler! Not that any cool answer comes to mind, but still... Someone, give me a generic cool answer to say!

We continued having tea despite me having embarrassed myself. I spoke of all the progress the Better Grades Committee had made in the Royal Academy, while Charlotte told me how the winter playroom was doing this year.

Rihyarda must have sensed that I would try my hardest when Charlotte was around, as she made arrangements for us to practice harspiel together, as well as for us to sew and make lace, which were both important bridal practices. I was being handily manipulated by those around me, but there was no helping it; I just wanted Charlotte to admire me as her older sister.

It'll happen one day! "You're incredible, Sister!" she'll say! "Ohoho! You can count on me, Charlotte!" I'll reply!

Making flower embroidery while daydreaming about books reminded me of my Urano days—even my old mom would tell me to stop reading and start embroidering. I recalled that, at the time, I had thought there was no real point in it; we mostly bought our clothes, sewing machines could do automatic embroidery anyway, and fabric that already had printed patterns on it was easily available.

I really never thought all her weird arts and crafts projects would end up being so useful...

After several days of a lifestyle which could be described as both leisurely and monotonous, the Lord of Winter hunt finally ended. The sky cleared up before my very eyes, and the knights came home looking absolutely exhausted. Several more days passed after Cornelius told me they were getting some time off.

Once everyone was back on their feet again, I wrote a letter to the Plantin Company. I mentioned that Giebe Illgner had agreed to provide his assistance; that the only printing workshops established this year would be in Haldenzel, but that he would need to prepare the Gutenbergs to eventually establish more in other provinces; that we needed documents to lay out the preliminary foundations for the printing workshops; and that Ferdinand wanted nanseb paper from Illgner. I gave the letter to Rihyarda, requesting that she have the scholars send it alongside an invitation to the castle.

While I was at it, I went ahead and wrote a report for Sylvester covering our temple meeting and our discussion with Giebe Illgner. Ferdinand had probably updated him on the situation already, but communication was important, and it was possible that my report would provide a unique perspective due to my merchant mindset. Not to mention, Benno and the others probably wouldn't be permitted to speak in the meeting due to being commoners; if they were going to be ordered around, it was crucial that Sylvester knew what they were capable of so that he wouldn't push them too far.

If Sylvester does his usual and pushes Benno and the others way too hard, their inevitable failure won't just affect the merchants; it'll affect the entire duchy.

The situation wasn't like before, when nobles could simply dispose of unsuccessful merchants and destroy their stores to replace them with new merchants and new stores. If we failed with royalty and with Klassenberg then it was Sylvester whose neck was on the line.

Eep. Talk about scary.

With all the knights home, normalcy returned to the castle. It was one full week after I had given the Knight's Order my blessing that I was permitted to enter the main building again.

Sylvester had summoned me to his office to discuss my reports. “Rozemyne, when it comes to socializing matters, you make everyone want to leap off a cliff... but you’re not bad at this merchant stuff,” he said.

“We all have our strengths and weaknesses,” I replied.

In truth, I just have a better time in the lower city where everyone can speak their mind. Communicating as a noble is hard.

Nobles relied on euphemisms so heavily that there were still many things I didn’t understand properly or would subtly misinterpret. This was especially apparent during my post-tea party discussions with Elvira and the others, when my disjointed perspective would mess with my understanding of certain things. It was scary how a conversation between two nobles using euphemisms could result in neither person truly understanding what the other was saying.

“Seems like we can only sign with two duchies here. Is there any way you can increase that number?”

“There have been new rinsham and hairpin workshops made in Ehrenfest due to the increased demand for those products, but we have no idea how many new customers we will receive when signing with a greater duchy.”

I had made some estimates based on the ratio of students in the Royal Academy, but with so few duchies being signed with, there would be a lot of merchants who would want to monopolize the scarce goods to make as much of a profit as possible.

“We will only harm ourselves if we sign with too many and do not have the product to satisfy them. Not to mention, because of the magic contracts that bind plant paper, no new workshops have been established to produce it. If too much trade builds up at once... won’t you end up needing to cancel a contract with another archduke?” I asked.

It seemed that my indirect message—that overreaching here would result in Sylvester being criticized at the next Archduke Conference—had been conveyed loud and clear. He and the scholars he would most likely be bringing with him all nodded in understanding.

“Alright, I see why we need to keep the number of contracts down. Moving on. About your suggestion of adding an information gathering post in the lower city for the Archduke Conference, since the merchants are the ones actually doing the trade...” Sylvester trailed off, looking like he didn’t really want to talk about this. “I agree with what you’ve written here, but the scholars say they’ve had no problems just ordering the merchants and leaving it at that. They don’t want to gather information in the lower city.”

“Only a truly bizarre scholar would actively want to go to the lower city—that much is true.” I only knew one scholar who actually liked going there, and if you counted Sylvester, that made for two nobles in total. This sweeping hesitation was completely understandable too, since the lower city was disgusting and smelled terrible. “That is why I think we should organize a government-run project to beautify the lower city as soon as possible. We know from the traveling merchants visiting the Rozemyne Workshop that our lower city is filthy and unattractive, even compared to the lower cities of other duchies.”

“You’re saying the lower cities of other duchies are clean and appealing?” Sylvester asked, scrunching up his face in disbelief. The scholars beside him looked equally skeptical. They all surely understood that filth was inevitable in the lower city, since commoners would always bring filth with them.

“I cannot say for certain, considering that I have never visited another duchy, but the traveling merchants certainly say so, and it is unlikely to be a complete falsehood.”

“Hm...”

“Ehrenfest is seldom visited by the nobles and merchants of other duchies, and those who do visit already know of our current state. However, when merchants from Klassenberg and the Sovereignty arrive, who can say what they will think?” I asked. I was implying that having such a poorly kept lower city right beside the Noble’s Quarter would harm the reputation of our products, but the scholars didn’t quite seem to understand.

“The lower city is separate from the Noble’s Quarter,” one scholar said. “Can we not just accommodate any guests in the Noble’s Quarter as we usually would, Lady Rozemyne?” He spoke as though this was the most obvious thing in

the world, but Sylvester seemed to understand—he had actually been to the lower city and seen what things were like there.

"Imagine scheduling a meeting and then being greeted by poorly dressed attendants," he said with a grin, gazing across his scholars. "You ordered goods from them but didn't get the service you were expecting. There was even mud from the garden tracked all over their entrances and corridors. What would you think of the lord of the estate? Could you really ignore everything else and evaluate him based only on his own nice clothes and well-maintained parlor? That is what Rozemyne is asking."

Sylvester's precise analogy made the scholars freeze in place. Visitors from the other duchies would need to pass through the lower city, and while locals considered it completely separate from the Noble's Quarter, outsiders would simply view it as another part of Ehrenfest.

"I understand now. We must beautify the lower city at once."

Yup, yup. I'm glad you understand.

"Shall we expel all the commoners for a day and rebuild it?"

Um, wait... What? What did you just say?

"We don't have the mana for that," Sylvester replied, "but we can start by drawing up what we would change if we did."

Oh no. I've got a feeling something really, really bad will happen if Sylvester and his scholars are left to their own devices here!

"Hold on a moment," I said. "Let us begin with more feasible solutions, like paying commoners to scoop up the waste and clean away the grime. Perhaps you could make it a necessity for them to clean themselves up through bathing and washing their hands."

"Makes sense. Rozemyne's right—this mana shortage is a real pain. We don't have the leeway for any major rebuilding projects."

Um, no... I wasn't talking about mana at all.

Thanks to the mana shortage, the lower city was spared from an excessively sudden and dramatic overhaul in favor of minor and steady improvements. I let

out a relieved sigh. Never had I thought that my suggestion would lead into something so extreme.

Whew... This was one step away from becoming a repeat of the Hasse monastery incident.

Several days had passed since my apparent success in getting the scholars to care about the lower city. The merchants were due to come at third bell, though the Plantin Company in particular was going to arrive earlier, since I wanted to look over some of their documents before our audience with the aub.

“Rozemyne, some scholars are going to attend your preliminary meeting. They want to see how you interact with the merchants,” Ferdinand said. They apparently knew it was important to gather intelligence from the lower city, but since they had only ever ordered merchants around, they weren’t sure how to actually go about doing it themselves.

“I imagine they also wish to confirm that the merchants are not taking advantage of your apparent youth,” he muttered to me. “Accept their request, as refusing their participation would be unnatural, but take care to maintain firm control of your expressions and emotions throughout the meeting. The lower city is your greatest weakness; I cannot predict what will happen if they target it and you lose control. Do not reveal your true relationships as you did when telling Elvira you did not wish to cancel the magic contracts due to the amount you valued the connections they provided—doing so will only expose those you care about to danger. You understand what would happen if someone malicious were to detect a weakness, yes?”

I nodded.

“Ensure your emotions are kept under control until we return to the temple,” he concluded.

“...Right.”

Ferdinand and I brought our retainers to the room where the Plantin Company was waiting. Four scholars were there already, as well as Giebe Illgner and Viktor, who were sitting down. We exchanged the customary lengthy

greetings; then, I accepted the documents I had requested from the Plantin Company and started to look them over. Meanwhile, Ferdinand purchased the nanseb paper he had wanted.

Benno's documents were a careful record of what they had done to prepare for building a workshop in Haldenzel, as well as the actual process they had followed. The methodical handwriting distinctively belonged to Mark. If we printed copies and distributed them to the giebes, they would be able to prepare their respective provinces themselves.

"With these documents, we can decide both where to establish the next printing guilds and how the paper-making workshops will need to be prepared," I said. "Thank you."

"I am glad to have been of service to you, Lady Rozemyne."

"The Gutenbergs will move when Haldenzel holds its Spring Prayer," I explained. "Furthermore, in order to make the paper-making workshops operational, we are going to send three craftsmen to teach in each of the prepared workshops, as well as one person to establish a branch of the Ehrenfest Paper Guild. Illgner, Hasse, and the orphanage will provide the instructors; will you be able to send the individuals to establish the guilds?"

We would be sending the instructors once the plant paper workshops had their tools and such prepared, but getting the suketas made, the craftsmen trained, and so on was not an immediate process. They would probably leave for the paper-making workshops once they got back from Haldenzel.

"Yes. We thank you for your concern."

I next conveyed that, from the production quantities discussed in the documents, we would only be signing with two other duchies. I discussed this with Benno, all the while feeling the serious looks of the scholars. Most of what we spoke about I had already mentioned in my letters, so the conversation went smoothly... but then Benno hesitantly asked whether the magic contracts were going to be nullified.

"Yes," I replied with a smile, taking care to not freeze in place. "The industry is going to be spreading all throughout Ehrenfest, and we will need to sell our goods to other duchies, so the contracts no longer suit our situation. The aub

agrees.”

The first magic contracts I ever signed were unavoidably going to be nullified. The industries we were trying to spread were intended to serve as important political structures for Ehrenfest; it simply wouldn’t do for my permission rather than the archduke’s to be required to establish a workshop, nor could all sales pass through the Plantin Company where Lutz worked. It would make life much harder for a lot of people.

We went on to discuss the amount of compensation they would receive for their contracts being nullified and how they would be treated in the future.

“Our gratitude for Aub Ehrenfest’s consideration is beyond words,” Benno said as the meeting concluded.

“We will continue to have high hopes for the Plantin Company,” I replied.

Lutz stood behind Benno, his face devoid of emotion. He was looking at me with the blank smile of a merchant.

The afternoon meeting with Gustav, Otto, and the others progressed without issue, since we were purely confirming what we had already discussed. The merchants were not permitted to speak directly, and so they only listened as the scholars listed out everything that had been decided. Still, at least their thoughts had been taken into consideration this time. Rather than being forced into fulfilling unreasonable commands, they were receiving feasible orders that could actually be completed within the time constraints.

“Now sign this.”

At the end of the meeting, we were presented with a sheet of parchment. Written on it was a brief passage about nullifying the magic contracts and the two numbers representing the magic contracts in question. Benno and Lutz recorded their names and stamped them with blood, as always, whereas I signed mine with a mana pen given to me by a scholar. What I put wasn’t “Myne,” the name I had used when signing the other magic contracts, but “Rozemyne.”

Once that was done, the parchment ignited and quickly disappeared in golden

flame. It only took a few seconds to burn away completely, and with it went the contracts that had once connected Myne, Lutz, and Benno.

My heart stirred with profound unease. It felt as though I was being pushed away from someplace important to me—like the thin strand connecting me to the people I cared about had been cut. I wanted to ask Benno and Lutz whether our relationship would stay the same even without the contracts. I wanted them to nod and reassure me it would, leaving no doubt in my mind. But I had been told to contain my emotions until after returning to the temple, so I could do nothing but tense my stomach and try to keep myself under control.

“Good. Now the paper-making and printing industries can expand without issue,” the archduke said, relieved.

“Indeed. Now there is nothing stalling the construction of more workshops,” the scholars agreed, their words buzzing in my ears like annoying flies.

A Place to Call Home

With the old magic contracts nullified, we needed to sign new ones so that Sylvester could direct the expansion of the paper-making and printing industries. He would not sign them as himself, however, but as Aub Ehrenfest—this way, his successor would remain in control when he eventually passed the torch. Benno was likewise signing as the Plantin Company to ensure things were future-proofed.

I would be handling most of the practical matters as the archduke's adopted daughter, so I was signing as an individual. Profit was guaranteed to line my pockets as a result, but since Lutz was just a leherl apprentice, he wasn't permitted to sign.

This new contract was essentially Aub Ehrenfest purchasing from me the rights to establish paper-making industries, and from Lutz the rights to sell paper, so it included a section wherein a portion of the proceeds would go to the Plantin Company. Of course, the rates were different from before, and other stores would be allowed to buy and sell the products themselves.

"...Plantin Company, is the contract satisfactory?" Sylvester asked.

Benno, who had been glaring at the new magic contract as he looked it over, nodded. "Our gratitude for your immense consideration and generosity is beyond words, Aub Ehrenfest."

The contract really had been as generous as possible out of consideration for how the Plantin Company and I had been carrying the industries on our shoulders up to this point. To me, though, it stopped being generous the very moment Lutz was excluded from it.

Benno signed the contract and stamped his blood, and I signed my name as well. A scholar then took the parchment and passed it to Aub Ehrenfest for the final signature. A moment later, it was enveloped in golden flame.

And so the new magic contract was in effect—a magic contract without Lutz's

name.

Elvira had said we just needed to form a new connection through the new contract, but no such connection had been made here. My heart grew cold. I was already aware that Lutz and I were growing further apart despite having spent so long together, and this was pretty much shoving that fact in my face.

I want to hug Lutz...

I wanted somebody to comfort me, to reassure me that things weren't going to change. I wanted contact, warmth, intimacy... Things I couldn't get as a noble.

I want to go home...

With the magic contract signed, the scholars began to discuss fixing up the lower city. They said through euphemisms that the fastest method was to rebuild everything at once using construction magic, but that a lack of mana to spare on the lower city meant the commoners would need to handle things through manpower alone.

"We would never dare dream of disturbing the aub so," the guildmaster said, his face completely pale as he bowed alongside Benno. "Please do allow us to handle everything."

I could hardly blame them for their fear—they had both seen Hasse's monastery be constructed with magic, and the lower city being messed with in the same manner was a terrifying prospect.

I spoke up, serving as an intermediary between the scholars and merchants. "I shall determine the budget for restructuring the lower city myself and order the scholars accordingly. As you commoners are going to be doing the labor, I entrust those matters to Gustav's leadership. Begin with the main street running from the west to the east gates, since this route experiences more traffic than anywhere else. We can discuss how to further beautify the lower city at a later date."

"As you wish, Lady Rozemyne." The merchants bowed their heads respectfully, their relief clear in their voices.

With the discussion having ended as planned, Sylvester ordered the

merchants to leave. They did as instructed, showing not even the slightest hesitation as they filed out of the audience chamber. I watched them carefully, but Lutz didn't look my way even once.

From there, I was called straight to the archduke's office. The brains of Ehrenfest were all gathered, and the scholars explained to those who hadn't attended our meeting with the merchants the results of our discussion.

"As requested, the Plantin Company received the highest accommodations in the new magic contract," one said. It was apparently normal to buy the rights and leave things at that, but the Plantin Company was also getting a portion of the profits. It was only a small portion, but it would serve as a continual source of income for a new company that had only been established a couple of years ago.

The scholar went on to insinuate that such a contract never would have been signed had the store not been in my favor. I couldn't help but frown at this remark, irritated; he had no idea how much we had struggled to invent these technologies, nor was he aware how much Benno had helped Lutz and me back when we had literally nothing to our names. It was downright insulting for him to frame this as nothing more than empty favoritism.

"Rozemyne," Ferdinand said, briskly moving his hand and instructing me to contain myself. I exhaled slowly and put on my best fake smile.

"The contract we signed with the Plantin Company was only to do with printing and the manufacturing and sale of paper. There was no clause regarding the granting of any technologies, correct?"

"Rozemyne...?"

"Instructors will soon be sent from the Rozemyne Workshop, and the Plantin Company will begin establishing branches of the Ehrenfest Paper Guild and the Printing Guild in service of the construction of additional workshops. I will decide the price paid for the granting of technologies and extract it from the giebes, to be paid to the Plantin Company and to Illgner for providing instructors of their own."

My sudden proclamation elicited wide-eyed stares from all those present. Sylvester in particular blinked in confusion. "Where's this coming from? What's

the point in doing that?" he asked.

"Given this discussion and the situation, I suspect the Plantin Company and the assisting craftsmen will not be paid the proper amount for their granting of technologies, since the contract mentions no such thing. I cannot imagine noble scholars will be capable of understanding the difficulties said merchants and craftsmen will face in needing to train new workers during the spring while simultaneously participating in these new industries and doing their usual duties."

This was not charity work; it was large-scale industrialization being led by the archduke. There was no chance of the budget being divided for the Gutenbergs, however, nor were they likely to be given the leeway necessary for them to do their jobs. The only future I could envision was one in which the nobles crushed my precious craftsmen with their usual unreasonable demands.

"Ah. This must be a difference between commoners and nobles..." one scholar speculated, seeming to have misinterpreted my attempt to convey that I couldn't trust them to play such a pivotal role in work they didn't even understand. I envisioned a dunce cap on their head; they were a complete failure in my mind.

"That is one way of putting it. Another is that I have no intention of entrusting important duties to those who will make no attempt to understand the details of our work. I will train the scholars involved in the paper-making and printing industries myself," I declared with a smile.

Ferdinand shot me a surprised glare. "Calm yourself, Rozemyne. That is not something for you to decide on your own," he said. This was an industry being spearheaded by Aub Ehrenfest himself—it was outright disrespectful for me to take charge without consulting him, but I refused to stand and watch as the Plantin Company and the Gutenbergs were ground into the dust.

"Who will decide these things if not me? How many scholars are familiar with printing and paper-making? How many have spent time with craftsmen and businesses, and have it in them to grow the burgeoning industries further? Did you train any such scholars during the two years I was asleep, Ferdinand? Did Aub Ehrenfest? Doing so is only natural if one plans to develop new industries,

would you not agree? I would be delighted to see them, so that I do not have to raise them myself," I said, knowing that no such scholars existed because the ones here with us were so incompetent.

I was ultimately doing a poor job at disguising my inner thoughts. Sylvester averted his gaze, having essentially neglected the two industries while entrusting all the work to Ferdinand, who was presently rubbing his temples.

"I believe Justus has grasped the industries over the past two years," Ferdinand said, his voice a low groan.

"Then I will raise the scholars with Justus at their center," I replied. He was a weirdo who all but dedicated his life to the pursuit of collecting intelligence, but he didn't show much prejudice toward commoners and was obsessed with new things. He was an ideal candidate for working in these new industries.

I nodded with a smile, pleased to have so suddenly obtained such a skilled worker, only for Ferdinand to shake his head. "No. He is too useful to me. I will not have you stealing him away."

"Rozemyne, Justus serves Ferdinand. You can't use another person's retainer without their permission. Pick any of the scholars here instead," Sylvester added. He was giving me free rein over them, but that didn't matter to me; I had no use for incompetents.

"Aub Ehrenfest, I have been involved with printing and paper-making since the very beginning. These industries are my babies; they have only reached their current scope because I nurtured them so dearly. Printing and the creation of paper, as well as the making of the tools required for both, have always been done by large groups of commoners. Nobles have not been involved at any point, and I have absolutely no intention of entrusting my children to those who cannot understand the importance of the Plantin Company and the craftsmen involved. Such incompetent scholars will only force unreasonable demands on them, grinding them into the dirt with their ignorance. They have no talent for anything but the destruction of others."

"So in other words, you don't want any of the scholars here?"

"Correct. I understand we are suffering a shortage of manpower, but I would greatly appreciate individuals who have at least a sliver of skill and wisdom to

their names.”

Sylvester winced as I started to list what I needed from scholars: a lack of prejudice toward visiting the temple, the ability to converse normally with commoners, and a general interest in new things. “Those aren’t skills scholars are expected to have, you know.”

“Of course. It would not be natural for traditionally educated scholars to be capable of doing work with commoners. Someone who is competent for your purposes, aub, may not be competent for mine.”

“I see.” Sylvester nodded and crossed his arms. “Alright then. I’m leaving the training of workers for the paper-making and printing industries to you, Rozemyne; nobody in Ehrenfest is more familiar in these areas. Plus, I don’t know what resources you’re going to need.”

“May I speak for a moment?” Elvira asked, breaking her silence as she placed a hand on her cheek. “Might I suggest training the layscholars and medscholars serving as the giebes’ government officials?”

The unexpected suggestion caused all eyes to fall on Elvira. Pretty much every noble here had been born and raised in the Noble’s Quarter; it was safe to say that, excluding Elvira herself, who had been raised as the daughter of Giebe Haldenzel, there were no traditional land-owning nobles here.

“They have had more opportunities to interact with commoners than those raised in the Noble’s Quarter, and if we inform them that they can line the pockets of their provinces with a new industry, they will certainly take the learning seriously.”

“That is an excellent idea. I shall investigate its potential,” I said, but I got the feeling that would only make it harder to charge the giebes for the technologies they were being taught. I would talk it over with Benno later; my decision needed to be based on how competent the scholars were as workers.

That night, I had a dream. I was walking alone down a long dirt road with no end in sight. A single light shone in the sky like the North Star, and I was walking in its direction.

At first, I was alone. But then my family joined me. And Lutz. And Benno, and Mark. Things were getting more and more lively. Lutz would carry me on his back, or Dad on his shoulders, or Benno and Mark in their arms. They were all helping me along the way. We all talked as we continued our journey, and we laughed about the silliest things together.

Fran and Gil joined in at some point along the way, and the next thing I knew, Ferdinand was there too. By that point, a small amount of grass had sprouted underfoot. It was soft and cushioned my steps. I kept walking forward, holding hands with Lutz and with my family in turn, but the grass continued to grow. It eventually became so tall that I struggled to even press onward.

I pursed my lips, annoyed at the grass. I was being forced down a different path than Lutz and the others, but we were at least moving in the same direction, so I continued my march toward the radiant star.

They're getting a little too far away...

I could still reach their hands, but they were slowly moving farther away. They were walking slightly faster now too. I desperately raced to keep up, but the grass was pulling at my legs with each panicked step.

Wait! Come back! Don't leave me!

The more I walked, the more our paths separated. Everyone was laughing and smiling together, but not one person noticed I was falling behind. At some point, our hands had slipped apart. I was alone.

Dad, Mom, Tuuli! Wait for me! Lutz! Lutz! *Don't leave me behind!*

The grass was as tall as me now. I pushed it aside, my sobbing uncontrollable as I raced along my path, desperately searching for everyone.



And then a voice broke through the chaos.

“Milady.”

“Rihyarda...?”

I woke up with a start, suddenly aware that someone was shaking me. It took me only a moment to realize Rihyarda was looking down at me with concern. My pillow felt cold. I had apparently been crying in my sleep.

I sat up slowly and rubbed my eyes, shaking my head several times in an attempt to shake away any remnants of my dream. But despite my best efforts, the nightmarish sights were burned into my mind.

“You were stirring quite a bit in your sleep, milady. Are you alright?”

I wasn’t. I wasn’t at all. The back of my head ached, and I could feel my mana boiling up inside of me. Yet I was still unbearably cold.

“Rihyarda, tell Ferdinand that I wish to return to the temple.”

“...As you wish.”

Despite the early hour, Rihyarda sent an ordonnanz at once. I washed my face, had my clothes changed, and then ate breakfast. The ordonnanz returned while we were eating and thrice repeated a message from Ferdinand.

“Rozemyne, I heard your request through Rihyarda, but you have a meeting with Giebe Haldenzel scheduled for today. Can you endure until after then?”

I really didn’t think so. Giebe Haldenzel was among those who, despite the growth of the printing industry, had been unable to establish new paper-making workshops due to the magic contracts. If at any point he expressed his joy about them being nullified, I wasn’t sure I could contain myself.

“This is Rozemyne. I’m going to leave on my own before I cause any problems.”

Ferdinand sent back another ordonnanz in an instant, his message this time punctuated with sighs. “I will come see you after sending a notice about the meeting. Prepare to leave and do not act on your own,” he said.

I clenched my teeth. He was going to make me wait even longer?

Rihyarda patted my tense shoulders. “Now, now, milady. Hurry and finish your breakfast. Judging from how Ferdinand sounded in his response, he should be here in no time. You wouldn’t want to get scolded for calling him early in the morning and then not even being ready to go, would you?” she asked, keeping her voice lively in an attempt to lighten the mood.

I nodded and got back to eating while Ottilie prepared for my return to the temple. I saw her preparing winter clothes and sending off an ordonnanz to contact my guard knights.

“You look even more sickly than usual today. You’ll feel more comfortable at the temple, though, won’t you?” Rihyarda asked, wearing a sad smile. “You can spend today relaxing.”

Just as she had said, Ferdinand appeared in no time at all. He probably would have scolded me had I still been eating breakfast in a daze. “Have you prepared to leave, Rozemyne?” he asked. “If so, we shall depart at once.”

All of the basic necessities I needed could already be found at the temple, so there wasn’t that much luggage for me to drag around. The most important thing this time was the rinfin paper we had gotten from Giebe Illgner.

“Farewell, Lady Rozemyne.”

Ferdinand and Eckhart took the lead, I followed after them in Lessy, then Damuel and Angelica trailed behind me. My impatience caused me to speed up along the way, so the journey went a little quicker than usual.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne.” Fran greeted me when we arrived. Before I could even climb out of my Pandabus, Ferdinand had put away his highbeast and was walking toward him.

“Fran, the arrangements?” Ferdinand queried.

“Completed already. The other attendants are currently organizing the orphanage director’s chambers.”

“It seems much stress has built up within her. Spare the long greetings and take them directly to the hidden room.”

“As you wish.”

Once I had alighted from Lessy, Ferdinand held out a leather bag to me. “Rozemyne, put your hands into this and drain as much of your mana as possible. You do not want to hurt those around you with an emotional explosion of mana, do you?”

“My gratitude.” I took the leather bag and went straight to the orphanage director’s chambers.

“We were all truly surprised by the High Priest sending a letter so early in the morning...” Fran said with a troubled smile. One couldn’t use an ordonnanz to communicate with those who lacked schtappes, so Ferdinand had instead used the magic tool letters that flew like birds to instruct Fran to summon the Plantin Company. “Gil departed in an immense hurry. He should return with Lutz soon.”

The air was ice-cold when we arrived at the largely unused orphanage director’s chambers. Not much time had passed since the furnaces were lit.

“Please keep your coat on; the room has not quite warmed yet,” Fran said, and so I entered the chambers without taking off any of my layers. I was half relieved to see the inside unchanged from when I had been a commoner shrine maiden, but also half discomforted—it was yet another reminder of how much things had changed. It was like my dream was becoming a reality.

“Lady Rozemyne, please wait in the hidden room with Lord Damuel. Lady Angelica, please guard the door.”

“You can count on me, Fran. Leaving the hard merchant talk to Damuel is the right call for sure,” Angelica said, gladly making her way to the chamber’s front door. She had broadcast her ineptitude and general aversion to thinking so openly that I expected Fran to cradle his head, considering that he was so similar to Ferdinand, but he didn’t appear at all bothered. Instead, he handled her effortlessly, perhaps because she was so much less stiff and formal than Brigitte had been.

“To think I’d be going back in there again after so long...” Damuel muttered as we climbed the stairs and went into my hidden room, though I opted to ignore him. The room was open to my attendants and already clean thanks to their quick work.

I made sure the door was kept wide open so that Lutz could come in; then, I

sat in the chair Fran had offered me. He looked down at me with an uncertain expression. “Might I suggest using the leather bag the High Priest has allowed you to borrow?” he asked. “The color of your eyes seems to be a bit unstable.”

When one’s eye color began to change, it often indicated that they were losing control of their mana. I hurriedly stuck my hands into the bag and noticed there were many small, round things inside. They instantly began sucking out my mana.

I wonder what these are, exactly?

I peeked inside and saw several black feystones, some of which had already broken apart into golden dust. Ferdinand was evidently hoping to contain my rampaging mana while simultaneously securing some valuable crafting resources for himself. Was I the only one annoyed at his thorough planning?

“I have brought Lutz!” Gil exclaimed, bursting into the orphanage director’s chambers. His breathing was a little ragged, maybe due to him having sprinted here at full speed.

“Gil, Lady Rozemyne is in her hidden room,” Fran said. “Please guide Lutz there.”

“Understood.”

I could hear Gil and Lutz climbing the stairs. Their movements had been nothing but graceful for some time, but now their footsteps were quick and unsteady.

“Lutz, thank you very much for coming this early in the morning. I entrust the rest to you,” Fran said, allowing Lutz and Gil into the hidden room and then immediately shutting the door behind them. Their shoulders heaved up and down as they struggled to catch their breaths.

I abruptly stood up, not even waiting for the door to fully close, and sprinted toward Lutz. “Lutz, Lutz, Lutz!” I cried, but right as I was about to leap at him, he held me back by my shoulders. “Why stop me?! Can’t we hug?!”

“We can; I just can’t breathe. Let me catch my breath before you dive at me.”

Lutz embraced me, patting my back and telling me to calm down. It was a

familiar hug—one that made both my unease and my remaining strength melt away. I wrapped my arms around him in turn and gave a gentle sigh.

“Lutz, Lutz... The contracts being nullified won’t change anything between us, will it...?”

“Well, are you gonna change?” he asked, placing an affectionate hand on my head. I shook my head in response. “Me neither. It’s definitely a little sad that the contracts are gone, but what’s more important to me is my promise to make the things you think up, and that hasn’t changed at all. Things are the same.”

“Right. You’re right. Whew. I had such an awful dream last night. I just couldn’t stand it, so I came back to the temple.”

Lutz gave a weary sigh. “C’mon. Are you telling me I was dragged over here first thing in the morning ’cause you had a bad dream? Is there... not anyone else who can do this kinda thing for you?”

“If there was, we wouldn’t be here right now. There are people who give me more work and things to worry about, but nobody to take my fears away.”

“...Alright. Well, guess my days of getting dragged around are far from over,” he said, looking a little relieved despite his words.

“I couldn’t take it anymore. But once I’ve recharged with you, I can try hard again. Thanks.”

“Just don’t push yourself *too* much. You’ll collapse,” Lutz said, scrunching up his face and tapping my cheeks. That was a thing of the past now though—I still needed to keep my magic tools on, but it was much rarer for me to actually collapse.

I puffed out my chest with pride. “Once I get a little better, I won’t collapse at all anymore. Just a little better.”

“Why does your saying that make me even more worried?!”

“I’m fine, really. The only reason I’m still sick is because I haven’t fully recovered from the coma yet. How’s Tuuli? Is she doing okay? She has a super important and scary job now, so I’m worried about her.” Both Otto and Benno

had given tough-guy answers, but Tuuli was the one actually making the hairpin. Who knew if she was okay.

Lutz answered in a high voice, mimicking Tuuli. “Gosh, Myne, this is way too sudden! You dumb, dumb dummy!”

“Eep. Sorry, Tuuli...”

“She also said she wasn’t gonna let this opportunity go to waste and that you should look forward to her making the best hairpin ever.”

I smiled, imagining her delicately making the best hairpin she could despite being pretty mad about it. *My Tuuli really is an angel!*

“Lutz, Lutz. Tell Tuuli I love her too.”

“No thanks,” he said, rejecting me immediately. I widened my eyes and asked why, only for him to give a sharp frown. “Everyone thinks Tuuli and I are dating now ’cause we go to the temple together to learn etiquette. I don’t wanna deliver a message like that and add fuel to the fire.”

“What, is Tuuli not good enough for you, Lutz? You should feel lucky just to be with her in other people’s minds. This is *Tuuli* we’re talking about here, you know?” I said, pursing my lips.

Lutz furrowed his brow and shook his head. “Nuh uh. I don’t want people getting even more jealous of me.”

“Jealous? Does that mean she’s super popular with the boys? I knew it. That’s my Tuuli for you! She must be a total babe by now, I bet. I wanna see her...” I sighed. I hadn’t seen Tuuli or anyone else in my family a single time since waking up.

“You’ll see her when the hairpin’s done, won’t you? Tuuli was saying she wants to deliver it herself and hear what you think. Also, Kamil’s been saying he wants new toys.”

“Guess I’ll have to make some, then! What kind of toys would he want, do you think? He needs new picture books, right? Maybe karuta to help him learn letters? Should we order boards from Ingo? We could try using paper from Illgner.”

Dirk, who had previously been just a toddler waddling around the orphanage, was now just about old enough to go gathering. Kamil had no doubt gotten bigger too while I was asleep.

Lutz grimaced as I excitedly started thinking about fun toys for four-year-olds. “Crap... Did I mess up here? Look, you gotta focus on paper-making and printing first. Don’t get your priorities out of order.”

“Aww. I can’t put Kamil first?”

“No! Of course not!”

“I know, I know. I was just messing around. Mm... Joking like this is nice. It takes me back,” I said with a chuckle, and that was when the feystone in the door of my hidden room started to shine. That meant someone was signaling me from the other side. It was a necessary feature, since the hidden room blocked out knocks and other sounds entirely.

I detached myself from Lutz and straightened my back as Gil moved to open the door. Standing on the other side were Fran, Benno, and Mark.

“Lady Rozemyne, Masters Benno and Mark from the Plantin Company have arrived.”

Um... Why?

Seeing my surprise, Fran lowered his eyes uncomfortably. “In his letter, the High Priest instructed us to summon the Plantin Company at once... so we called for everyone, not just Lutz. My sincere apologies.”

“Oh. I see... Worry not, Fran; you are not at fault.” I gestured for him to stand down before looking up at Benno and Mark. They had gone pale from hearing there was some kind of emergency.

“What the hell happened?! What’s the emergency?!” Benno asked as soon as the door was shut, so worked up that spit was flying from his mouth.

I instinctively hid behind Lutz and answered honestly—I had awoken from a terrible dream after the contracts had been nullified and just wanted to see Lutz.

“You... YOU IDIOT!”

“Gyaaah! Ow, ow, ow!”

Benno dragged me out from behind Lutz, his eyebrows shooting up in anger, and started fiercely grinding his knuckles against my head. “We got called over the day after an audience in the castle for an emergency! We were freakin’ terrified, and, what, it all comes down to you having a bad dream?! Like hell that’s an emergency!” he yelled. He wasn’t holding back at all, and there was nobody here who could stop him.

“I was at the end of my rope!” I protested. “My mana was about to go on a rampage! Even the High Priest thought it was an emergency!”

“Yeah, her eyes were a bit of a weird color when I got here...” Lutz added.

Hearing that, Benno stopped grinding my skull and peered down at me. He pulled on my cheeks in frustration before letting out an exhausted sigh. “Seems like you’ve calmed down at least. Alright. We’re outta here.”

“Wait a moment. Let’s talk for a bit. I can’t just drag you over here first thing in the morning without making it worth your while, can I?”

I gave them a summary of what had been discussed in the archduke’s office following the audience. I reported that I had obtained the right to train the scholars myself so that the Gutenbergs wouldn’t be crushed by their unreasonable demands, which elicited words of gratitude and a wider smile from Mark. Back when Elvira had instructed them to establish a printing workshop right away, trying to negotiate with her had not been easy.

“I was useful, right? I did something helpful, right? Go ahead—praise me!” I ordered, looking as proud as ever. Rather than lavishing me with compliments, however, Benno grimaced and flicked my forehead. “Ow! But why?!”

“Because I can tell you’ll only act crazier if you start getting cocky.”

“Aw! How come you’re so eager to grind your fist on my head when you’re annoyed, but you won’t praise me when I’ve earned it?! Isn’t it weird that I’m suffering for all my hard work?!”

“Aah. Fine, fine.” Benno forcibly patted me on the head with a monotone, “You did good.” It actually hurt a little, since my head was still sensitive from his knuckle-grinding. I puffed out my cheeks and complained, but Lutz just shook

his head and gave a relaxed smile.

“You’re complaining and yet you’re still smiling at him. I’m gonna take a guess and say that you actually like this kinda stuff, since you can’t do it with nobles, right?” he pointed out.

I went silent. Lutz was completely right—I felt so much nostalgia for these kinds of exchanges and was simply happy to be enjoying them again. Benno and Mark shook their heads with exasperation as I grinned.

“Anyway, about the scholars—how’re you going to train them?” Benno asked.

“I need them to be capable of speaking to commoners on some level, but almost none of the nobles I know can be trusted with this work. Do you know anyone who might be more reliable?” I asked.

Benno and Lutz both immediately suggested Justus. He was a fast worker and, unlike the archnobles in Haldenzel, had actually cared to ask the Plantin Company for their thoughts. He had kept things going without issue while I was asleep.

“Justus serves as a scholar for Ferdinand, and Ferdinand won’t lend him to me,” I complained, bemoaning my truly unfortunate circumstances. But as I was considering whether I should ask again, Mark raised a hand.

“I believe the guildmaster is more familiar with considering and understanding nobles than we are. His recommendations will also likely hold more weight than ours, considering that our rapid growth has earned us much ire.”

“Planning to dump the hard work on the old geezer, huh?” Benno said with a grin.

“He is simply the best man for the job,” Mark replied casually, wearing his usual smile.

“Okay. In that case, try asking the guildmaster to put together a list of candidates for me. I’ll consult the archduke about who among them is best to use,” I said. “Also, this is Mother’s suggestion, but what about using the officials supporting giebes for this? They’re familiar with the lives of commoners, and she said they would wholly dedicate themselves to their work if doing so meant

enriching their land. How were they in Haldenzel?”

I hadn’t been to Haldenzel yet, but both Lutz and Benno had been there with the other Gutenbergs; they surely knew how these officials had performed.

“Only Master Benno and Damian met Giebe Haldenzel,” Lutz said. “I was given a tour of the city by a servant with the others—maybe he was a scholar? The commoners and nobles there actually seemed to interact a little.”

“If we go for mednobles instead of archnobles, it might work...” I mused aloud. “Or, no, maybe laynobles are best.”

Back in Illgner, the lack of nobles working as officials had resulted in Giebe Illgner needing to visit the paper-making workshop himself to check up on progress. They had been given a lot of control in Illgner, but the same wouldn’t be the case for Haldenzel.

“The province is totally frozen over; people struggle to live if the blessings go down even a little, so they’ve ended up clumping together to survive. They’re harsh to outsiders and not very open to new ideas... but once they started getting a bit more receptive, things got going real fast.”

It had apparently taken them a long time to accept the new work and way of doing things. That was their provincial culture, which was fair enough, but it had been a real pain when it came to actually getting things done.

“And we’ll probably be building those paper-making workshops in Haldenzel come spring...” Lutz said, crossing his arms in thought.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“There are way fewer trees in Haldenzel than Illgner, and I dunno whether the types they have are gonna be any good to make paper with. I get why they want paper-making workshops, but I feel they’re better off just buying their paper from elsewhere once we have more workshops set up north of Ehrenfest. Also, we should build the workshops as far south in Haldenzel as we can. Could you make these suggestions for us?”

“Sure. You can count on me. Also, Benno—about the Gutenbergs’ long-term trip...”

We went on to discuss everything from the printing industry to our families, from important matters to little nothings. Our conversation continued until, eventually, I was completely relieved.

I saw Lutz and the others off with a smile, and they all smiled back in turn. They had forgiven me, saying that the trip hadn’t been a complete waste of time thanks to my intel. And with that, the Plantin Company was gone.

The Meeting with Giebe Haldenzel

“The High Priest said to visit him this afternoon,” Zahm said upon my return to the High Bishop’s chambers. “He is surely worried about you as well.”

I looked down at the leather bag that Ferdinand had given me. *Maybe I should show the extent of my appreciation by turning all the feystones into that golden sand...*

“I am relieved to see you looking well again, Lady Rozemyne,” Monika said with a pleasant smile. I was surprised to see that she was already preparing lunch; it seemed that I had been talking with Lutz and the others for much longer than I had thought.

Once I had eaten, I went to the High Priest’s chambers. Ferdinand was probably mad that I had immediately ruined our schedules and forced us to come back to the temple early. I couldn’t help but tremble as I stepped into his room, and the stern glare he shot me the moment I came into his view was enough to make me flinch.

“Ferdinand, I truly am sorry about how much I’ve inconvenienced you today.”

“You have indeed inconvenienced me. However... I see you are well again.”

“It is because of your consideration that my fears have been vanquished and my energy has recovered.”

Ferdinand checked the color in my face before pointing to the leather bag in my hand. “Were those of use to you?”

“Indeed. I thank you ever so much. I was once again surprised by the thorough nature of your preparations,” I said as I returned the bag.

Ferdinand checked the contents; then his expression turned to a grimace and he tapped his temple. “It seems I did not provide an unnecessary amount. Still, for you to have turned this many feystones to dust, I can only imagine how emotionally disturbed you must have been. Better this than your emotions exploding within the castle, but still... I will need to think of a way to handle

these situations without relying on the Plantin Company."

"There is no need, Ferdinand. I feel better now. I'll do my best so that I can keep spreading books!" I declared. I certainly didn't want him to start thinking up anything that would sever my connection to the Plantin Company.

"Do only as we have already decided," Ferdinand shot back. "Your behavior tends to become extreme when you are doing your best."

"Ngh. Okay, well... Tell me what we have decided to do, then."

We went on to discuss my upcoming meeting with Giebe Haldenzel. Now that the magic contracts had been nullified, the archduke would be permitting the establishment of new paper-making workshops. This meeting was mainly going to be about the Gutenbergs' long-term stay. I also went ahead and reported to Ferdinand what I had just told Benno.

Once our conversation was over, we hurried back to the castle, where Ella had stayed behind. Rihyarda welcomed us with her lips pursed at my busy schedule, noting that she would have preferred me taking things more slowly now that I finally had some spare time.

Unfortunately, it was becoming clear that I could only run away from noble society for so long. I ate dinner with Charlotte, who expressed concern for my health.

It was ultimately decided that the meeting with Giebe Haldenzel would be held in the afternoon two days later, and that Ferdinand would accompany me as my guardian. A noble life sure was a busy one.

The meeting room for archnobles was a bit fancier than the ones I had visited previously—there were colorful tapestries, and the furniture seemed to be high-quality and historied. Waiting inside were Giebe Haldenzel, his wife, and Elvira.

Once Ferdinand and I sat down, Giebe Haldenzel greeted us with his wife. "At last we have the chance to greet you formally, Lady Rozemyne. May we pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?"

"You may."

Giebe Haldenzel certainly looks a lot like Mother...

His dark-green hair and dark-brown eyes resembled hers exactly. He wore a polite smile, but his gaze was sharp, and it was obvious that he was watching me carefully. Even as he knelt before me, he was exuding an unmistakable amount of pressure; he carried the firm aura of someone who was used to standing above others.

“On behalf of Haldenzel, I wish to thank you.”

The giebe and his wife had previously come all the way to Karstedt’s estate for my baptism ceremony, but I had been dragged away by Wilfried and ended up falling unconscious before we could exchange greetings. Our next opportunity to formally meet had been during my debut, but I had been forced to leave prematurely after giving a blessing. Then, the following winter, we had been too preoccupied fighting with the former Veronica faction nobles about Wilfried.

“Have I done something worthy of your thanks...?” I asked.

I was offered pretty much the same explanation that Elvira had already given me: Haldenzel had been receiving chalices filled with mana since I began work as an apprentice blue shrine maiden. My efforts had apparently caused crop production to rise across the entire province, which had in turn made the people’s lives a little bit easier. Of course, this “little bit” had actually had a massive impact considering that they had existed in perpetual poverty.

I had learned in my lessons on Ehrenfest’s geography that Haldenzel was cold enough for its rivers to freeze over and that its citizens learned to live close together and take care of one another. The province itself was expansive, but its population was focused in the southern half, with the north having barely any inhabitants. To complicate matters further, Haldenzel was the province the Lord of Winter was most likely to appear in.

“My knights have reported that your blessings provide much aid during the Lord of Winter hunt,” Giebe Haldenzel noted.

“The color of the flag has returned to normal as well,” his wife added with a kind smile, referring to Ahrensbach’s unsuccessful attempt to take over Ehrenfest’s higher-ups. “Not to mention, due to how long winters last in

Haldenzel, many have been saved by the printing industry."

From there, Giebe Haldenzel and his wife explained how well the Gutenbergs had worked from their perspective. Lutz and the gray priests had apparently brought the necessary tools to a prepared workshop, put together the printing press, and then demonstrated how it worked. However, the printing press required the operator to organize the letter types into place, and almost no Haldenzel commoners knew how to read. The teaching process had taken a very long time as a result.

"I was stunned to see that all of the Ehrenfest craftsmen know how to read," the giebe said. "We had our hands full adopting the Gutenbergs' technologies over the winter, and now we must teach our own people to read; after all, it would not do for them to mistakenly place the letter types upside down and not even realize it."

"The orphans in my orphanage learned through playing karuta together and reading picture books, but the process is not a fast one," I explained. "It might be wise to have layscholars or apprentice scholars proofread the draft prints for now." Given that the books were being sold to nobles, quality assurance was our highest priority even in the Rozemyne Workshop.

"Your Gutenbergs have developed quite a positive reputation among the craftsmen of Haldenzel, Lady Rozemyne. They are all so skilled despite their youth."

The Gutenbergs had taught ink workshops how to make the special ink that we used for printing and carpentry workshops how to make the wooden parts needed for printing presses, all during their long stay from spring to autumn. Once they had the scholars proofreading, the printing had gone off without a hitch.

There was one issue, however: the smithies in Haldenzel still weren't skilled enough. They had completed their own letter types and other kinds of metalwork, but nothing they had made was good enough to earn Johann's approval. That simply wouldn't do—it was surprisingly easy for letter types to get scratched, worn down, or broken during the printing process, so they would need to be able to make their own.

“I am told the smiths have banded together,” the giebe continued. “They are determined to receive the Gutenbergs’ approval by spring.”

“In the report I received from the Gutenbergs, they expressed their concern that Haldenzel had not accepted them,” I said, recalling the report mentioning that Haldenzel had met the Gutenbergs with extremely high resistance. “But I see now that these fears were for nothing.”

As the conversation continued, I decided to use this opportunity to relay the suggestions that had been passed on to me.

“Haldenzel receives few outsiders, and our lifestyles rarely see any change at all, so I can understand why the craftspeople showed resistance to this new technology,” the giebe responded. “That said, the bonds between family members are as strong as the earth, and once we accept someone, we protect them like family. Once the people understand the blessings that printing will bring us, they will never forget what you have done for them. They will treasure printing forever. I would like to provide a formal response to the Gutenbergs’ suggestions once Haldenzel has grown used to its technology.”

“Please take your time—my hope is that your printing will bring as much wealth as possible to Haldenzel. Still, I see that the provinces even within Ehrenfest have quite unique cultures. Haldenzel seems much different from Illgner,” I observed. I had once traveled all throughout Ehrenfest for Spring Prayer, but it was hard to pick up on a province’s culture when I was just landing on a stage to give my blessing and then immediately leaving again.

“We have been told you will accompany the Gutenbergs on their return to Haldenzel in spring. When this time comes, you may see firsthand the strength of our proud people, who endure even the harshest winters with a smile.” Giebe Haldenzel spoke with a pleased smile as he boasted about his people, and I couldn’t help but smile with him. I could imagine him among his people, doing his best to protect them amid the harsh environment. While it was certainly different from Illgner, it seemed to me that Haldenzel was a good province too.

“I am quite looking forward to visiting Haldenzel as well.”

“Giebe Haldenzel,” Ferdinand said, “the Gutenbergs will be sent following Spring Prayer and will then depart again by the end of summer.”

The giebe crossed his arms, his brow furrowed as he pondered the meaning behind those words. Ferdinand went on to explain that printing workshops were due to be spread all throughout Ehrenfest, and that the Gutenbergs needed to begin long-term preparations to accomplish this.

“There are many provinces waiting for the Gutenbergs,” Ferdinand concluded. “Consider it special circumstances that Haldenzel is seeing them twice.”

Giebe Haldenzel closed his eyes as he processed this information. Then, after a moment of silence, he looked at me head-on. “Lady Rozemyne, I find it extremely reassuring to know that you are working among the leaders of Ehrenfest. As Elvira’s daughter, I trust that you will treasure your family and never forget your home.”

“Excuse me, Giebe Haldenzel... You seem to be praising me, but both Ferdinand and Mother frequently inform me that my softness for my family is a weakness that must be dealt with.” I shot Ferdinand and Elvira slightly concerned glances, since it sounded to me like the giebe was instructing me to prioritize him as family, but they just quietly awaited my next words.

I returned my attention to the giebe, whose dark-brown eyes glimmered as he shook his head. “That is not what I meant,” he said. “Rather, you have been gifted with a talent for inventing a seemingly endless stream of products. I imagine many other duchies will seek your person in the Royal Academy, but I pray that you recall your home and your family, and that you remain in Ehrenfest nonetheless.”

It seemed that he wasn’t telling me to prioritize Haldenzel, but rather to avoid leaving the duchy. I had misunderstood him once again.

A sigh escaped me. Little did he know, those I considered my family were found not among nobles, but in the lower city. And with the magic contract preventing us from interacting as family, I needed to treasure the tiny connections that still remained—like Tuuli delivering her hairpins, and Dad guarding me on my way to Hasse. These were connections that existed only in Ehrenfest; I had no plans to leave the duchy for as long as my family was here.

“My family is indeed in Ehrenfest,” I said. “Barring orders from Aub Ehrenfest

himself, there is no other place I would call home.”

Giebe Haldenzel seemed visibly relieved to hear my declaration... but out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that Ferdinand was now wearing a deep frown.

Returning to the Royal Academy

After my meeting with Giebe Haldenzel, I participated in winter socializing. This meant meeting the nobles Ferdinand and Rihyarda had selected, attending tea parties hosted by members of the Florencia faction, and writing down any stories I remembered to make into romance books that Elvira and her friends would probably like.

I had already gone to the winter playroom with Charlotte and spoken with Moritz about the first-years. Laynobles generally struggled with geography and history, since they had few opportunities to see maps and chronologies, and so we had discussed incorporating these subjects into the winter playroom. I had even given Moritz one of the study guides I had made for this winter's first-years. Once the children were given these tasters, I expected that their interest would grow, and that they would find attending the actual courses a little easier.

"Milady, you have a meeting with Aub Ehrenfest scheduled for this afternoon," Rihyarda told me one day after breakfast.

"This is quite sudden. What would have driven him to schedule a meeting so abruptly and without notice?"

"He received a report from Wilfried first thing this morning and wants to hear your thoughts."

Something must have happened at the Royal Academy. I consented to the meeting before getting back to the Elvira-pandering romance novel I was writing.

Following lunch, I went to the archduke's office. Ferdinand had apparently been summoned too, as he was reading from a board when I arrived.

"I hear you received a report from Wilfried," I said.

"Yep. Though it was less of a report and more him pleading for you to come

back," Sylvester replied, handing me the report in question. I started looking it over.

Almost all of the Ehrenfest students had finished their lessons, and the Royal Academy was now shifting fully into socializing season. Those from our duchy had so far received almost twice as many tea party invitations compared to the year prior, and there were a great number of questions floating around about our trends. Girls were as interested in the hairpins and rinsham as I had expected, to the point that Wilfried and his retainers were finding it quite uncomfortable being surrounded whenever they attended tea parties.

"If these tea parties are filled with girls, why is Wilfried attending them himself rather than sending Brunhilde or Lieseleta?" I asked.

"Because they address the invitations to all archduke candidates. They're directed at you, of course, but since you're not there, Wilfried is stuck going in your place," Sylvester explained.

"I see. He has my sympathies, then."

I gleaned from Sylvester's words that, had I stayed at the Royal Academy, I would have been forced to attend tea party after tea party instead. Perhaps the order to return home had actually saved me. Wilfried was suffering in my place, but, well... there was nothing I could do about that.

"This is a report about ditter," Ferdinand said, handing me the board he had been reading from. It seemed that Ehrenfest had been unable to refuse Dunkelfelger's challenge to a rematch, and so the two duchies had ended up playing another game. Ehrenfest lost in the blink of an eye, of course—they lacked my strategies, and their main fighters, Angelica and Cornelius, were both away. Rauffen had apparently been so disappointed that he flat-out asked when I would be getting back.

Professor Rauffen's forgotten that I'm not an apprentice knight, hasn't he?

The tea party between cousins—that is, the tea party with Ahrensbach and Frenbeltag—had also taken place. It seemed that Detlinde had aggressively asked why Ehrenfest's grades were shooting up and why Lamprecht's marriage had ended up being refused, on top of asking various questions about our trends.

“This does not bode particularly well for the Archduke Conference,” Ferdinand observed.

“You can say that again,” Sylvester concurred. “We’ll need to keep a close eye on what moves Ahrensbach and the former Veronica faction make.”

Also, according to the report, Rudiger from Frenbeltag had indirectly asked whether I was already engaged. Detlinde had asked the same about Wilfried, who had managed to avoid both questions by saying that we would probably have hard answers by the Archduke Conference this spring.

“Does this mean I’m going to get a proposal from Frenbeltag?” I asked, wiping an overjoyed tear from my eye as I reread the board over and over again. That would be my first proposal ever, even including my Urano days.

Ferdinand sighed and ripped the board from my hands. “Why would that make you happy?” he asked. “They are blatantly trying to secure your mana.”

“How many books does Frenbeltag have in its libraries?” I inquired. “Does it have more books than Ehrenfest? Ngh... N-Not that I want to accept the proposal... I’m just curious. I would like a list of all their books, if possible.”

Ferdinand glared at me, his eyes brimming with doubt. “If you continue to print as you currently are, we will soon leave them in the dust regardless.”

“True. Well then, Sylvester, you can go ahead and turn down Frenbeltag’s proposal for me.”

“Rozemyne, is that all you’re going to focus on?!” Sylvester barked in disbelief. “Aren’t there other things you should be worrying about?! This isn’t something to decide based on how many books the suitor has!”

“She has brought this foolishness up before,” Ferdinand said with a dismissive scoff. I didn’t much appreciate his attitude, but he was right—was there anything more important than how many books a person had? No. Absolutely not. “Forget about Frenbeltag’s proposal. This is what you need to focus on.”

Ferdinand pointed at one particular paragraph on the board. In it, Anastasius was described as impatiently awaiting my gifts, while Eglantine was noted as having invited me to a tea party to introduce me to her friends.

“I’d much rather I pretend I didn’t see this and leave it all to Wilfried...” I murmured. Anastasius was waiting not for me, but for the hairpin and compositions, and a tea party with Eglantine’s friends meant socializing with rich daughters from high-ranking duchies. I had already lost all of my confidence from everyone saying I lacked any socializing sense whatsoever; I didn’t want to throw myself into the fire now, of all times.

Sylvester nodded, having heard my mutter. “I know how you feel, but these are direct invitations, so you’re the one who has to attend. Wilfried’s already turned them down three times in your absence; if we don’t at least have a date to give for your return, he’s gonna be in a world of pain. Ferdinand, when are you planning to send Rozemyne back?”

With all eyes on him, Ferdinand tapped his temple. “Next Earthday. I have finished all the intelligence gathering I plan to do, and Justus will have a bit more leeway by then.”

“Leeway to do what?” I asked, unsure what Justus had to do with my return to the Royal Academy. Before Ferdinand could answer, however, Karstedt spoke up with a conflicted expression.

“He’s been assigned to serve as Traugott’s attendant.”

“Traugott has other attendants, doesn’t he? Why Justus? And Ferdinand, how could you lend him to Traugott, of all people? You wouldn’t even let *me* borrow him,” I said, glaring at Ferdinand with as much displeasure as I could muster.

“This is half your fault,” he retorted, glaring right back at me. Our angry staring contest was only interrupted when Karstedt spoke again, looking just as conflicted as before.

“Rozemyne, Traugott was practically forced to resign, remember?”

Karstedt went on to explain how Rihyarda, in a fit of rage, had taken time off specifically to complain to Traugott’s parents about what he had done. After scolding them for their incompetence in raising such a child, she had then hailed the event as a disaster for the entire house and summoned everyone—Karstedt and Bonifatius included—to a family meeting about Traugott.

“My father was just as infuriated as Rihyarda when he heard what Traugott

had done," Karstedt continued. "When the talks finally ended, he gave Traugott one painful talking-to."

"Strange... I elected to have him resign rather than firing him because I assumed that would minimize the impact on his family."

"Resigning has less of an impact than getting fired, but it still causes ripples," Karstedt replied while gently patting my head. "Not to mention, you said not to send him to the temple, remember? Our house had to deal with the matter independently, and our decision was to assign him an attendant from our house. We intend to reteach him the mindset expected of an archnoble serving the archducal family from the ground up."

"But Justus is a scholar... Can he do attendant work?" I asked. I knew that Justus was a skilled scholar, with his love of gathering intelligence and retrieving all sorts of information, but would he be capable of diligently serving a lord or lady?

"Of course he can," Sylvester said with a grin. "Justus is the attendant Ferdinand brought to the Royal Academy back in his day."

I looked up at Ferdinand, surprised. He nodded.

"At the moment, I use only his services as a scholar, but he is my attendant as well. He became an apprentice attendant under Rihyarda's instruction, but it is my understanding that he also took scholar classes in the Royal Academy as per his own interests. It was he who informed me that I could take multiple courses at once."

Today I learned that Justus is responsible for all the legends surrounding Ferdinand...

"Justus will reeducate Traugott, keep an eye on you, gather information within the Royal Academy, and report back to Ehrenfest all at once. He will place a disproportionate amount of focus on gathering information if someone does not watch him in turn, but with Rihyarda there, we should have nothing to fear."

"I imagine this will make him terribly busy, but could I have him train the apprentice scholars too?" I asked.

“‘Train the apprentice scholars’?” Sylvester repeated, blinking in surprise.

“I am referring to the scholars I will be raising for the printing and paper-making industries. I will soon be selecting layscholars and medscholars who will need to do business with commoners, and they will need an archscholar to lead them, no? And their work is a government affair, so won’t they eventually need to form a connection with the next archduke?”

It was yet unknown who would be the next archduke, and my intention was to also train one of Melchior’s scholars for after he was baptized.

Sylvester fell into thought. “Not a bad idea, but you’ll only get apprentices that way. You’ll want an archscholar to keep them in order too. Any recommendations for an archscholar who could manage them to Rozemyne’s will?” Sylvester asked, looking over at Ferdinand.

Ferdinand’s eyes wandered for a moment before he gave his response. “Few things are more difficult than deducing Rozemyne’s intentions.” No one had come to mind, it seemed.

There was a brief silence, broken only when Karstedt suddenly clapped his hands together. “How about Elvira?” he suggested. “If arbitrating between Rozemyne and the archnobles will be a big part of the job, she seems perfect for it.”

“Hm. I cannot deny that Elvira displayed great interest in the printing industry while Rozemyne was asleep, and she actively incorporated it into Haldenzel. She will have more knowledge than other scholars too,” Ferdinand mused. “I agree—she is a perfect match for the role.”

Sylvester’s eyes began to sparkle. “Alright. Let’s see what she thinks, then.”

“She’s interested enough in printing to start making her own books. Now that our kids are all grown, she should be fine getting back into scholar work,” Karstedt said.

And with that, the topic shifted to entrusting Elvira with keeping the printing and paper-making industries organized. I knew she was an excellent scholar, and it was very reassuring to know she would be taking the job for me... though it was also a cause for great concern.

If I give Mother free rein, I've got a feeling she might establish a Make Books About Ferdinand Squadron and corrupt the industries from within. Eh. Oh well.

Karstedt had suggested it, Ferdinand agreed with it, and Sylvester had approved it; Elvira could do what she wanted with all her skill.

"Considering Justus's personality, I am somewhat concerned about him raising apprentice scholars," Ferdinand said to me. "However, this will be your only opportunity to borrow him from me for the purpose of training scholars for the printing industry. Make full use of him while you can."

It was decided that I would leave for the Royal Academy to socialize next Earthday. Ferdinand was going to return to the temple in the meantime, but I was instructed to remain in the castle for a bit longer to adjust to socializing as much as possible.

So he says, but I won't be meeting any nobles without Ferdinand, plus Mother's flurry of tea parties has calmed down.

I passed the days until my departure visiting the winter playroom and sewing with Charlotte. "Just three more days until you leave," she said. "I'll miss you once you're gone, Sister."

"I won't be away for as long this time, Charlotte."

I would have one week to attend tea parties before the Interduchy Tournament and the graduation ceremony brought my first year in the Royal Academy to a close. In total, I would be gone for two weeks at most.

"I will do my best to raise our duchy's rank as much as possible for the sake of your upcoming first year," I said to Charlotte.

"Please prioritize getting rest, Sister. And if you wish to say that you are acting for my sake, I would like for you to leave at least something for me to conquer on my own. At this rate, Brother and you will take all the glory for yourselves," she replied with puffed-out cheeks. If we raised the grade average too much during our first year, it would just make things harder for Charlotte when she entered the Academy next year.

Hm... I've never really thought about leaving room for Charlotte to show off and impress others.

An ordonnanz flew into the room while I was practicing sewing embroidery with Charlotte. It repeated a message from Ferdinand three times.

“We have received word from the Gilberta Company that they have finished the hairpin and wish to hear your thoughts. I have told them to bring it tomorrow afternoon, so you will need to be here by then.”

I get to see Tuuli!

Its duty complete, the ordonnanz reverted back to a yellow feystone. I tapped it lightly with my schtappe and said “understood” in response, trying to contain the welling excitement in my voice to the best of my ability. Having heard the message from Ferdinand, Ottilie left to tell Ella to prepare to leave for the temple, while Rihyarda started covering me in warm clothes so that we could depart at once.

“I can’t believe Ferdinand is making you go all the way to the temple for this. Couldn’t he just send the hairpin to the castle? He really needs to learn to be more considerate,” Rihyarda huffed. This actually was Ferdinand being considerate, though—Tuuli wasn’t yet ready to come to the castle, and I wanted to see her, not the Gilberta Company.

“This is a hairpin ordered by royalty,” I explained. “I will need to examine it before Aub Ehrenfest sees it so that I can have it remade, if necessary.”

“You take on too much work, milady.”

“You do, Sister,” Charlotte chimed in. “You’re still not well, remember?” She had stopped her embroidering and was now regarding me with a reproachful look as she handed her sewing tools to an attendant.

“I thank you both ever so much for worrying about me. I will return to the castle tomorrow after checking the hairpin; I’m leaving for the Royal Academy this Earthday, after all. Rihyarda, you may prepare for my departure while I am gone. We have a lot of luggage from Ferdinand, no? I expect there will be even more once I return from the temple,” I said. He would no doubt unload a ton of Hirschur’s documents and magic tools on me.

Rihyarda chuckled, perhaps remembering how much luggage Ferdinand had brought with him to the castle. “Oh, yes. You may leave that to me. Everything

will be ready.”

And so, I went to the castle’s entrance with my guard knights. Rihyarda had apparently contacted Norbert, as he was there giving instructions to some servants.

I looked around at my guard knights. “Cornelius, Leonore—you will both need to prepare for our return to the Royal Academy this Earthday.”

“Understood, Lady Rozemyne.”

With that, I returned to the temple with Damuel and Angelica taking the lead.

I was finally getting a chance to see Tuuli, but Ferdinand was sitting with us for some reason. Perhaps he thought he couldn’t trust me with this, considering that this hairpin was being made for royalty.

Why is he being a pest and trying to ruin this moment?

The last thing I wanted was Ferdinand scaring Tuuli with his harsh words and expressionless face; I needed to serve as a dam to protect her. And so, with that resolve in my heart, I glared at him with as much intensity as I could muster.

“What is with that displeased expression?” he asked, looking entirely satisfied as he drank the tea Fran had given him.

“I am displeased, but this is primarily the face of a woman who has steeled her resolve.”

“I sense only hostility and trepidation. How many times must I tell you to learn to control your emotions?” he asked, pinching my cheeks.

The scariest face I could manage vanished in an instant as tears welled up in my eyes. Unlike Benno, Ferdinand never held back, so his pinching legitimately hurt. I put my hands over my cheeks to prevent any further attacks, at which point I heard Gil arrive on the first floor and the group he was with start climbing up the stairs.

“High Priest. This is Otto, the one who inherited the Gilberta Company, and this is Tuuli, Lady Rozemyne’s personal hairpin craftswoman,” Benno said. It was their first time meeting Ferdinand, and so it was necessary for him to

introduce them both. They stepped forward and knelt in turn.

“May this meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life, be blessed,” they said.

“I bless this day from the bottom of my heart. May Ewigeliebe’s guidance take the Gilberta Company to ever greater heights,” Ferdinand replied, blessing them.

“I am ever so delighted to see Lady Rozemyne doing well,” Tuuli said once she and Otto had stood up. She looked shockingly mature for someone who was still just twelve years old—her hair was in a big braid much like before, but now she wore the Gilberta Company’s apprentice uniform. There was no longer any trace of the energetic little girl who had used to run through the forest.

Tuuli had always been a fast grower, but in just two years, her legs had gotten long and slender, and visible bumps had appeared on her chest. The youthfulness in her face had vanished, and she looked a lot more like Mom than she had before. She moved with quiet elegance; there was nothing of the sister I knew in how she carried herself, how she spoke, or how she curtsied to nobles.

As I reeled from the shock of my two-year absence being once again shoved in my face, Tuuli looked at me, her blue eyes wrinkling in a warm smile. Her expression alone seemed to say, *“It’s been so long. I missed you*,*”* and the love overflowing from her relaxed the tension in my body.

“This is the ordered product,” Benno said, his words prompting Tuuli to delicately open the wooden box on the table. I could tell at once just how experienced she had become—there were no longer any traces of clumsiness or awkwardness in how her fingers moved.

The hairpin she took out was made with a koralie of warm red, the divine color of Geduldh the Goddess of Earth. The large flower was surrounded by smaller white flowers, as well as green vines that evoked images of the coming of spring. Each petal had smooth, flowing curves, and around each flower was decorative lace. Even the thread was fancy. It was undoubtedly the best, most regal-looking hairpin Tuuli had ever made. I could easily imagine Eglantine wearing it, and how it would perfectly complement her golden hair.

“...It’s splendid,” I said, sighing with awe.

Ferdinand gave a contented nod. “This will do without issue. Well done, Gilberta Company.”

Receiving praise from Ferdinand despite the perpetually scary look on his face was enough to ease the tension Tuuli had been feeling.

“It is exceedingly well-made,” I added. “This will surely bring both Prince Anastasius and Lady Eglantine great joy. Your talents have grown much over the past years. I am surprised.”

“I thank you,” Tuuli replied. “I have humbly brought a hairpin for you as well, Lady Rozemyne.” She held out a spring hairpin she had apparently made for my sake. I immediately elected to buy it and shifted to the side for her like I always did.

“Will you put it on me?” I asked.

Tuuli approached, carefully watching Ferdinand out of the corner of her eye. She pulled out the hairpin that was currently in my braids and inserted the new one. A bit of my hair had gotten caught on my shoulder in the process, so she brushed it back.

“Does it suit me?” I asked.

“I made it to suit you, Lady Rozemyne. It looks perfect,” she said, a mischievous glint in her eyes. I smiled as we exchanged glances, while Ferdinand silently watched our communication with no change of expression.



My return to the Royal Academy came soon after I received the hairpins.

“If at any point Rozemyne seems like she is about to go on another rampage, stop her with all you have,” Ferdinand said to my guard knights. They were the first to step forward onto the teleportation circle and disappear.

I would be leaving with Rihyarda. Before we went, however, the hairpin for Eglantine, the song dedicated to the Goddess of Light, boxes filled with small trial bottles of rinsham, things for Hirschur, and any other remaining items were all sent off.

“We’ll be following to see the Interduchy Tournament. Try not to lose control of yourself. Moderation is key. Got it?”

“I know, Sylvester. I need to leave land for Charlotte to conquer when she arrives, no?”

“Rozemyne, are you her ally or mine?!” Sylvester exclaimed, his eyes wide.

“I do not understand the full meaning of your question, but is it not natural that I would be Charlotte’s ally? I am her older sister,” I said, proudly puffing out my chest. Sylvester cradled his head and groaned in response.

Ferdinand gave Sylvester a few light pats on the back before looking at me with a mixture of resignation and exasperation. “There is no point in thinking about this; absolutely nothing is going through Rozemyne’s empty head right now,” he said.

“Rude. I spend every day executing my ideas and thinking of ways to be the best older sister for Charlotte.”

“Yes, yes. Do your best for Charlotte’s sake. But think of nothing more than that. In any case, I have told Justus to gather intelligence. Bring him with you to tea parties whenever you can.”

Men were forbidden from attending most tea parties, where the secrets of girls were normally shared. It wasn’t often that I could bring Hartmut or other male scholars with me.

“You want me to bring Justus to tea parties? Does that mean...?”

“Do not make me say it. Your assumptions are correct.”

I was being told to have Justus cross-dress so that I could bring him to tea parties, but wouldn't that just lead to people assuming I was the one with the weirdo cross-dressing attendant rather than Traugott?

"Is it just me, or does Ehrenfest have an unusually large collection of absolute weirdos? There's Professor Hirschur, Justus... I would not like to be considered among them," I said, thinking about what to do if people started to assume I was weird by association. Ferdinand, Karstedt, and Sylvester all made inscrutable faces.

"Perhaps, at times, ignorance is bliss..." Ferdinand mused.

"What?"

"Just go," he said, shooing me away with his hand. I stood next to Rihyarda on the teleportation circle, feeling discontent, and felt the mana start to move.

A Week of Socializing

"You're late, Rozemyne!" Wilfried declared. He was waiting for me in the dormitory with his head held high, his hands on his hips, and his feet planted firmly on the ground. He looked just as Sylvester had when I had arrived at the castle, and he had said pretty much the same thing too.

Like father, like son.

"I have returned, dear brother. Do recall, though, that it was Aub Ehrenfest and Ferdinand who set the date for my return. Direct your anger at them, not me."

"But thanks to you, I've had to endure some of the worst days of my life!"

It seemed that, once the real socializing had started, Ehrenfest had received incomparably more tea party invitations than during the years prior. Unable to refuse invitations from higher-ranking duchies, Wilfried had been forced to attend and give nothing but empty, formal replies. There were also more invitations from other ranks and professions, all of whom wanted to know more about our duchy.

Having to attend more tea parties than usual was bad enough, but getting more attention meant duchies of similar ranks were even more aggressive and probing. The Ehrenfest students, who had up until this point been largely ignored, had no idea what to do. Hirschur would normally be the one to guide and instruct them as their dormitory supervisor, but it seemed she wasn't going to leave her research under any circumstances. There was also a considerable time lag between Ehrenfest sending questions and getting answers; Wilfried asked me to understand how he had been completely isolated with enemies on all sides and no assistance.

Look, I know how you feel, but that's not entirely my fault. If you're going to be mad at anyone, shouldn't it be Professor Hirschur, not me?

"It's because you socialized with Prince Anastasius and the archduke

candidate from Klassenberg...”

“I did not socialize with them because I wanted to; they invited me, and I had no choice but to comply. Would you have refused them?”

“I’m struggling precisely because I can’t refuse them!”

Socializing with greater duchies had evidently been put on pause when Wilfried told them the date I was due to return. Rihyarda smiled as she watched him desperately try to convey just how much he had suffered in my absence.

“Wilfried, my boy, if you want to have a conversation like this, how about we find someplace to sit first? You have more to say to milady, don’t you?”

“That’s right!” Judithe interjected, stepping forward. “I also have a lot to speak to Lady Rozemyne about!”

Judithe had been the only one of my apprentice knight retainers to remain in the Royal Academy. She had initially planned to return to Ehrenfest and continue her work as soon as she finished her lessons, but the ditter rematch with Dunkelfelger had delayed this. She had then gotten wrapped up in Royal Academy socializing due to being my retainer, foiling her plan entirely.

“I passed all my classes! They didn’t let me go back to Ehrenfest, though, so I couldn’t guard you! It’s not that I messed up or anything!” Judithe exclaimed, shooting Wilfried a side-look.

He merely shrugged in response. “How could I have let her go back to Ehrenfest?”

It seemed that the sudden increase in tea party invitations and the discussions that came with them had forced all those from Ehrenfest to mobilize, since we lacked the population to handle the situation otherwise. Everyone had needed to finish their classes as fast as they could manage, boldly challenging and passing their exams to get on their feet.

“Now, now,” Rihyarda said. “Save those words for the common room. Given milady’s health, things will only get worse if she collapses. I’ll take her things to her room.” She urged Wilfried forward with a light push on the back before heading for my room.

I watched as Rihyarda climbed the stairs, and it was then that I noticed someone pass her on their way down—someone with lively brown eyes and a truly excited expression. It was Justus. Traugott was there too, looking exhausted as he was practically dragged along behind him.

“It has been too long, Lady Rozemyne.”

“I have heard you served the Plantin Company well, Justus. They survived the two years I was absent in large part because of you, and for that, I thank you. I look forward to your continued service.”

“I am being blessed with unusual experiences thanks to you, milady. I will do my best to live up to your expectations.”

As I was speaking to Justus, Traugott’s eyes wandered as though he was trying to think of what to say. In the end, he settled on looking at the ground. His happy, confident smile was completely gone, replaced with a despondent look. I could only imagine how severely his family had scolded him in Ehrenfest.

I considered whether I should say something to Traugott, but before I even had the chance, Justus gave him a sharp elbow. It was a quick movement, and judging by the grunt that escaped Traugott when it landed, it was intended to hurt.

The polite smile vanished from Justus’s face; instead, he glared at Traugott with an expression so cold that it looked like it belonged to someone else entirely. “Traugott, don’t you have something to say?” he asked. “What’s wrong with you? Speak up.”

Traugott gritted his teeth and slowly knelt before me, all the while cradling his side where he had been elbowed. “My shallow thinking led to me being unthinkably rude. I am truly sorry, Lady Rozemyne. I apologize from the bottom of my heart.”

I opened my mouth to forgive him, but Justus narrowed his brown eyes and stopped me. “Traugott deserves no words of compassion, Lady Rozemyne; he has committed sins which must not be forgiven so easily.”

My other retainers all nodded in agreement. I silently thanked Justus for having stopped me before I could reflexively forgive Traugott.

“In any case, milady—Lord Ferdinand told me the other day to start training the scholars, but what exactly does he want me to do?” Justus asked.

“I need to raise individuals who can support the growing printing industry. To that end, I will need people who can interact with commoners and who know how the industry works. Above all, however, they must have a latent talent for scholar work. That is what I wish for you to do.”

The way Traugott followed behind us as we entered the common room made him look like the attendant rather than Justus. He couldn’t even say anything about it, since Justus had been sent by his family to whip him into shape. Maybe he had tried to complain already, only to get beaten down.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne. We have been eagerly awaiting your return.” The students in the common room greeted me when I arrived, their faces positively lighting up with relief. This year’s socializing must have been just as hard as Wilfried had said.

“And so I have returned, everyone. I hear from Wilfried that things have been difficult in my absence. I would like to know what happened while I was in Ehrenfest,” I said. I then listened to what everyone had to say, regardless of age or faction, much like I did in the temple.

“In truth, we have not yet held any tea parties for archduke candidates from other duchies. There is no helping that, as no other duchy needed any candidates to return home for the Dedication Ritual, but...”

Last year, when there had been no Ehrenfest archduke candidates, the archnoble girls had attended tea parties with other duchies just fine. Now that I was here, however, it was considered an insult for them to send invitations to the archduke candidates of other duchies. This has resulted in us lagging behind when it came to socializing with other archduke candidates.

“I imagine there is a reason for it, but why did you not hold the tea parties yourself, Wilfried?”

“I don’t know much about holding tea parties, since men aren’t normally supposed to hold them. I also had male socializing to handle. My hands were full enough just visiting all the tea parties the higher-ranking duchies were inviting us to.”

For men, socializing involved holding and attending small hunting tournaments or proving one's strength through noble games such as gewinnen while chatting and sharing information. Tea and sweets were served as well, but unlike at the tea parties for girls, they were far from the main event. Wilfried had been forced to keep up with male socializing while also attending a slew of tea parties filled with girls from higher-ranking duchies.

"I see you all worked very hard in my absence," I said. "I suppose now it is my turn to begin socializing. What I must do first is... visit the library to supply Schwartz and Weiss with mana."

Everyone gathered collectively narrowed their eyes. "Wait. Where's that coming from?" Wilfried asked. "Your priority is your meeting with Prince Anastasius."

"Klassenberg has asked to be informed of your return as well."

"The library, when you have all the higher-ranked duchies asking after you?!"

"There is also the ditter rematch that Professor Rauffen requested upon hearing of your return..."

"There is no time; we will want to hold at least one tea party for the archduke candidates of other duchies before the Interduchy Tournament."

I felt my soul leave my body as everyone listed out all the things I needed to do before I could go to the library. Having to cram so much into the few days that remained before the tournament and the graduation ceremony was completely unreasonable if you asked me. I turned around, hoping to discuss this with Rihyarda, and then I remembered she had gone to put away my luggage. I looked around the common room, but only Justus seemed as though he might have good answers for me.

I'd rather not have to do this, but he was *Ferdinand's retainer... Both Lutz and Benno also gave him high praise. Surely I can trust him to give me advice.*

"Justus," I said. He blinked in surprise from where he stood behind Traugott, having not expected me to single him out; then he walked over and knelt before me.

"Yes, milady?"

“What do I need to do first? If we had Ferdinand here, what approach do you think he would take?”

“Am I permitted to speak freely?”

“We have no dorm supervisor to rely on. You may speak not as Traugott’s attendant, but as Ferdinand’s scholar.”

“Understood. As you wish, milady. Apprentice, give me her schedule.” Justus took the schedule from Hartmut and then lowered his eyes in thought. “What we need to confirm first is how many people can be mobilized in this upcoming socializing season. Have preparations for the Interduchy Tournament been completed?”

I hadn’t been present, so I looked around the room for an answer. Wilfried, his retainers, and Hartmut all furrowed their brows.

“...No. To be honest, we just haven’t had the time or the manpower,” Wilfried said.

“We have made some progress, but preparations are far from complete,” Hartmut added.

Justus counted the remaining days on his fingers and then muttered, “Seems like we’ve got some tight time constraints...” under his breath before turning to all those gathered. “Very well. Everyone but milady and her retainers should now prioritize preparing for the Interduchy Tournament, for the aubs of other duchies are going to be present. Lord Wilfried, lead the preparations with your retainers.”

Justus watched as Wilfried and his retainers nodded in response; then he turned his attention back to me. “Milady, your highest priority is to work through all the backlogged socializing. I would suggest that you first request a meeting with the prince. From there, send ordonnanzes to the greater duchies who attempted to meet with you and announce your return, as well as the fact that Ehrenfest will soon be hosting a tea party. Once the date is established for your meeting with the prince, we can decide on a date for the tea party and send invitations to all other duchies. We can finish the bulk of socializing all at once by having as many duchies as possible participate.”

I could already feel a huge weight lifting from my shoulders. With such a concrete plan, I would be able to secure at least a little time in the library.

“You may go to the library to replenish Schwartz’s and Weiss’s mana when the time is right,” Justus said. “Of course, that is all you will be doing there; you will not have time to read.”

“Ngh...”

“It is possible that greater duchies will summon you even after our upcoming tea party is announced. Furthermore, considering how many we are going to lose to the Interduchy Tournament preparations, Ehrenfest does not have the leeway to allow for so many of your retainers to be stuck with you in the library. Do you understand my position?”

“...Yes,” I conceded. Going to the library meant bringing along several of my retainers, thereby putting them out of commission. I couldn’t just wander around alone.

Wilfried looked at Justus, shocked that he would so casually bar me from the library. He then looked at me, concerned that I might be on the verge of exploding. But of course, even I could show some restraint when we were in such dire straits.

I’ll be fine; there are books here in the dorm that I can read. I’d much rather be holed up in the library, though...

“Justus, what about Dunkelfelger’s request for a rematch?” Wilfried asked.

Justus raised an eyebrow. “That is not even worth thinking about. Naturally, we will refuse. There must be some kind of misunderstanding for Professor Rauffen to be challenging Lady Rozemyne—unlike Lord Ferdinand, she is not an apprentice knight, and as a first-year, she is not meant to participate in games of ditter. Times have changed, and ditter is now a sport for apprentice knights, so we should not have any trouble refusing. Luckily, the Interduchy Tournament is quickly approaching.”

Justus, having attended the Academy at the same time as Rauffen, flatly rejected the idea of a rematch. He was completely right in doing so, but surely refusing a higher-ranking duchy wouldn’t be so easy.

“This is a request from Dunkelfelger, though. How are we to refuse them?” I asked.

“We shall leave that to Professor Hirschur. Not only does it come under her remit, but she also has much experience refusing Rauffen from the days Lord Ferdinand attended the Academy. It will pose no problem for her.”

Oh yeah... Justus was Ferdinand’s attendant.

“But how do we ask Professor Hirschur to do that?” Wilfried asked, clearly concerned. “She won’t leave her lab.”

Justus had an immediate answer. “Professor Hirschur will readily work for us if we use the packages from Lord Ferdinand as bargaining chips. She is quite a valuable asset when used properly—after all, she is talented enough to have joined the Sovereignty.”

Ferdinand had been challenged to ditter games nonstop back in his school days, and since Hirschur had wanted to keep using him as a lab assistant, she had apparently engaged in constant battles with Rauffen where she refused them all. Securing another victory would be easy, it seemed.

“You suddenly seem so reliable, Justus...” I murmured.

“Oh? What did you think of me before?”

I thought you were a weirdo who just went around doing whatever interested you, even to the point of cross-dressing to gather intelligence.

Justus gave a sly grin as though he had read my thoughts. “Gathering intelligence is my job, you know,” he said under his breath.

That was true, but as far as I had seen, it was much more of a hobby to him than anything. To be honest, I couldn’t believe he was actually this competent. Now I knew why Ferdinand treasured him as a retainer despite him being so weird.

“Now then, milady—let us discuss the meeting with the prince and the tea party in another room,” Justus said, prompting Lieseleta to leave the common room to secure a meeting room for us. He then looked over at Wilfried and the others. “Everyone else, split into groups based on profession and then gather

around Lord Wilfried's attendants to discuss the upcoming Interduchy Tournament. We have no time to waste; think and act carefully, such that all your time is used to its fullest."

With Justus having concluded his speech—and in a very Ferdinand-like manner—everyone began moving around to follow his instructions. To think that having a competent adult who could give clear instructions would be such a boon...

By the time Lieseleta came to get us, the apprentice knights, apprentice scholars, and apprentice attendants had all split into groups to discuss the Interduchy Tournament. They had the energy of a classroom prior to a sports festival or a cultural festival. I slyly watched them as I exited the common room and entered the nearby meeting room that had been prepared for us.

"Inviting all the duchies at once will result in an event of a larger scale than initially planned," Justus said. "If we do not have Lord Wilfried provide assistance on the day of, I believe you will find things quite difficult, considering that you have spent so little time with the other students."

"He will surely be willing to help for just one day," I replied.

Rihyarda entered, having finished preparing my room, and we discussed the proper language to use with royalty. I then sent an ordonnanz to Anastasius, reporting that I had returned and that I wanted to set up a meeting to deliver the hairpin.

As we waited for a response, I informed Hartmut and Philine that Elvira and I would be handling the continued growth of the Ehrenfest printing industry. I also told them that Justus would be training the apprentice scholars.

"As this is a new industry, it is important that the next aub be involved in its machinations," I explained. "For that reason, Wilfried's, Charlotte's, Melchior's, and my apprentice scholars will all participate, as will scholars sent by giebes who have existing experience working with commoners."

"Lady Rozemyne, will I really be involved in such an important industry...?" Philine choked out in a fearful voice. As I saw her pale face and wavering light-green eyes, I suddenly recalled something Damuel had said to me—that he had

endured much envy over becoming my guard knight and growing his mana so much despite being a mere laynoble. Philine was a laynoble too, so the same terrible thing had to be happening to her as well.

"If you fear the consequences of participating in the printing industry, I can have others fulfill the role," I said.

"...That won't be necessary. I have resolved to make books with you, Lady Rozemyne. I will not turn my back on that decision," Philine replied, her fists clenched with determination. Those very same hands trembled with fear, but her voice was clear and strong. I couldn't help but smile at her conviction.

"Hartmut, I will do what I can myself, but please keep an eye out to ensure that Philine is not antagonized by the other scholars."

"As you wish," Hartmut responded.

I told Hartmut and Philine that they were going to be trained to be key figures in the printing industry and that they would need to learn from Justus during the short period he was here. It was around then that the ordonnanz returned.

"Come tomorrow at fifth bell; I wish to gift the hairpin to Eglantine as soon as possible," came Anastasius's voice. The message repeated thrice before the white bird returned to being a yellow feystone. I sent my reply of acknowledgment and then turned to Brunhilde and Lieseleta.

"If my meeting with Prince Anastasius is tomorrow, when can we hold the tea party? We need to write the letters of invitation accordingly, correct?"

"I believe it will be possible in five—no, four days," Brunhilde said. "Finishing the tea party sooner rather than later would be ideal; our visitors will need to prepare for the Interduchy Tournament just as we do. And, incidentally... we have to prepare for Angelica's graduation as well, don't we?" She looked at the girl in question, while Lieseleta gave a firm nod of agreement.

"I brought my costume with me," Angelica said, her head tilted in vague confusion. "I don't think there's anything else I need to do."

Brunhilde's eyebrows shot up in anger. "Do you not need to prepare for the stage as much as possible?! You are blessed with such beauty; it would be a waste to not wash your hair with rinsham and adorn you with hairpins to

emphasize Ehrenfest trends!”

“Sister, Father and Mother informed me that you have yet to decide on your hairstyle, makeup, and the like. You used guard duty at the temple to escape these discussions, no?”

Lieseleta’s observation made Angelica sadly lower her eyes. Her long eyelashes cast small shadows over her face, making her look like the very picture of a wounded young woman, but in reality, that was the face she pulled whenever she was feeling lazy. I had gotten pretty good at seeing through her deceitful expressions, and of course, Lieseleta was just as good—she made an exasperated face and then gave a knowing smile.

“I will pick a hairstyle that suits you perfectly, Sister, so at least play nice on the day.”

“If you say so, Lieseleta. I’ll play nice,” Angelica said with a truly melancholic nod. She was the spitting image of a sorrowful princess being married off to another country for political reasons, paired with a man she had no feelings for, but it was all just an act. Incidentally, while she was cripplingly lazy when it came to formal affairs, she was a very dedicated guard knight—she would invest a great amount of time strengthening the feystone for her knight armor and embroidering the magic circles on her cape.

“I know that you do not care much for wearing anything that does not increase your fighting potential, Sister, but you must not bring shame to the man who will be escorting you,” Lieseleta continued.

I blinked several times and then looked at Angelica. Lieseleta hadn’t mentioned their “father” or “grandfather” there; she had said “the man.” In other words, Angelica had an actual escort.

“Who is Angelica’s escort?” I asked. “Not family, I presume?”

“What? Lady Rozemyne, do you not know? Sister, have you told no one else...?”

“I have heard nothing.”

Lieseleta looked at me, then at Angelica, and then at everyone else. Upon seeing her sister making a puzzled expression as though this had nothing to do

with her, she frowned with deep concern before forcing an unconvincing smile. “If nobody knows, I suppose it can be a fun surprise to look forward to.”

Who’s Angelica’s date...? Now I’m really curious.

Justus and Preparing for the Interduchy Tournament

"Justus has said that he will be accompanying you for all of today, milady. Lord Sylvester and Ferdinand may have ordered it, but are you certain you're fine with this?" Rihyarda asked me first thing in the morning. She had a strict look on her face; Traugott and I were switching attendants for the day, and she was no doubt experiencing a sizable headache knowing that her own son was cross-dressing to serve as a female attendant.

"I am a bit concerned about this myself, but the information Wilfried and I have simply isn't enough. We have no choice. Not to mention, Justus was recommended to me by Ferdinand himself. He has my full faith."

Also, I hate to say this when Rihyarda is so worried, but I kinda want to see Justus cross-dress. Out of morbid curiosity, of course—in the same way one might want to see a horror movie.

I would be spending my morning at the library replenishing Schwartz's and Weiss's mana; then, in the afternoon, I was going to meet with Anastasius. Justus was due to be accompanying me as my attendant, which meant Rihyarda would be serving Traugott.

"Justus always focuses on the work he likes doing most, so he's probably leaving dealing with Traugott for last. I'll have to make sure he's doing his attendant work properly..." Rihyarda said, her dark eyes gleaming. There was no doubt in my mind that her check was going to be very thorough.

After breakfast, we discussed the Interduchy Tournament in the common room until the library opened. In Earth terms, the tournament was like a combination of a sports festival, a cultural festival, and a career fair, during which students would show off their skills to their guardians, the aubs, and Sovereign royalty. Some people would spin their wheels trying to prove themselves to their significant other's parents, while some professors used the occasion to publish their research, despite it supposedly being a place for

students. All in all, it was a time and place for all sorts of wacky happenings.

For apprentice knights, the Interduchy Tournament was all about the ditter, when they would compete to defeat feybeasts produced by the professors' magic as quickly as possible. It was the star competition of the tournament, since you could tell who won at a glance and it involved flashy battles during which everyone played distinct roles.

There was a blatant disparity in power between the greater duchies, who were populous enough to choose the very best knights for their games, and the lesser duchies, who were forced to send out all of their knights no matter their skill levels. However, that too was part of a duchy's strength.

Despite its size, Ehrenfest was much closer to being a lesser duchy than a middle duchy in terms of population. We had to compensate for our lack of manpower with individual skill, though judging by what I had seen of our apprentices, we were doing a rather poor job—or rather, that is to say, we still had much room to grow. Our ranking would surely rise as our apprentices increased their mana through compression, studied more feybeasts, and practiced coordinating in fights.

"Angelica and I will lead the fighting this year, with Leonore instructing us based on past tournament results and the weak points of whatever feybeasts we're up against," Cornelius said. "Unfortunately, we still aren't yet capable of anything resembling proper coordination."

Angelica nodded. The games with Dunkelfelger had taught everyone the importance of working together, but practice had only just begun. We would probably do better next year, since Bonifatius had said that he would train the apprentices for me once spring came.

"Incidentally, I plan to give Angriff's blessing to the apprentices before the ditter game, but would that be considered cheap or unfair?" I asked.

"Your blessings will be a key part of our strategy," Leonore replied. "There is nothing more confidence-inducing than you blessing our victory in the dormitory before we leave." Her implication that it was something best done out of sight of the other duchies was enough for me to guess it was on the darker side of being morally gray.

Well, given that Dunkelfelger already calls me a scheming trickster, I suppose it's fine...

For apprentice scholars, the tournament was a place to announce their research on magic tools, improved potion recipes, and other such inventions. One would sell their technology to the Sovereignty with the compiled research results and completed products in hand. Ferdinand had earned a literal fortune announcing his original magic tools here and selling them to the Sovereignty. Ever since his graduation, those from Ehrenfest had considered this part of the tournament little more than a place for Hirschur to announce her research results.

"Hartmut, will you be announcing anything?" I asked.

"You are my subject of study at the moment, Lady Rozemyne, but I currently lack any conclusions worth announcing."

Is it just me, or was that response genuinely terrifying?

"To be more precise, I am researching the difference between the magecraft we learn in the Royal Academy, and the blessings and divine protection you use, Lady Rozemyne. In the Royal Academy, we learn to use the divine protection of the gods only upon acquiring our schtappes, but you can use them even without one, correct?"

"Do we not all give blessings during our greetings?" I replied. Even without a schtappe, everyone could perform blessings using the feystone for expelling mana they received during their baptism ceremony.

Hartmut widened his orange eyes. "I'm referring not to blessings that simply expel mana, but to prayers made in the name of a god that carry potent divine protection. These are separate things in my eyes, but I see now that they are the same to you." There was the joy of discovery in his voice, and this information was just as new to me. Greetings, prayers in the temple, and requests for divine protection all came from saying the names of gods and expelling mana; as far as I was concerned, they were all just prayers dedicated to the gods.

Aah, but I guess there are minor differences... like when I feel the mana getting sucked out of me on its own versus when I actually need to work to push

it out. I don't really get it, so I'm just going to stop thinking now.

"In any case, I would like for you to work on some more productive research, Hartmut."

"I am planning to research something more publishable next year. My research on you will likely take more than a lifetime, so I would like to begin more thoroughly following my graduation," Hartmut said, his smiling eyes locked on me.

No! Don't make me your life's work! Please, no!

"Ah, Lady Rozemyne," Philine said as I cradled my head, "I just remembered—Professor Hirschur's announcements this year will be centered around her research on Schwartz and Weiss."

The outfits had thus far required a great deal of research, and everyone from Ehrenfest was having to work together in order to make them. For these reasons, Hirschur had decided to make them her main focus.

"That must be why she was so enthusiastic about getting those documents from Lord Ferdinand," Philine continued, her voice tinged with awe. "I was so surprised by her reaction yesterday."

Upon being informed of my return, Hirschur had burst into the dormitory like a cannonball. She had then sped right up to me with a look intense enough to bore holes into the wall—hardly the expression one would expect from a teacher retrieving packages from her old disciple.

Justus had been the one to step forward and deal with Hirschur. Just as he had proposed, he had used the research on Schwartz and Weiss as a bargaining chip to get her to refuse the Dunkelfelger match for us, deliberately emphasizing that I was not to be personally challenged again. He had then handed her only half of the documents, stating that he would "deliver the second half once the cancellation is confirmed."

Hirschur had of course acted immediately, and she was back to collect the rest before even a single bell had passed. She had rushed in like a hurricane and then left just as quickly.

"I never would have thought Professor Hirschur could talk Professor Rauffen

down so extremely quickly. Yesterday I learned that she has a talent for something other than research...” Hartmut muttered in a daze. Everyone else nodded in solemn agreement.

Seriously, with people like Sylvester and Hirschur, Ehrenfest culture could be defined as weirdos motivated only by their primary interest rampaging around. When will they learn to calm down a little? Good grief.

To attendants, the Interduchy Tournament was a place to push trends and lavish guests with excellent hospitality. Up until now, Ehrenfest had received almost no visitors outside of the students’ own guardians; without anything that was new or garnered much interest, other duchies wouldn’t bother to come over. The Interduchy Tournament wasn’t very long overall, so it was a matter of course that people and attention would be centered around the most fascinating things.

Even the students’ guardians and the archducal couple would immediately leave for other duchies to socialize; nobody would come to them, so they had to actively venture out. Brunhilde had found it exceedingly frustrating that she had honed her hosting skills to such an incredible degree but had never had the chance to actually show them off.

This year, Ehrenfest had garnered much attention with its rinsham, hairpins, pound cakes, and plant paper. Brunhilde was also putting her all into polishing up the girls by cleaning their hair with rinsham, exactly as we had done before the advancement ceremony.

There were still some concerns, however. For one, Lieseleta was worried that we didn’t know how many visitors would be coming—a problem born from all the new trends and the fact that both Wilfried and I were here. Justus had apparently told her that those of us from Ehrenfest would need to prepare to the absolute best of our ability, unlike during previous years. It was good that our students were getting a chance to prove their skills, but it ran the risk of things becoming too much for them to handle, which could make things even worse than usual.

“Oh...? And who is that?” I asked. A woman I didn’t recognize had suddenly entered the common room. She looked a lot like Rihyarda, but since the actual

Rihyarda was behind me, it had to be someone else. As I wondered who, I noticed Traugott with a pathetic look on his face, seeming like he wanted to be anywhere else. I turned around on instinct and saw that Rihyarda was wearing an exceedingly displeased grimace.

Oh snap! It's cross-dressing Justus! Holy cow! He totally looks like a refined middle-aged lady right now!

He advanced slowly, receiving suspicious looks from all those in the common room, and then knelt gracefully before me. No longer were there any traces of Justus, whom by now I knew well; instead, there was a woman who looked much like Rihyarda, albeit middle-aged. The winter cold meant everyone was wearing clothes that covered the neck, and so his Adam's apple was completely hidden away. His hands were also hidden beneath gloves, which meant the only area where his skin was exposed was his face.

Justus already had a bit of an androgynous face, so it had taken just a little makeup to completely change how it looked. His shoulders were slightly broader than Rihyarda's, maybe due to the layers of clothing he had on, but it was actually scary how normal it all seemed. He must have dyed his hair too, as it was now brown instead of gray.

"My apologies for the wait. How is it, milady?"

"You can change your voice, Justus...?"

"One need only alter how they speak."

As it turned out, he could make a feminine voice just by... changing how he spoke a little. And either due to him having observed the mannerisms of women, practiced a lot himself, or cross-dressed all the time, it was very believable indeed. Perhaps I was praising him too highly, but he reminded me of the male actors playing women in Noh theater or kabuki who, through rigid practice and careful attention to their every move, could end up more feminine than the actual girls.

"If you take no issue with this state of dress, I would like to accompany you to your tea party for girls," Justus said.

"That is fine, provided that you do not mind remaining dressed like that for

the entire day.”

“Certainly not. Now, I must ask that you call me ‘Gudrun’ when I am dressed like this.”

“‘Gudrun’?” I repeated, tilting my head just as Traugott let out a pained choke.

“Uncle, please! Do not use Mother’s name when dressed like that! Are there not a variety of female names similar to your own, like ‘Justine’ or ‘Justina’?!”

“Goodness, Traugott. Must you panic so? Do calm down. Only a shallow-minded fool would use a fake name so easily connected to their real one. That you are one such fool is why your life is but a string of failures,” Justus said with a giggle. He apparently looked just like Traugott’s mother, Gudrun, when he cross-dressed. Those wearing clear grimaces rather than looks of surprise were probably those who knew Gudrun personally.

Traugott cradled his head, weeping for mercy as he was forced to endure having his cross-dressing uncle as his attendant. The looks of judgment and scorn he had previously been receiving from the others steadily became conflicted stares of sympathy. No words were spoken, but it was clear how many people were feeling bad for him.

Wait... Did Justus deliberately walk into the common room like this to earn Traugott some sympathy? No, surely not. Justus wouldn’t go that far for him.

Upon seeing Justus retain his feminine grace even while dealing with Traugott’s emotional breakdown, Hartmut looked at me with the troubled expression of someone who had been given an impossible task. “Lady Rozemyne, ah... Is it expected for scholars serving as retainers to learn to cross-dress? I truly apologize, but I do not have a talent for such an art. If you insist that I learn, however, I will dedicate my best efforts to doing so.”

I had told him to learn from Justus, but that certainly didn’t mean I expected him to cross-dress. I immediately rejected the idea.

“You do not need to learn to cross-dress, Hartmut. There are surely many other ways to obtain the information you want, such as training a female assistant scholar or cooperating with others. Cross-dressing is merely an

interest of Justus's, and not a talent I see in you."

The apprentice scholars all seemed visibly relieved to hear my explanation. Justus, on the other hand, appeared somewhat dissatisfied. "This is no interest of mine, milady—it is simply the most effective method for achieving my goals," he said. "Would you not agree that it is most reliable to gather information with one's own eyes and ears?"

"Is it really that effective...?" Hartmut asked.

"Hartmut, no! Don't let him corrupt you!" I cried, already sensing the danger as Hartmut began to look contemplative. Despite my efforts, however, Justus stopped me with a smile and then began to profess the glorious practicality of cross-dressing to not just Hartmut, but the entire student body.

"Milady, he is not being corrupted; he is simply being educated so that he can make an informed decision. If one considers how information obtained personally is leagues more reliable than information obtained through others, then cross-dressing is a skill that anyone should dedi—"

"SHUT YOUR TRAP, JUSTUS!" Rihyarda yelled. "I will *not* let you keep blabbering such nonsense! And you will *not* drag Ottilie's precious son down with you! He has such a bright future ahead of him!"



Justus winced when his own mother unleashed her fury on him. She had contained her rage for as long as possible, since she was serving as my attendant, but she had finally lost her patience. And so began her enraged lecture.

On the outside, Justus looked a lot like his mother, so one could easily have assumed there were two Rihyardas present... except one now wore the stern expression of a mother, and the other the sullen look of a boy who had gotten caught midway through a prank. The whole situation was messing with my head.

“There is nothing I dislike more than being forced to witness this!” Rihyarda shouted. “I have only tolerated you working for milady because Ferdinand and Aub Ehrenfest ordered it. I have been given explicit permission to send you back home if at any point you risk damaging Ehrenfest’s reputation with your antics. Do *not* forget that. Now, do I make myself clear?!”

“...Of course, Mother.”

Thanks to Rihyarda stopping Justus, we could finally leave for the library. Rihyarda and Traugott saw us off, the former looking worried and the latter gripping his stomach in agony as I departed with “Certainly Not Justus in Disguise” Gudrun and my retainers. This was going to be my first time seeing Schwartz and Weiss in a while.

“Milady. You’re here.”

“Welcome back, milady.”

Schwartz and Weiss tottered over and then began hopping circles around me, chanting “welcome” over and over again. It was heartwarming to receive such an enthusiastic greeting. I gazed around the library as I stroked the feystones on their foreheads to replenish their mana. There were more gaps in the bookshelves than I remembered; in fact, they were practically filled with holes.

“The bookshelves certainly look lonely right now, Professor Solange...” I observed.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne. That would be because final exams are

approaching. Everyone is quite desperate. The shelves may seem much emptier than usual, but the carrels more than make up for it."

As Solange had said, the library was filled with visitors. It was quite unlike what I was used to. Nobody was engaged in conversation, but the waves of sound produced as the students moved about was unceasing. The study resources and carrels were apparently being reserved far more often than usual; those who hadn't yet completed their exams were finding themselves driven by fear as those around them steadily began to finish. The prickly tension one felt before a test was clear in the air. Nobody here was relaxed.

"I might recommend you spend today reading in your own chambers," Solange said.

"In truth, I have been absent from the Royal Academy for so long that I must spend all of my time socializing from now until the graduation ceremony. I would much rather read at my leisure in the library, but it seems I will simply have no opportunity to do so."

"Oh my. Socializing is quite an important learning experience in the Royal Academy. I am sure you will do just fine," Solange said with a refined chuckle.

Hearing this, Gudrun tilted his head and placed a thoughtful hand on his cheek. "I believe you will have an opportunity to read once you have finished your socializing for the day," he said to me. "Shall we borrow a book?"

"Really, Gudrun?!" I exclaimed.

Justus is a weirdo, but he's a good man! A good, competent man!

As if sensing my rising affections for him, Gudrun gave a small smirk. "I am aware that small rewards are key to keeping you motivated, milady."

"Indeed they are. Shall we search for a book at once?"

"There is no time for that. Schwartz, Weiss—please fetch and borrow for us a book that milady has not read before," Gudrun said, clasping my shoulders so that I couldn't escape. His gloves made his hands look feminine, but they were bumpy and rough, and he gripped with the unmistakable strength of a man. It was certainly more than I had come to expect from Rihyarda.

I watched as Schwartz and Weiss began to toddle away.

“Okay. One book.”

“We’ll borrow.”

I waited for the two shumils to finish going through the book-borrowing process and then returned to the dormitory, feeling elated. The sight of Gudrun walking along in a feminine manner reminded me of something he had told me in the past.

“Gudrun, where is that forbidden archive?” I asked. “You mentioned it to me in the past, did you not?” He had specifically mentioned it to keep me awake during the Night of Schutzaria. Much had changed with the librarians and the books, but surely the archive itself still existed. Perhaps it had gone from being forbidden to being open to all, but that didn’t make a difference to me.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing. Is it in the Royal Academy?” one of my retainers asked. They were intrigued by the mystery of the archive, but Gudrun simply put on a peaceful smile and shook his head.

“I do not know where it is. Its existence was mentioned to me by the librarian who served while I was attending the Academy. He said there exists a book storage room that can be opened only by royalty.”

“Wait, what? If only royalty can open it, that means I can’t go inside!” I exclaimed. It was just too cruel; he had gotten my hopes up for nothing.

Gudrun widened his eyes as I puffed out my cheeks. “Did you intend to enter that which is literally referred to as ‘the forbidden archive’? Do you know what ‘forbidden’ means?”

“If there are books in there, it is only natural that I will desire to read them.”

“I cannot imagine there are many who would think the same...” Gudrun said, again tilting his head in confusion. I truly couldn’t believe it; Justus would cross-dress and mingle with commoners to get the information he wanted, but he was looking at me like *I* was the weird one. How did he not empathize with me here? Surely he wanted to know what books were in that room too.

“Are you not curious about what books are in the forbidden archive and what

is written within them?”

“I would certainly like to know, but any normal person would give up on ever going inside the moment they learned that only royalty can enter. It is not like a tea party, which is reasonably simple to sneak into,” Gudrun said, entirely pretending to be a normal person. I glared at him.

“Gudrun, you speak as though I am not normal.”

“Milady, please. Do you have no self-awareness?” Gudrun asked, looking at me with equal parts amusement and genuine concern. I couldn’t help but falter; I wasn’t completely blind to my own shortcomings.

“Ngh... I-I am aware that I am a bit unusual...”

“That is a relief,” Gudrun said with a smile, while Cornelius let out a shocked, “Just a bit?”

What...? I’m just a bit weird, right...?

Meeting with the Prince

Fifth bell rang. It was time for us to meet with Anastasius, and so we picked up the various gifts that Rihyarda had prepared and started on our way. Of course, it was my attendants who were doing the actual carrying—my job was to put my all into my walking. I focused on making sure each step I took exuded the utmost grace, all while spreading out my stamina so that I wouldn't start feeling sick. Walking around in the Royal Academy was something that I struggled with.

"Gudrun, did Ferdinand also receive invitations from royalty when he was a student?" I asked.

"Indeed. Many times. Though he received invitations from both a prince and a princess, as they would summon him to play harspiel." Gudrun went on to explain how Ferdinand had been invited to a tea party with the music professors, during which he had earned the favor of a princess. Had he not been an archduke candidate, she would have apparently wanted to make him her personal musician.

"I see everyone goes through the same things here."

"Milady, allow me to correct what seems to be a misunderstanding: not everyone experiences being invited to the private room of royalty." There was exasperation in Gudrun's voice, but surely it wasn't that rare—both Ferdinand and I had been invited, and judging by what Anastasius had said, Eglantine was invited all the time too.

"I think I will use this opportunity to ask Prince Anastasius about the forbidden archive. If he is familiar with its location, perhaps he will open it for me," I mused aloud, having had the genius idea to ask royalty to open the room that could only be opened by royalty. Gudrun, however, stopped me with a stunned expression.

"Please do not make such a request, milady."

“Why not?” I asked, tilting my head to one side. “Is that not the fastest solution, considering that only royalty can open the room?”

Gudrun faltered, at a momentary loss for words, and then let out a heavy sigh. “Lady Rozemyne, the forbidden archive is a mystery of the Royal Academy. It is a rumor of uncertain veracity or origin and thus unsuited for the ears of royalty.”

“So it’s one of the seven mysteries of the Academy?”

“Seven? What are the other six, in your opinion?”

Back in Japan, it was traditionally said that every school had seven mysteries. I didn’t know why that was or what the other mysteries might be in this case.

“I wouldn’t know, but you must have some ideas, Gudrun.”

“I can recall perhaps twenty mysteries related to the Royal Academy.”

“Twenty... That sure is a lot.”

“The mysteries develop over time as students introduce new ones for amusement, similar ones become fused together, and existing ones quickly morph into something else entirely. There is the goddess statue that dances on the night of the graduation ceremony, the gazebo where the Goddess of Time plays tricks, the gewinnen pieces that begin playing games of ditter... Have you all not heard of these?” Gudrun asked, counting them off on his fingers.

Cornelius and the others exchanged glances before shaking their heads. If not even the older students were familiar with these mysteries, they must not have been topics that came up all too frequently.

Gudrun widened his eyes at that; then he muttered, “Perhaps the impacts of the civil war are being felt here as well...”

“Welcome, Lady Rozemyne. I see you are looking well today,” said Anastasius’s head attendant, Oswin. He gave a relieved smile upon seeing my face, which reminded me—I hadn’t seen him since my collapse, and my response to their well-wishes had noted only that I was returning to Ehrenfest. The reason for my sudden departure was a summons, but from an outside

perspective, it would seem that I had returned due to my poor health after my meeting with the prince. Oswin must have been concerned about me this entire time.

“I am fine now. My apologies for having worried you all.”

Oswin guided me to the guest parlor where Anastasius was waiting. The prince was already seated, and he immediately gestured for me to sit down as well.

Wait, what? Is it just me, or is the prince all shiny now?

Anastasius’s blond hair had always been luxurious, but now it looked especially silky; I couldn’t help but wonder whether Eglantine had allowed him to use some of her rinsham. His attitude had also changed completely—rather than seeming uneasily impatient, he sat calmly in place, positively brimming with confidence. It was such a stark contrast that, for a second, I thought he was a different person with the same face.

“Took you long enough,” the prince said. “I’ve been waiting.”

“My apologies. I must say, however, that your wait has been worth it; the hairpin for Eglantine is our finest one yet.” I had thought he would demand to see it at once, but his gray eyes instead crinkled in a pleased smile. He glanced at our attendants as they went through the gift-giving process. “Did something happen while I was away?” I asked.

“By which you mean...?”

“Oh, you just seem to be carrying yourself quite differently, so I couldn’t help but wonder if your relationship with Lady Eglantine has progressed,” I said. I couldn’t help but think of the old saying that if you didn’t see a man for three days, you’d come back to find an entirely different person.

The moment I said that, Anastasius’s self-assured attitude fell apart into something more casual. “What, you’re curious? I see even the youngest-looking of girls are still fond of romance. Hm... It was thanks to your advice that the situation changed so suddenly, so perhaps I can tell you a bit of what happened.”

No thanks. I feel like you’re gearing up for a boring ramble...

That was what I wanted to say, but I held my tongue; Anastasius's gray eyes were sparkling as he silently pressured me to ask for more details. Gudrun was likewise signaling for me to request more information. I had no choice but to read the mood.

"I am ever so curious. Ohohoho..."

"Then I will tell you. However, I can disclose only a portion of the full story; there is much which must be kept private," Anastasius said with a proud grin. Despite his words, however, it was clear on his face that he desperately wanted to tell me every little detail. "I spoke with Eglantine alone after our meeting. I took heed of your advice and spoke frankly, so that she could understand my true wish and I could understand hers."

Upon hearing her wish, Anastasius had used the following Earthdays and all the spare time he had from his finished classes to rush between the royal castle and Klassenberg. He was dead set on making her dream come true.

"I cannot say much as the information is not yet public, but Eglantine rejoiced. It was my first time seeing such a smile, and its beauty made her truly indistinguishable from the Goddess of Light," Anastasius said, breaking into a smile himself. There was a particular kindness to his expression that I had never seen from him before. I could feel his love for Eglantine radiating from his every pore, and, to be honest, I couldn't stand it. I didn't want to hear any more of this lovey-dovey garbage from him.

"So your efforts bore fruit," I summarized, "and you secured the right to escort Lady Eglantine with aplomb?"

"Correct. The hardest part was convincing the previous Aub Klassenberg—I needed to visit him with Eglantine countless times, and... Ah, apologies. I cannot give the details."

And I don't want to hear them.

Anastasius clearly, desperately wanted to tell someone else his story, but I was fine just knowing he was going to escort Eglantine. The hairpin was going to see use, and assuming their relationship ended up a success, Ehrenfest would surely benefit to some degree.

“Now then, please behold the hairpin made for Lady Eglantine. My personal hairpin craftswoman put her all into making this our best one yet,” I said, forcibly changing the subject and gesturing to Gudrun with my eyes. He placed a box on the table without a word, which I delicately opened and turned so that Anastasius could see the hairpin inside. “This is the koralie hairpin. I believe it will suit Lady Eglantine perfectly, but does it meet your expectations?”

The hairpin was made in the image of a koralie, a flower Eglantine liked, which was similar in appearance to a lily. The large petals were adorned with tiny white flowers and green plants to symbolize the coming of spring. Decorative lace made the ornament appear even fancier and more elaborate, and the colors chosen were intended to complement the Geduldh-red dress that I had been told Eglantine was going to wear to her graduation. The center of the flower was an orangish shade of red, with the petals gradually becoming redder the further out you went.

Anastasius plucked the hairpin from the box and carefully began to look it over. There was a deadly seriousness in his narrowed eyes as he examined the ornament from every angle. Had Tuuli managed to meet the standards of royalty? I swallowed hard as I nervously awaited his judgment.

“This is much more extravagant than your hairpin,” he observed.

“My hairpins are for daily use—their style differs from those meant to be worn with formal attire at celebratory events such as the graduation ceremony where one comes of age. Furthermore, a hairpin such as this would not suit me; koralies are so extravagant that I would be outshone. This is a hairpin designed only for Lady Eglantine. Have you deemed it worthy?”

“Yes. This hairpin will do a splendid job at drawing out her beauty,” Anastasius said with a satisfied nod. I couldn’t help but give a broad smile knowing that such praise had come from royalty.

Yes! Tuuli, the prince thinks your work is splendid! That’s my angel for you. Aah, I wanna brag to everyone!

I clenched my fists beneath the table as I tried to contain my swelling excitement, but it seemed that my attempt wasn’t quite enough—Anastasius fixed me with a glare and said, “Contain your emotions.” I frantically placed my

hands over my cheeks, but my smile continued to grow nonetheless.

Oswin returned the hairpin to its box, delicately closed the lid, and then carried it away. Gudrun then stepped forward as if to replace him and set down the sheet music. He gestured with his eyes for me to control myself, and that finally calmed my excitement.

“What shall you do with the song dedicated to the Goddess of Light?” I asked. “I do believe it would be wiser for you to present it to her yourself, rather than through me, but the choice is yours.”

“I would agree. As initially planned, I shall buy it. Oswin.”

Oswin stepped forward again and began the purchase with Gudrun, while Anastasius looked over the sheets and nodded. Ferdinand and Rosina had arranged the song into something truly beautiful, so I expected that it would sell without issue.

Once the transaction was complete, we went on to discuss Eglantine’s cuteness and some trivial affairs related to the Royal Academy. Thinking that was it, I moved to bring the meeting to a close... only for Gudrun to interrupt me with a cough.

Am I forgetting something...?

With his hand hidden partially behind his skirt, Gudrun extended two fingers as if making a peace sign and then curled them to resemble flopping ears.

Schwartz and Weiss!

It was only then that I remembered—I had been asked to consult the prince about whether it would be acceptable to publish research on the library magic tools at the Interduchy Tournament. The request had completely slipped my mind.

“Erm, Prince Anastasius... If you don’t mind, I have one last question. Ehrenfest’s scholars would like to publish research on Schwartz and Weiss during this year’s Interduchy Tournament. Would that be acceptable, considering that they are the heirlooms of royalty?”

“Ah, of course. That should be fine. Were any discoveries made?”

Heck if I know.

I opened my mouth, about to say just that, but then I shut it again and slowly shook my head. “I’m afraid you will need to ask Professor Hirschur for details. I have only just returned from Ehrenfest and have not yet seen all the documents myself.”

“Hirschur again, hm? Ehrenfest would do well to have its students participate in the tournament too, not just its dorm supervisor,” he said with clear exasperation, and he was totally right. I had no rebuttal.

“I will strive to ensure that our students have stunning research to publish next year.”

“...I shall wait and see, though my expectations are not high.”

And with that, our meeting came to an end.

“I must say, milady, that meeting alone was enough for me to understand the many woes you bring to Lord Ferdinand,” Gudrun said, rubbing his temples as soon as we returned to the dorm. “I could feel my stomach turn as I waited to hear what you would say to the prince. Not only were you completely unpredictable, you even forgot many of the things we discussed moments prior to leaving the dormitory. Now I truly empathize with why Lord Ferdinand said you should be kept isolated from the other duchies and your socializing kept to a minimum.” His relief was so unmistakable that it honestly freaked me out.

“Gudrun... Am I truly that bad at socializing?”

“Your largest problem is that you seem competent at first glance. The majority of your answers and questions are quite fine, but you attempted to ask royalty about the forbidden archive and managed to forget advice you had received just moments prior. I feel that your mistakes are always severe and fatal; there is no middle ground, and thus your retainers must be exceedingly careful. I will be writing a report to Ehrenfest as Mother attends to you, and I will propose that Lord Ferdinand personally train your retainers.”

Bonifatius had already agreed to train the apprentice knights, and now there was a chance that Ferdinand was going to train all of my retainers. They

recoiled at the thought and stiffened; they knew all too well the legends that followed the current High Priest.

"Milady, the responses to your tea party invitations have arrived," Rihyarda said, holding a great bundle of letters in her hands. A discussion room had already been set aside for us, so we moved there at once to begin checking the replies.

It seemed that we were going to hold a tea party with every single duchy in attendance. Given space constraints, we were limiting attendance to one representative per duchy, but since each representative would need to bring with them attendants and guard knights, there was still going to be quite an enormous crowd.

"Can we actually handle this many people?" Cornelius asked, worried.

Brunhilde's amber eyes shone with a fierce light. "Let us consider this a prologue to the Interduchy Tournament. There will be no limit to the number of people then, and we are also bound to encounter the archducal couples and adult nobles from other duchies. I do believe Lord Justus was correct when he said that no amount of preparation will be enough."

"But is there not a limit to how much our kitchen can produce? What shall we do about that?" Lieseleta asked.

I pondered her questions for a moment. "Let us send a letter to Ehrenfest requesting access to the castle's kitchens the day before the Interduchy Tournament and placing orders with the pound cake-selling Othmar Company. We can have the food delivered as luggage."

We would need to send this letter to Sylvester and the others sooner rather than later—there was no getting around the fact that the resources currently being sent to the Royal Academy weren't enough to meet our upcoming needs. I decided to leave decisions on the number of orders and the budgeting for them to my attendants, instead thinking about how we would handle the people once they actually arrived.

While we were preparing for the large-scale tea party, I received a summons from Eglantine. She wanted me to teach her how to put on the hairpin that

Anastasius had gifted her, so there was no way for me to refuse.

Because Anastasius had his eye on Eglantine, men were forbidden from attending her tea parties. This meant that Hartmut and Cornelius would need to stay behind, while Justus would be accompanying me as Gudrun. Upon hearing this, Hartmut began to deeply contemplate something.

Please, O gods... Steer Hartmut away from the dark side...

"I do apologize for inviting you during such busy times; it was just essential that I ask before the graduation ceremony," Eglantine said, welcoming me with a radiant smile. At the risk of sounding like Anastasius, she truly was beautiful enough to be mistaken for the Goddess of Light. She had always been a sight to behold, but now she was invincible, propelled forward by the blissful confidence unique to girls who were in love and who were receiving love in turn. "I was truly overjoyed to receive such a splendid hairpin, though I must say—I am concerned that Prince Anastasius has forced unreasonable demands on you once again."

It seemed that Eglantine, in all her kindness, was worried about royalty dragging me around. I smiled and rejected the idea; this was something I had suggested on my own to cheer him up, not something he had forced on me.

"I advised him to order the hairpin. It was clear to me how well one would suit you, Lady Eglantine."

"Oh my. Might I ask you to teach me how it should be worn, then?"

Eglantine had put on the dress she planned to wear at her graduation, no doubt wanting to see for herself whether the colors matched.

"How do I look?" she asked.

"Stunning. I speak with all seriousness when I say that you could steal the heart of not just Prince Anastasius, but all men who gaze upon you."

Her bountiful golden hair was bound up like that of an adult woman, revealing the pale skin of her neck that so nicely brought out the red in her dress. Her long and gorgeously embroidered sleeves shook ever so slightly as she experimentally touched her nape; she wasn't used to not feeling her hair brushing against it.

“Is that the Klassenberg crest?” I asked, looking at the embroidery.

“Indeed. My grandfather—or rather, my adoptive father—was quite fussy about the design.”

“I can imagine. You are his granddaughter and adoptive daughter, and this is the dress for your coming-of-age ceremony—it is only natural that he is invested in every detail. And rest assured, your own stunning beauty is not overshadowed by the beauty of your outfit. It suits you perfectly.”

As we spoke, my attendants taught Eglantine’s how to put in the hairpin. It was like the large red flower was blooming from her glossy, rinsham-cleaned hair, with the lively greens reminding one of spring. All the colors made Eglantine’s golden hair look even more gorgeous.

“Oh my, how splendid!”

“It looks wonderful on you, my lady.”

The attendants gave enthusiastic approval as well. Considering how impressed they sounded, it was easy to guess that Eglantine would draw a lot of attention at her graduation ceremony.

Eglantine joyfully expressed her thanks for the praise; she then turned back to look at me while touching the hairpin. “Lady Rozemyne, is this hairpin safe to wear while whirling?”

“I would suggest experimenting. If you find it interferes with your whirling then you will need to adjust its positioning or change how your hair is braided. I usually insert my hairpins from above so that they remain in place even during dedication whirl practice; there is a risk it might fall out if stuck in from the side.”

Eglantine gracefully raised her hands and started to whirl, humming a quiet rhythm to herself. Her billowing sleeves filled with air as she spun, fluttering through the air as though they had minds of their own. The loose strands of hair dangling on either side of her face gleamed as they caught the light, and the subtle smile that crept onto her face showed just how much she loved to whirl.

“It seems that things will be just fine,” she eventually concluded with a contented smile. I was likewise satisfied, having been able to watch Eglantine

whirl free of charge. I was a big fan of her dedication whirls.

Once we had finished celebrating the hairpin together, I stealthily sold Eglantine the jar of rinsham I had brought, thereby completing everything I had planned to do during this meeting. I victoriously balled up my fist, having remembered to do everything that I had been told to do this time, only for her to bring out two sound-blocking magic tools.

“May we speak a bit more with these?” she asked.

“Of course,” I replied, my heart pounding in my chest as I gripped the tool. Who knew what she was going to say?

“It is thanks to you, Lady Rozemyne, that I can allow Prince Anastasius to escort me.”

“I am told that he put forth great effort to make it a reality.”

“There is no doubting that; he truly did pour his all into this. He spoke with the king, Prince Sigiswald, and even my grandfather countless times, traveling between them with no rest to speak of. This determination won my affections more than any sweet nothings.”

You’re really going to use sound-blocking magic tools just to make me listen to you brag about your boyfriend...?

It seemed that the sight of Anastasius passionately working to convince the former Aub Klassenberg had won Eglantine’s heart more than anything. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes watered slightly as she spoke, the overflowing aura of a young girl in love making her even more lovely and attractive. However, perhaps due to my lack of imagination, I could only imagine Anastasius, like... arguing with a stubborn old man. It was certainly disappointing.

Nooo... Here we have basically the most handsome man and the most beautiful woman possible, but it barely feels like a fairy-tale romance at all. My heart is dead.

Still, Eglantine’s smile was radiating happiness, and that was enough for me. She looked much more wonderful now than when she had been agonizing over whether she would become the catalyst for another war.

“I cannot say much more, as our future will be announced during the upcoming Archduke Conference, but you are undoubtedly the reason that things are going so well. Lady Rozemyne, I am truly grateful for all that you have done,” Eglantine said.

“I am just glad to see you happy,” I replied with a smile, only for Eglantine’s own smile to cloud over a little.

“Lady Rozemyne... Would you still celebrate our union knowing that it might distance us from the throne?” she asked. I recalled my guardians yelling at me about how dangerous problems with the throne were—in which case, this distancing could mean only good things for me.

“Of course,” I replied, my chest confidently puffed out. “I have chosen to be your ally, Lady Eglantine. You being distanced from the throne changes nothing.”

Eglantine fell silent, so shocked that she was truly at a loss for words.

“Lady Eglantine...? Is something the matter?”

“Oh, no. I just never expected you to give such a reply. Will your aub not scold you for speaking from your heart? Do the powers of Ehrenfest not wish to establish connections to the throne?”

“Ehrenfest is a neutral duchy that did not side with either faction to begin with, so in truth, I was scolded simply for getting involved with matters of succession at all.”

“Oh my!” Eglantine exclaimed with a giggle. Her expression was no longer clouded over; rather, her peaceful smile from before had now returned. “You truly are the Saint of Ehrenfest, Rozemyne. I feel as though you have saved me.”

“If my actions have helped in the least bit, I am honored to have been of service,” I replied on instinct.

Huh? I mean, wait... Did I actually do anything?

I kept my confusion to myself, allowing Eglantine to continue extolling her boyfriend’s many virtues until our tea party eventually came to an end.

“You cannot be allowed to socialize any further—it is simply too dangerous,” Justus said as soon as we returned to the dorm. He knew how to lip-read, and what he had seen had apparently put him through agony again. He muttered under his breath that he would need to write yet another report to Ferdinand.

“Have I done something wrong?” I asked.

“Lack of education, misunderstandings... The problem is more to do with your surroundings than you yourself. The most terrifying part is your own lack of awareness over what a dangerous bridge you are crossing. Something must be done at once,” Justus said, looking entirely exhausted. My other retainers, none of whom knew how to lip-read, watched with confused expressions.

Well, I don’t know what I’ve done, but... sorry anyway.

The Tea Party for All Duchies

"The seats have been arranged. Lady Rozemyne, please memorize all of the names and duchies," Lieseleta said, holding out a table of all the archduke candidates due to attend our tea party, as well as any archnobles attending in an archduke candidate's place. The table contained each person's name, the duchy they were from, a description of what they looked like, and any personal preferences that were likely to come up in conversation.

"Here is a list of each duchy's quirks and specialty products. I hope you will find it of some use," Philine said, adding another document to the pile. She had apparently organized all of this information with Hartmut after gathering it at tea parties.

Guh. I have to memorize all this?

My motivation was low, but I wasn't about to stomp on the goodwill of my retainers. I had no choice but to put my all into remembering everything they had prepared for me.

"This must be hard for you, since you were sent back to Ehrenfest before you had a chance to socialize..." Philine said.

"I must count my blessings and appreciate that Wilfried will be helping when the time comes. Had I been alone here, I would truly not have known what to do."

Wilfried and I were jointly hosting the tea party together, since all of the other duchies were going to be involved. One could guess that his participation had made it easier for male archduke candidates to attend, since there were several boys due to arrive. Of course, these lists naturally lacked photographs, so I had no idea what most people were going to look like; I just glared at the names and did my best to memorize the traits associated with them. At first, I had thought that all this information would help at least a little, but I already felt as though I was suffocating.

Let's see... Klassenberg is sending Lady Eglantine, of course. And Dunkelfelger is sending... Oh? Not Lord Lestilaut, but one Lady Hannelore, a first-year. Crap. She's in my grade, but I don't remember her at all. I wonder what kind of girl she is. But, moving on... I thought Drewanchel would send Lord Ortwin, the first-year, but they're apparently sending his fifth-year older sister. Interesting.

Perhaps because I had finished my classes so quickly, I barely remembered my fellow first-year archduke candidates at all; and the few I did kind of remember had siblings who would be attending instead. The fact that Dunkelfelger was sending Hannelore rather than her older brother was possibly due to Lestilaut holding a grudge against me.

Well, I hope I can at least forge a good friendship with Lady Hannelore. Oh, but she's also a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate... Is she going to be all aggressive and ditter-obsessed too? Eeh...

"Lady Rozemyne, Lord Wilfried, we have received a response from Ehrenfest," Justus announced. "They have said that they will not be able to provide much more material support for the Interduchy Tournament. This is all they can give at the moment."

We had requested supplies for the Interduchy Tournament, but what they could actually provide seemed to be very limited.

"That can't be! What do they expect us to do, then?!" Wilfried shouted, his eyebrows raised in anger. From my perspective, however, it felt as though those in Ehrenfest had done all that they could to help in whatever ways they could. The Interduchy Tournament was an annual event, which meant a portion of our duchy's budget was put aside for it each year. There was no way they could just conjure up more resources; they had no doubt done all they could with the Archduke Conference and the business it would entail on the horizon.

"They provided more assistance than we had anticipated, no?" I asked. "We asked expecting nothing at all."

"Rozemyne? This isn't enough at all."

"There is nothing we can do about that; sugar is simply too expensive. Considering how unreasonable of a request it is to expand the budget at such short notice, they must have worked very hard to accomplish even this. We

have no choice but to handle the rest as best we can."

The trade of sugar had continued to develop over the two years I was asleep, but it was still expensive and more on the sparse side than not. It was to be expected that Ehrenfest couldn't send us its entire supply for the Interduchy Tournament.

"We won't be able to satisfy our visitors like this," Wilfried protested. "It's not like we can make something from nothing."

"Wilfried, do you know how many members of royalty will be visiting?" I asked.

"I'm pretty sure Ignaz looked that up for us," Wilfried replied, at which point his scholar began fishing through documents.

"If we have enough pound cake to treat royalty and the archducal couples then I would argue that is satisfactory. We *do* have enough for them, correct?"

"Yeah, but what will we do about the other nobles?"

"First come, first served. We prioritize visitors in order of arrival and stop serving it when we run out."

"Buh?" Wilfried widened his dark-green eyes like a cat that had just been smacked on the nose. "'First come, first served'? Is that even allowed...?"

"Regardless of whether it is or isn't, we cannot serve food that does not exist. We should ensure service only for royalty and the archducal couples, while serving other nobles as they come. Then, when we run out of seats, we can serve pound cake to be taken home. Once we run out of that as well, we will politely request that they leave, while saying that we await their visit next year."

"That is simply too disrespectful," Justus interjected, refusing the idea as well. Ensuring service for royalty and the archducal couples was a satisfactory idea, since it followed status-based customs, but simply ignoring other nobles outright was not an option. It seemed that the parents of some betrothed students were due to visit, and we absolutely needed to accommodate them to some degree.

“In that case, what if we calculate how many guests of such importance are going to visit and then reserve seats or gifts for them?” I suggested. “Only the nobles who wander our way unprompted will be turned away.”

“That is at least somewhat better,” Justus conceded. His approval was enough for us to go ahead with the idea. We were lacking numbers either way.

“As for how to dress up what we have as best as possible, and how to satisfy our visitors... I shall leave that all to you, Wilfried. I am not much of a socialite myself,” I said, directing work his way.

Wilfried grimaced and gave me an unhappy look, but what did he expect? All of my suggestions would simply be rejected, so it was much easier and quicker to have someone with more noble-like ideas handle things.

“As we can only host so many people, the only solution that comes to my mind is rejecting visitors,” I continued. “Of course, I have a few small ideas such as slicing our pound cakes into singular bites and distributing priority seating for next year, but nothing more.”

“Ah. I’ll see if I can think of anything.”

Preparations for the large-scale tea party progressed alongside preparations for the Interduchy Tournament until, at last, it was the day of the tea party.

The tea party room assigned to Ehrenfest was on the first floor, close to the stairway leading down to the basement kitchen, which made it easy to prepare sweets and tea. The door for visitors was connected to the central building of the Royal Academy, meaning anyone could enter, but the door connected to the dormitory was much like the dormitory’s front door in that only students of the relevant duchy could enter.

I entered the room my attendants had prepared and checked that everything was in order, including whether we had enough tea and sweets. After that, I discussed with Wilfried how we were going to divide our guests. There would be a great number of visitors here from every single duchy; I couldn’t hope to run the tea party alone.

“I’ll leave Klassenberg and her school friends to you, Rozemyne. I’ll prioritize

hosting the first-years I know from class and those I know a little from attending those other tea parties."

"That will be quite helpful, Wilfried."

Third bell rang while I was double-checking the lists the apprentice scholars had made. The students would now be leaving their dormitories, so everyone started taking their positions. We needed to brace ourselves for the incoming storm.

Before the bell had even stopped, the smaller bell used to mark the arrival of a visitor rang from the other side of the door. One guest had arrived already, and the apprentice attendant who was standing by to open the door turned to look at me with surprise.

"Lady Detlinde of Ahrensbach has arrived," came a voice from outside. All those who hadn't yet gotten into position did so at once as the door began to open. We had mostly completed our preparations, but the sudden arrival meant we were feeling a bit anxious regardless.

Detlinde looked around the tea party room before lowering her eyes shyly and pressing a hand against her slightly reddening cheeks. "Oh my, I seem to have arrived early. I suppose I was just that excited to visit. How embarrassing... Should I leave and come back?" she asked. Her expression made it exceedingly hard to tell whether she had genuinely been excited, or whether she was just mocking us for not having been completely ready by the scheduled time.

"That is quite alright, Lady Detlinde," I said. "I am glad you were looking forward to this tea party so much that you arrived before the bell rang. Please, come in."

"Oh, but of course. I simply could not wait to see Wilfried," she replied.

Okaaay... It was definitely just her being spiteful.

I made my conclusion in an instant—her dark-green eyes held no mirth nor light above the smile she was giving me. In a way, she was very easy to understand. I decided to leave handling her to Wilfried.

"Wilfried, it seems that Lady Detlinde wishes to see you," I said, prompting him to step forward.

“It is so good to see you,” she said to him, having already forgotten about me entirely. “I believe the last time we saw each other was at our tea party between cousins, or perhaps that one hosted by Dunkelfelger.”

“I am glad to see you as well, Lady Detlinde.”

“Oh my. Formal today, aren’t we? I believe I asked you to be more casual, but I suppose there *is* going to be a crowd.”

While Wilfried was busy greeting Detlinde, I ordered my attendants to begin preparing tea and sweets for her. Wilfried then escorted her to and offered her a seat, demonstratively sipping the tea and taking bites from the sweets once her attendants had prepared the appropriate dishes and cutlery.

“This is the pound cake that is popular within Ehrenfest. We have prepared three kinds today,” he explained. There were honey, apfelsige, and rumtopf pound cakes, as well as several traditional sweets that had been served during previous years. “They were invented by Rozemyne.”

“Oh my. So they are sweets served in the temple, then? That explains the rustic appearance, but the flavor is certainly excellent.”

“I’m glad you like them.”

Wilfried... You’re giving a proud smile here, but she literally just said they’re poor-looking sweets she would expect someone raised in the temple like me to come up with. She’s insulting them. Pay attention!

Wilfried had described the tea party among cousins as very peaceful, but now I was starting to think Detlinde had voiced all sorts of coded messages and insults that had gone straight over his head. In reality, it had probably been a disaster. Now even I was starting to worry about him.

Soon after Detlinde took her seat, visitors began to arrive one after another. Wilfried and I stood at the entrance to greet them, while our attendants took them to their seats.

“Thank you ever so much for coming, Lord Rudiger.”

“Thank you for inviting me, Lady Rozemyne. I was thinking that I would like to have a leisurely discussion with you. Ehrenfest and Frenbeltag are on good

terms, and that extends to us relatives as well," Rudiger replied with a smile. He looked a lot like Wilfried, perhaps due to their parents being swapped-around siblings, and this familiar face made me feel instinctively closer to him. I also appreciated that he had bent forward slightly to meet my eye level, since most people were content to look down at me from above.

"You would consider me a relative despite the fact I am adopted, Lord Rudiger?"

"I wish to be as friendly as possible," he replied. I similarly wanted to be on good terms with Frenbeltag, considering that it was Florencia's hometown.

As we exchanged smiles, Wilfried was welcoming another visitor. "Lady Hannelore. Thank you for coming."

"Thank you ever so much for inviting me, Lord Wilfried. I have truly been looking forward to today. Lady Rozemyne... is busy, I see. I will greet her later."

As I was speaking to Rudiger, I glanced over at Hannelore. She was a quiet-looking girl, not at all comparable to her aggressive older brother Lestilaut. Her almost purplish light-pink hair was tied into two tails, one on either side of her head. She looked a little tense, and the way her red eyes darted around the room reminded me of a rabbit.

Lady Eglantine arrived when over half of our guests were seated. "Lady Rozemyne, I thank you ever so much for inviting me today. I am determined to introduce you to my other friends," she said, gesturing to those she had entered with. Likely due to her being a sixth-year, pretty much all of her friends were older students.

The girls immediately began to circle around me. "Even up close, you truly are small, Lady Rozemyne," one said. They eyed me as though delighting over the cuteness of a stuffed animal, though as archduke candidates, there was no doubt some plotting behind their smiles.

I wonder whether they're being this friendly because I'm so small...? Or is it because Eglantine introduced me as a friend? I'm not sure how I should be interacting with them.

I entrusted Wilfried with handling our remaining visitors as I took the girls to

their seats; duchy rankings took priority here. I then escorted Adolphine, an archduke candidate from Drewanchel the Third, who smiled at me as I gestured to her seat.

"You were forced to spend two years asleep in a jureve following a serious poisoning attempt, yes?" Adolphine asked. "My little brother has told me you are quite well-learned despite this fact. He wanted to come here as a fellow first-year, but I wished to see you ever so much."

Er, sorry... I know that his name is "Ortwin," but I don't at all remember what he looks like!

I smiled, but I was screaming on the inside. "My brother tells me that Lord Ortwin is quite intelligent and that he is absolutely honored to be his classmate."

Casual discussions were kicking up across the room; it was almost the end of socializing season, so the archduke candidates and the archnobles sent in their place already knew each other reasonably well by now. I was surrounded by Eglantine and her school friends, while Wilfried made his way over to those he knew the most.

"Ehrenfest's pound cake has a humble appearance, but it really is quite good. Even Prince Anastasius is fond of it," Eglantine said as she introduced the sweet. Several of her friends' faces lit up at once as though they had been waiting for this very subject.

"I had some at one of your previous tea parties, Lady Eglantine. The apfelsige flavor was particularly delightful," one girl said.

"That pound cake was a gift from Lady Rozemyne, which reminds me—the hairpin I will be wearing at graduation was made in Ehrenfest at Prince Anastasius's instruction. It has ended up looking quite splendid."

Eglantine is already shilling me to all her friends... What an actual goddess.

She was better than me when it came to flattery, and she was much more influential. I wanted to learn from her radiant example, but that seemed fairly tough.

"Your hair looks even more lustrous than usual, Lady Eglantine. Is that also

thanks to Ehrenfest?" one of the girls asked. "I cannot help but notice that the women of Ehrenfest have especially brilliant hair today."

For advertising purposes, every girl from our duchy had used rinsham in preparation for the tea party, much like they had done prior to the advancement ceremony. Even the attendants serving everyone had glossy hair.

"Your hair is especially glossy, Lady Rozemyne. May I touch it?" another girl asked.

"Of course."

Eglantine's friends took turns touching my hair, praising it, and expressing their jealousy. Of course, they also asked whether I would sell them some rinsham, but I wasn't allowed to engage in any trade here.

"Unfortunately, I cannot make such decisions myself, since I need the aub's permission to engage in any trade. Would you like trial jars, however? I can share that much, at least."

"Oh my. You don't mind?"

"Not at all. There are a limited number, though, so I will need to prioritize friends."

In my eyes, one could hardly call a relationship founded on bribery a friendship, but this was just a fact of life for archduke candidates. Ehrenfest was in a hardly favorable position at the middle of the duchy rankings, and unless there was merit in befriending me, nobody would even bother trying. I needed to make as many friendships with other duchies as possible while Eglantine's influence was on my side.

"I will have my attendants prepare them," I said, "and then I shall greet our other visitors."

"Tea parties of this size are always dreadfully busy. We wish you luck."

With encouragement from Eglantine and her school friends, I slipped out of the circle and signaled Brunhilde with a glance. She would deliver the rinsham trial jars while I greeted those I had missed on my first pass.

"I wished to form bonds with you all as soon as possible, but fate necessitated

that I return to Ehrenfest, and so it is only now that I have been able to hold a tea party. I extend my apologies and thank you ever so much for visiting during these busy weeks."

"You were raised in the temple before being adopted by the archduke, weren't you, Lady Rozemyne?" Detlinde asked, looking and sounding concerned. "You must participate in temple rituals even now. I cannot imagine how hard that must be, as I have naturally never set foot in a temple, of all places, but I sympathize with your struggles."

The visitors were astir. Many had already known that I was adopted, but apparently not that I had been raised in the temple and continued to serve as the High Bishop even now. A few people scornfully muttered, "In the temple?" to one another. Their eyes were narrowed like predators that had just discovered a weakness to exploit.

Using faux concern to publicize my dirty laundry, hm? Talk about nasty...

This wasn't a one-time thing either—I would need to go back for the Dedication Ritual every year from now on. Allowing my temple origins to become a lasting weakness for others to attack would only cause me lasting trouble; I needed to own it here, and so I looked over everyone and smiled.

"Indeed. As Lady Detlinde says, I was raised in the temple due to family circumstances. However, it is by the request of the aub that I continue to participate in religious ceremonies. Ehrenfest is suffering so greatly from the mana shortage that even a child such as myself is needed to serve as a saint and participate in ceremonies. I am admittedly quite jealous of greater duchies that have no such mana issues to deal with. Isn't that right, Wilfried?"

"Yes. I, too, have participated in temple ceremonies, filling the duchy with my mana. It was arduous but worthwhile, since it is the duty of the archducal family to fill the land with mana. Of course, I also envy the greater duchies so rich with mana that their archduke candidates need not do this work themselves."

I nodded in agreement and then gave Detlinde an envious look, one which said, *"I would like for your home to share its plentiful mana."* It was an ironic jab, since Ahrensbach was plummeting down the rankings despite being a greater duchy, and she appeared to understand this—she furrowed her brow in

frustration, and the hard look in her dark-green eyes intensified.

"Many middle and lesser duchies are suffering right now; Frenbeltag too is envious of the greater duchies," Rudiger said with a calm smile. "And yet, despite the difficulties we all share, Lady Rozemyne assisted Frenbeltag when we called for aid. Our duchy has nothing but gratitude for the Saint of Ehrenfest."

"I am grateful that your people are so appreciative, Lord Rudiger."

"I hope that Ehrenfest and Frenbeltag can continue to assist one another in the future."

Is that just a generic thank-you, or is he trying to lead into the proposal that I've already rejected with my guardians...?

Frenbeltag's intentions were not yet clear. I appreciated the backup, but I couldn't say whether they were expecting even more assistance in turn. To avoid the troubles that might have come with any further clarification, I ended the exchange with a smile.

"It feels that we are all struggling as of late..." came words of agreement from those in the middle and lesser duchies. My commoner upbringing meant that I couldn't really empathize with them, but the civil war had dramatically changed the lives of countless nobles. The Sovereignty had also undergone blatant and quite extensive change, to the point that Justus had commented on how different the Royal Academy was not long after arriving here. Ehrenfest was struggling from having fewer people, but other duchies had been impacted even more.

"You say that Ehrenfest is struggling from a lack of mana, Lady Rozemyne, but your duchy's grades have been steadily rising. You even are spreading new trends," one girl noted.

"That is because we are putting our best efforts into areas which do not require mana," I replied. "Of course, we are likewise working on the mana problem as best we can."

It was true that our written grades had shot up, but those didn't require mana, and all of our new trends were fashion accessories and sweets, not new

magic tools. Everyone seemed to nod in response, understanding my point entirely.

“I consider your hairpins very delightful, Lady Rozemyne,” another girl said. “To think that one could help their duchy in ways that do not require mana... I believe I will need to learn from your example and think of something myself.”

“Oh? But Lady Rozemyne is also working on matters that do require mana,” came an unexpected rebuttal. I turned to see a boy looking at me with probing eyes—an archnoble attending because his duchy had no archduke candidates at the moment. “My first-year little sister made a highbeast that one can climb into and drive like a carriage. It seems you thought up that design yourself, Lady Rozemyne. How does one come up with such ideas?”

“I have always been of poor health, and so I spent much time thinking of ways to travel while minimizing contact with the outside. The drivable highbeast was my solution,” I replied. It was a complete, shameless lie. I certainly felt bad for all the people who were nodding to themselves at my apparent logic—the truth was, I had simply only been able to picture a car after being instructed to make a vehicle.

“One can ride drivable highbeasts without needing to change into riding clothes, plus they can be used to carry luggage,” I continued. “I believe it is quite a convenient design for women, but the surrounding walls block the usage of weapons, so my guard knights have maintained that it is not suitable for knights.”

There came a few impressed noises from among those gathered.

“The idea is quite splendid, but was it not said that you assaulted a dormitory supervisor with your highbeast?” Detlinde asked, drawing attention once again. “It was ultimately no more than a rumor, but its feybeast-like design is surely to blame. Did no one try to stop you, or do you simply have a fondness for such terrifying creatures?”

I knew from experience that attempting to convince everyone that Lessy was cute would not do me any favors. As I paused to think about what to do, Wilfried looked at the ground and then snapped his head back up as though he had just had some incredible idea.

“Rozemyne prioritized toughness when creating her highbeast; her weak constitution has resulted in her being drawn toward those who exude strength. Just consider how many knight commanders she is fond of. There is Lord Bonifatius, Lord Ferdinand, Karstedt...”

Wait, what...? I know you’re trying to back me up here, Wilfried, but that’s completely untrue. When have I ever said that I love strong people?! That’s so wrong!

That said, his twisted backup appeared to have had some effect—Detlinde was now giving me a look that was filled with both concern and pity.

“I see. The weak admiring the strong is understandable, but as a woman, I would suggest that you seek cuteness over strength,” she said. Some nodded in agreement, but others spoke up to support me.

“It sounds to me like Lady Rozemyne will be on good terms with Dunkelfelger, then. Don’t you agree, Lady Hannelore? Oh, where has Lady Hannelore gone to...?”

“It seems she has briefly left to wash her hands.”

Another missed opportunity to greet Hannelore... My timing sure is bad today.

It was then that Brunhilde whispered, “Everything is ready, Lady Rozemyne.” I concluded my greetings and started making my way back to my seat, all the while eyeing Hannelore’s empty chair. I was now going to be distributing the trial jars of rinsham to Eglantine’s friends. The girls met me with looks of excited anticipation; they had seen Eglantine’s and the Ehrenfest girls’ glossy hair with their own eyes, so it only made sense that they would want to secure some rinsham for themselves.

Brunhilde brought over the small jars with a half-smile, at which point I noticed Hannelore return out of the corner of my eye. We had completely missed each other. I wanted to speak to her at least once before this party was over, but for now I distributed the bottles to the friends Eglantine had introduced me to. I started with Adolphine and carefully worked my way down the status hierarchy from there.

“Here is yours,” I said. “My attendants will explain how to use it later.”

“Oh my. I thank you ever so much.”

As I was handing them out, I noticed that I was drawing attention from the people Wilfried was speaking to as well. They didn’t say anything to me, however, and so I continued distributing the jars to my new friends.

“They all smell lovely, don’t they?” Eglantine asked. “I am quite fond of the scent myself.”

The other girls opened the corks sealing their jars and tried the scent for themselves. They all immediately let out awed gasps of delight. They likely had their own preferences, but for this particular event, I had given them all the same kind I had given Eglantine.

“Brunhilde, teach everyone’s attendants how to use the rinsham for me.”

“Understood, Lady Rozemyne.”

As Brunhilde gathered the attendants of my new friends and taught them to use rinsham, those who hadn’t been given any jars leaned toward me, as if unable to resist the allure.

“Lady Rozemyne, what is in those jars?” one person asked. “It smells ever so delightful.”

“It is rinsham, a liquid which brings out the glossiness in one’s hair. I’m afraid there’s a limited amount, so I am distributing these jars only to my friends today.”

“Oh my. Are you not distributing them to Lord Wilfried’s friends also?” Detlinde asked. Her wide eyes turned to Wilfried, and soon enough, many more eyes had gathered on him.

“Well, it was Rozemyne who created rinsham in the first place,” Wilfried responded with a smile, backing me up. “And unlike girls, I’m not too interested in glossy hair. I generally leave all matters related to beauty products to her.”

Several of the boys gave wry smiles to indicate that they felt the same way. Much like Wilfried, they had most likely failed to understand why women were so passionately obsessed with rinsham.

“I see,” Detlinde replied. “So that means you will be giving me rinsham as

well, yes, Lady Rozemyne?”

Um... What? Where in the world is that brimming confidence coming from? Is she, like... trying to use her authority as a greater duchy archduke candidate to order me to give her a jar? I cocked my head to one side in confusion, unsure how to respond.

“Goodness, Lady Detlinde. Did Lady Rozemyne not just say she is distributing them only to her friends? I do not believe your words thus far have been friendly in the least,” Eglantine said, chastising her with a soft smile. She spoke as the archduke candidate of Klassenberg, the highest-ranking duchy, and our friends who had just received rinsham all nodded in quiet agreement.

Aah, I see... So this is why mednobles and laynobles flock to greater powers—it keeps them safe from tyrannical misuses of authority.

As a lower-ranked duchy, Ehrenfest had to obey the orders of Ahrensbach... but if an even higher-ranking duchy like Klassenberg stepped in, then Ahrensbach would need to back down. It was only now that Eglantine had protected me, despite not being a relative or my guardian, that I started to truly know how it would feel to be a mednoble or even a laynoble here. At the same time, I understood for myself what members of a faction expected from those they followed.

In the Royal Academy, I need to take care to be as friendly as possible with greater duchies. And in Ehrenfest, I need to take care to protect the mednobles and laynobles in my faction.

Even after Eglantine’s interjection, Detlinde persisted. She widened her dark-green eyes as though she were the one being treated unfairly, blinked in surprise, and then sadly looked down. “I am shocked that our relationship seems so cold on the outside. I am always, always concerned for Lady Rozemyne; she is my precious cousin, and my heart ached when I learned that she was attacked by other nobles in her home duchy.”

Um. Um. What? “Precious cousin”? Your what now?

“My words may have seemed harsh to most, but such sharpness is a reflection of our familial love. Lady Rozemyne understands me. Don’t you?”

...No. Not at all.

She was flip-flopping so blatantly that my jaw actually dropped as she spoke. However, I quickly snapped back to reality. I needed to reject her here, otherwise everyone would accept her erroneous statements as fact.

“This is my first time hearing such a thing. I recall you once saying to my face that I am no cousin of yours.”

“Oh my. It seems that even you misunderstood me, Lady Rozemyne. How tragic...” Detlinde said, slumping forward. The boys watching certainly appeared to have fallen for her act, and I started to worry that the girls would similarly conclude that there had been a tragic misunderstanding... As I turned my attention to them, however, it became clear that they had picked up on the lies and were getting annoyed. They subtly signaled for me to end this already.

“Lady Rozemyne, it was all a misunderstanding. You are my precious cousin,” Detlinde reiterated, seemingly intent on continuing this charade despite the flat, unamused looks she was receiving from all the other girls.

No, I’m pretty sure I understand you just fine, Detlinde. But, hm... What should I do? How do people want me to end this?

I paused, unsure what a noble would do in this situation, and that was when Gudrun appeared with one of the small jars in hand. “Milady, might I suggest you gift your cousin, Lady Detlinde, some rinsham too?” he asked with a smile, handing me the rinsham while simultaneously showing me a slip of paper on his palm that read, *“Use this opportunity to emphasize your position as cousin to an Ahrensbach archduke candidate.”*

He was right—there was no harm in me exploiting her status. The very reason I was distributing the rinsham to my friends was to ensure my own security.

Though it is annoying having to give her some after she smack-talked me so much.

“I had no idea you viewed me as such a precious family member, Lady Detlinde. My apologies. If you would have me, then I welcome our relationship as cousins,” I said. She probably wouldn’t be able to backtrack on our connection as family now that she had announced it in front of archduke

candidates from every single duchy. I smiled and held out the bottle, which Detlinde took with a smile.

“Indeed. May our relationship be long and fruitful, Lady Rozemyne.”

Giving some rinsham to Detlinde caused a number of girls from other duchies to step forth, all asking for trial jars of their own. I counted, and we had just enough for all those flocking around me.

Once the jars of rinsham had all been distributed and my attendants had explained how to use them, the topic shifted to Eglantine accepting Anastasius’s request to escort her during the graduation ceremony.

“In truth, I acquired Prince Anastasius’s escort thanks to Lady Rozemyne’s assistance,” Eglantine revealed.

“Is that so? Please do share the details,” came a reply. It was highly important even from a political perspective whom the royals chose to escort, so boys and girls alike were interested in what Eglantine had to say.

“Lady Rozemyne, it is quite interesting that you were able to meet with Lady Eglantine despite having returned to Ehrenfest before socializing season began,” one girl said.

“It was when the music professors invited me to a tea party,” I replied. “Lady Eglantine invited me to a separate tea party with her afterward. My time in the Royal Academy is limited, so it was quite reassuring that I was given the opportunity to befriend her.”

Some girls responded with looks of surprise, no doubt because I had started socializing so much earlier than usual, but Detlinde gave a worried look of sympathy. “You must feel very concerned then,” she said, “considering that Lady Eglantine is about to graduate.”

“Oh my. You are quite prone to worrying, aren’t you, Lady Detlinde? Fear not—Lady Rozemyne and I have promised to remain friends long into the future, haven’t we?” Eglantine replied, easily restraining Detlinde and directing a smile my way. It was the soft smile of a goddess, and I returned it with a nod.

“Um, Lady Rozemyne...” came a small, trembling voice. I turned and saw Lady Hannelore from Dunkelfelger, clasping her hands before her chest and wearing

a resolved expression. “There is something I want to ask you, Lady Rozemyne...”

Whew... I can finally greet her.

I had an attendant help me down from my chair so that I could stand before Hannelore. She was certainly on the smaller side for a first-year student, but she was still significantly taller than me, as one would probably expect. I looked up and saw that her red, rabbit-like eyes were wet and trembling.

“I thought it important to greet you properly, Lady Hannelore. It feels we have been just missing each other all day,” I said before giving the proper noble greeting. Much to my surprise, however, Hannelore looked more troubled than pleased when she greeted me in turn.

Wait... Did she not come here to greet me? Have I messed up?

I was starting to feel worried, and Hannelore likewise looked around with an anxious expression. People were starting to watch us with curious looks, as if something was about to happen.

“I wanted to speak to you about my brother, Lady Rozemyne. But on second thought, this is not quite the place for it. I will save the matter for another time.”

Hm...? Is Lestilaut causing more problems or something?

We had beaten Dunkelfelger in a game of ditter using what was considered an unusual plan, thereby avoiding their attempt to take custody of Schwartz and Weiss, and then we had refused a rematch through our dorm supervisor. Perhaps Lestilaut was going to make some unreasonable demand of me that Hannelore couldn’t mention in public.

“That is not all, however—I also wanted to ask if we could possibly be friends...” Hannelore asked nervously. I glanced over at Brunhilde and felt my stomach drop when she subtly shook her head.

Oh no... This is even worse than an unreasonable demand! We’re out of trial jars! I’d assumed that Hannelore wasn’t interested, since she was busy talking with Wilfried while everyone else was crowding around me. What should I do? Maybe I should have saved a jar for each greater duchy. It’s obviously a problem that a greater duchy is asking for some rinsham after we’ve already given it all

away. Sheesh! Greater duchies should demand a jar first; that's how they're supposed to act!

Struggling with the impossible problem before me, I decided to plainly state the truth. "Lady Hannelore, I am truly sorry, but we are out of jars to distribute."

"What...?" Hannelore widened her eyes in surprise; then she looked down at the floor and slowly shook her head from side to side. I doubted anyone else could see her face, considering that she was hanging her head, but I was short enough to see her devastated expression up close. She looked as though she was about to burst into tears.

NOOOOOO! I've never seen anyone more disappointed in my life! Justus, save meee!

I turned on instinct and saw Gudrun quietly walking over to stand behind me. He placed a hand on my shoulder and gently encouraged me forward. "Lady Rozemyne, I do believe Professor Solange mentioned that Lady Hannelore visits the library often. Perhaps you could lend her one of your books, as proof of your friendship?"

I widened my eyes in shock, and Gudrun nodded to confirm that it was true without a doubt. There was an instant where the question of when he had heard such information from Solange flashed through my mind, but it was quickly forgotten amid the intensity of the revelation.

"Oh my! You are a lover of books, Lady Hannelore?"

"Y-Yes, well... I do not dislike them," Hannelore said, looking up and nodding. Most archduke candidates never bothered to go out of their way to visit the library, but Hannelore apparently went there quite often. She had presumably started going there once her lessons were all over, which had probably been right around the time I returned to Ehrenfest. I could tell we would have become fast friends if only we hadn't missed each other.

Aah! I've found a bookworm cutie! I want to be friends with her. I want to be friends with her so bad. This must be the guidance of Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom! Woohoo!

Hot mana started to course through my body as I was struck with the urge to offer a prayer of gratitude right then and there. I managed to contain myself, however, since it would be well and truly awkward for me to pray in the midst of all these archduke candidates so soon after my temple upbringing had been mocked.

“Lady Hannelore, I have many knight stories, but which would you prefer—stories focused on romance or on fighting? As an archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger, I presume the latter?”

Hannelore paused in thought. “If I had to choose, I would say that I prefer stories about romance,” she finally responded in a quiet, reserved voice. The thought of such a shy-looking girl enjoying romance was in itself enough to bring peace to my heart.

I see... She likes both but prefers love stories. Interesting. Interesting...

In which case, I would lend her the book of romantic knight stories that Elvira had written and then probe her for opinions. Perhaps we could even make a book together in the future. The possibilities were endless.

“I will have it sent to you at once, then. I am quite happy to have made a book-loving friend,” I said with a full smile.

Hannelore responded with a cute smile, looking relieved; then she clapped her hands together in realization. “Um, in that case, I’ll lend you a book of my own in return. What would you be interested in, Lady Rozemyne?”

Um. Oh my gosh. Hannelore might be a literal angel. A precious, precious angel who lends me books. She was sent to me by Mestionora. Aah, my truest friend!

My arms began to rise in prayer as I entrusted my body to the fervor and joy burning with me. This lack of restraint was short-lived, however—Gudrun intensified his grip on my shoulders, quite clearly signaling for me to contain myself. I forced down the mana in my body that was searching for an exit and looked up at Hannelore.

“I adore all books, but I would especially like to read stories about knights or romance that are rich with Dunkelfelger culture,” I answered.

“I will get it to you as soon as possible. I am so glad that we can be friends, Lady Rozemyne.” Hannelore smiled warmly and then clasped my half-raised hands in hers.

Holy cow! What?! She’s so cute! She’s a totally adorable bookworm! What should I do?! I think I’ve just found my best friend in the whole world!

I broke into a goofy smile of my own, overwhelmed by Hannelore’s cuteness.



“I am glad to be your friend as well, Lady Hannelore. I... Oh...?”

All of a sudden, everything went black.

When I woke up, I was already in bed. I sighed at how familiar this whole experience was.

“It feels like a while since I last messed up like that...”

It seemed that I had gotten too excited about finding a new best friend and had fallen unconscious. The massive quantity of mana raging through me had not had any form of release, whether through prayer or a feystone, so even my jureve-expanded capacity hadn’t been enough to contain it.

Once I’m feeling better, I’ll have to bring Hannelore that book and apologize...

Interduchy Tournament

Once I had properly recompressed my mana and regained the ability to move normally, I reached out for the bell sitting on the table beside my pillow. Before I could even ring it, however, Rihyarda pushed through the curtains around the bed; she must have heard my rustling around.

“Finally awake, milady? You were asleep for two whole days, so we were truly starting to worry. We even just finally managed to convince that stubborn Ferdinand to come give you an examination.”

When Justus had reported to Ferdinand that I had collapsed from overexcitement, the only response he had gotten was to push empty feystones against me and wait for my mana to calm down. Even I was exasperated by the fact that I had gotten worked up enough to fall unconscious for two full days. At the same time, I wondered how Ferdinand was going to react when, after having begrudgingly made the trip here, he found that I was already awake. The blood drained from my face as I imagined him glowering at me and unleashing a storm of criticisms.

“Rihyarda, I would like to pass out again. Until Ferdinand arrives, if possible.”

“What are you saying, milady? Everyone’s worried to death about you. If your mana has calmed down, we should be heading to the dining hall for breakfast.”

And so we made our way to the dining hall. The very moment I arrived, everyone turned to look at me.

“Lady Rozemyne!”

“Awake at last, huh?” Wilfried said. “Uncle said you’d be fine, but I was still worried.”

“What happened with the tea party?” I asked as I sat down and started to eat breakfast. Due to Gudrun having been at the tea party, Rihyarda had immediately moved to direct my attendants and take care of me, so she hadn’t been able to tell me what had happened next—or rather, when I had asked, she

had just told me to check with those who had actually been there.

“Not like anyone could just calmly keep drinking tea and enjoying conversation after the host collapsed,” Wilfried noted. I had put my weakness on display for all the attending archduke candidates and their retainers to see, and the tea party had been brought to an immediate close, giving everyone the impression that I would collapse if so much as touched without warning.

“Lady Hannelore had it the worst of all, since you collapsed right after she held your hands,” he continued. “You’ve gotta go apologize to her. She was trying her best to stay composed, but she ended up in tears.”

Hannelore had apparently fallen into panic, entirely unsure of what to do. Wilfried had done his best to console her, having endured a similar trauma in the past—namely the time he had taken me by the hand and ran off during my baptism ceremony, which ended with me unconscious and somewhat bloody. There had also been another incident during the winter that same year, when a single snowball had knocked me out, which had terrified his friends and guards too. It was safe to say that my health had spawned many legends in Ehrenfest.

“I told Lady Hannelore over and over that she doesn’t need to feel bad, since no matter how shocking it looks, you’re always just fine when you wake up. Your retainers also told her that it wasn’t her fault, but it just came off as superficial. It didn’t help her feel better at all,” Wilfried explained. “I ended up walking her all the way to the Dunkelfelger Dormitory, explained to Lord Lestilaut what had happened at the tea party, and then carefully apologized for having disturbed Lady Hannelore. Understand what that means?”

The tea party had been held not long after our treasure-stealing ditter match, so Lestilaut, who had bitterly called me a trickster and described me as far from being a saint, had apparently glared at Wilfried and the others with some overwhelming intensity.

“Ngh... I’m sorry for putting everyone through that.”

“I didn’t think it’d take you two whole days to wake up; the Interduchy Tournament’s tomorrow, you know. Besides, why did you even collapse this time? It didn’t look like anything happened.”

It’s simple—Lady Hannelore is such an adorable cutie that I got all heated. I

opened my mouth to tell him just that, but then I paused. *Wait a second... Doesn't that make me sound a little bit like a pervert? I should probably dress this up a little. Mm... I could say I was really glad to have made a new friend. No, no... I showed way too much excitement for something like that.*

As I struggled to find a nice-sounding answer, a low, melodic voice came from behind me. "I, too, would like to hear why you collapsed, Rozemyne." My heart skipped a beat, and such an intense chill ran down my spine that I could have sworn it had turned to ice.

"F-Ferdinand...?!" I was so taken by surprise that my voice cracked, and I whipped around to see the man himself glaring down at me. His eyes were filled with irritation and practically screamed, *"You would dare cause problems while I'm so busy?"* Eckhart was there too, serving as his guard knight.

"I reluctantly came at Rihyarda's dogged insistence," Ferdinand continued, "but I see now that you have recovered on your own."

"She woke up right before breakfast," Rihyarda soothingly informed him.

At those words, Ferdinand went from a frosty smile to his usual flat expression. "I will hear the details regardless. Come," he said to me.

"Um, but... the Interduchy Tournament is tomorrow, and there's a lot I need to prepare." I was indirectly asking Ferdinand to save the lecture for another time, but he just looked around the dining hall and made a dry announcement.

"There is no need for you to worry about the Interduchy Tournament. It has been decided that you will not be attending."

"Wait... what?"

"You will not be attending the Interduchy Tournament," he repeated. "This is the aub's decision, and one that we will now discuss. Rihyarda and Justus will suffice as your attendants. Everyone else, prepare for tomorrow."

Dazed, I allowed Rihyarda to push me into the side room for discussions. Eckhart stood outside the door; only Ferdinand, Rihyarda, Justus, and I went inside.

"Do check up on milady before you start your talk, my boy."

“I know. Come, Rozemyne.”

I walked up to Ferdinand, who had slowly sat down on a chair. From there, he acted like my family doctor—he touched my neck, my wrists, and investigated me all over.

“I see your mana has already calmed,” he said. “Do you understand what happened to you? According to Justus’s report, they could only assume that you became too excited over the proposed lending and borrowing of books.”

“...That’s basically it.”

It had been my first time befriending a fellow bookworm, and my excitement had gotten the better of me. Books were rare and expensive in this world, so it followed that very few made a hobby of reading. I had doubted that I would ever find another girl my age who was both a lover of books and of a similar enough status to me for us to interact casually. To me, Hannelore was a precious friend whom I could not allow to slip through my fingers under any circumstances.

“I was so thrilled about making a bookworm friend that I started to offer a prayer. Justus stopped me, since praying and giving blessings is abnormal behavior at a tea party, but the mana had already been unleashed within me. It raged through my body until, out of nowhere, everything went black.”

“So it surpassed your allowance. As expected. That should be fine, now that your mana has calmed. The problem will be this new friendship of yours. Who is this girl, exactly?” Ferdinand asked, fixing me with another glare. I recalled what I knew about Hannelore.

“She’s Lady Hannelore, an archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger. Her (rabbit)-like features make her absolutely adorable, plus she’s an avid lover of reading. We promised to exchange books. I have a friend with whom I can discuss books now! Aah, this is amazing!”

“Fool. You are getting too excited,” Ferdinand said, his frustration clear in his voice. He pulled me forward, pressed a feystone against my head, and then promptly replaced the feystone with another. “It seems to me that you should avoid this friend. At this rate, you are going to lose consciousness again.”

“Ah.” I watched as the feystone rapidly changed colors, a clear sign that I was indeed too worked up. Rihyarda shook her head as if to say that I was hopeless.

“Lady Hannelore was quite troubled when you collapsed, milady. It might be wise to keep your distance for her sake as well.”

“...I will contain my excitement, so please do not say such cruel things. Do not take my first bookworm friend away from me.”

“Have you never had a friend who loves books before?”

I had been close with a number of weirdos back in my Urano days, all of whom had had different but respectably strong obsessions. Since coming to this world, however, I hadn’t made any such friends, neither as Myne nor as Rozemyne. Even Lutz, who had spent so much time making books with me, couldn’t be described as a bookworm. To him, books were products, not things to read and enjoy.

“This is the first book-loving friend I’ve made since moving here,” I replied. “Books are so expensive that even nobles tend not to keep very many, no?”

A mutual appreciation of reading was the reason I was on good terms with Philine, but I was an archduke candidate and she a laynoble; we couldn’t see each other eye-to-eye, nor share books with one another. She was my retainer, and I couldn’t treat her as anything more than that. From her perspective, I was her lady and someone she had to be very careful around; she needed to keep an eye on her surroundings at all times and avoid getting too close. We weren’t friends, but rather a lady and her obedient servant.

“Lady Hannelore, however, is a Dunkelfelger archduke candidate; she almost certainly has an impressive library. I will need to keep on making as many books as possible so that I might be able to lend her just as many.”

“It seems that you are not going to calm down for some time. Rihyarda, drain her with feystones whenever she gets excited so that her mana does not overflow,” Ferdinand said as he set a leather bag on the table. I could tell from the visible lumps in the material that it contained three large feystones.

“That reminds me, Ferdinand—why has it been decided that I won’t be attending the Interduchy Tournament? I feel perfectly well again.”

“The aub decided such after reading Justus’s report. Aubs from other duchies and royalty are going to be attending the Interduchy Tournament, and considering that you could not even make it through your own tea party without ingloriously falling unconscious, he has concluded that it is best for you to remain in bed and avoid causing any further problems.”

The Interduchy Tournament was like a cross between a sports festival and a cultural festival, to put it in Earth terms. It was the biggest event of the year and something that everyone looked forward to. Not being allowed to attend was just plain cruel.

My dissatisfaction must have shown on my face; Ferdinand crossed his arms and shrugged at me. “Rozemyne, the Interduchy Tournament can politically be considered the first stage of the Archduke Conference, and to be honest, with so many uncertainties this year, we do not wish for someone as unpredictable as you to be involved. It would be best for you to develop socializing skills and stamina first. If an aub from another duchy speaks to you, are you confident in your ability to handle yourself appropriately? And would you be able to avoid collapsing in spite of your proven affinity for spontaneously falling unconscious?”

Ferdinand paused to look at me, awaiting an answer. I took a deep breath; I wasn’t confident that I could do either of those things. Just a few days ago, my way of speaking had been enough to make Justus cradle his head in agony.

“Are my socializing skills really that bad...?” I asked.

“Justus says that you are largely competent and that you can socialize while keeping up proper appearances. However, there are times when you say such bizarre things that one feels compelled to ask what in the world inspired them. The fact that you think and act on entirely different bases is likely to blame for that.”

I sadly hung my head; as always, my common sense was not so common here. To make matters worse, I couldn’t even tell what it was about my thought processes that everyone else found so strange, and without that knowledge, I couldn’t be careful and avoid making similar mistakes moving forward.

“Ferdinand, my boy... milady is doing the best she can with her poor little

body. Her grades are so incredibly high that one would doubt she had actually spent two years in a jureve, she completed the Dedication Ritual, and she even took part in some socializing. What more could you ask of someone who has so recently awoken from a coma?" Rihyarda asked, stepping forward protectively.

Ferdinand regarded her with his usual flat expression. "I am asking her to rest. Rozemyne easily completed all that the archduke requested before she entered the Royal Academy—or more precisely, she surpassed our expectations far more than is reasonable. We had no plans for her to socialize with royalty, nor did we expect her to form this many connections with greater duchies. At this rate, if she attends the Interduchy Tournament tomorrow, we can expect her to bond even further with royalty and the aubs of other duchies. Those around her cannot keep up with that any longer, and that is why I ask that she rest, and avoid contact with royalty and the aubs of any higher-ranking duchies."

Ferdinand turned his attention back to me before continuing. "Justus's report also included the suggestion that you collapsed due to exhaustion from socializing and preparing for the Interduchy Tournament. I thus opted to bring with me several books for you to read while you rest, out of consideration for your health, but would you still rather attend the tournament?"

Several books, you say? That means... WOOHOO! A whole day of reading!

Resting on one pan of my internal scale was the Interduchy Tournament, and resting on the other was an entire day of reading in my room. Considering that I had been forbidden from even entering the library due to socializing and the tournament, there was only one answer I could give.

"I am still of poor health, so I believe from the bottom of my heart that it would be best for me to rest in the dormitory with Rihyarda. However, what will my retainers do? We expect to be short on hands, and I would like for them all to participate in the Interduchy Tournament."

My resting meant that some of my retainers would need to stay in the dormitory, and that certainly wasn't ideal when we were so short of people and resources.

"I will remain in the dormitory as your supervisor, so you will not need retainers. You should be able to survive the day with just Rihyarda."

Wait, what? Ferdinand supervising me? No thanks.

That was a surefire way to turn my day of reading into a day of nonstop lectures. I thought as hard as I could of ways to get rid of him.

“Ferdinand, shouldn’t you be attending the Interduchy Tournament? Please, don’t feel compelled to stay here with me.”

“The plan was for me to attend the tournament as your guardian and to support you during any negotiations with higher-ranking duchies, but it seems that things have gotten too troublesome for that,” he said with a glare, but I returned only a quizzical look. What was so troublesome about our situation?

“Justus has informed me of the headache-inducing reality that bizarre legends of my past are circulating the Academy,” Ferdinand continued, answering my question before I could even ask it. “It has reached the point where he believes my casual appearance at the tournament might cause quite an incident, which is utterly absurd. What in the world did you do?”

Aah. The Legends of Ferdinand.

“Please do not try to blame me for every little problem,” I replied. “Professor Hirschur publicly referred to me as your disciple, and so everyone began to speak of your student days in the Royal Academy. I will not deny that the legends have gotten a little mixed up, with the exploits of others now being attributed to you and the like, but I am completely uninvolved.”

“I am told that you instructed the students to gather stories about Lord Ferdinand, as you expected him to be an easy topic of conversation at tea parties, milady.”

“Justus! Shh!” I frantically tried to shut him up, but it was too late—Ferdinand was already staring daggers at me.

It was the day of the Interduchy Tournament—and more importantly, my first day of reading in a very long time. Everyone finished breakfast early and then rushed to continue preparations.

A sweet aroma had been pervading the dormitory for several days now as those in the kitchen prepared a copious amount of sliced pound cake. The same

heavenly scent also wafted from a number of pound cake-filled boxes; we had recently been receiving a consistent stream of packages from Ehrenfest containing supplies for the Interduchy Tournament. The apprentice attendants checked each one, sent out any necessary instructions, and then had the servants carry them where they needed to go.

Wilfried was currently out by the stadium where the tournament was due to be held, likewise giving instructions.

The apprentice scholars were diligently writing down the key points Ferdinand and Justus were giving them about the research presentations. The most important one of all, apparently, was to hide the fact that Ferdinand was here: “Professor Hirschur will abandon her presentation and rush to the dormitory to discuss research if she learns of my presence, so speak of me to no one.”

The apprentice knights had exited the dormitory through a side door and were now receiving something of a lecture from Eckhart about the weak points of various feybeasts and how to attack them. It seemed the students were easier to deal with now that they had overcome their ignorance and recognized their complete lack of cooperation skills. Eckhart was pretty pleased about that, since he was in charge of training new recruits in the Knight’s Order. These apprentices humbly listened to his teachings; they would apparently be a lot more skilled next year once Bonifatius trained them in the spring.

“Aub Ehrenfest has arrived!” came an announcement.

First the archducal couple, then the guardians of graduating students arrived in the busy dormitory. They were all wearing extravagant clothing for socializing and passed right through the dormitory on their way to the stadium. They had all previously graduated from the Royal Academy and so they did not need any guidance.

“Finally awake, Rozemyne?” Sylvester asked. “You should spend the day resting here in the dorm. You still look a little sick.”

“I thank you ever so much for your concern,” I replied. I personally thought I was looking healthier than ever—the sheer bliss of now having an entire day to read had worked wonders—but if Aub Ehrenfest said you looked sick, then you

looked sick, no questions asked. I would be resting in my room.

“Ferdinand, take care of Rozemyne. Don’t let her leave the dormitory.”

“As you wish.”

The dormitory calmed somewhat once the visitors had all passed through, but then the apprentice knights returned. It seemed they had to start standing by in the stadium now.

“Lady Rozemyne, may we ask for a blessing?”

“If you would be so kind as to kneel then certainly; I will grant you all a blessing from Angriff.”

The apprentice knights knelt in rows and bowed their heads, with Angelica the sixth-year at the front. Just like always, I conjured my schtappe in my right hand, raised it into the air, and started filling it with mana.

“O God of War Angriff, of the God of Fire Leidenschaft’s exalted twelve, I pray that you grant them your divine protection.” Blue light shot from my schtappe and rained down upon the apprentices. “I ask that you all use what you have learned to the best of your ability—that you keep an eye on your surroundings and work with one another. I pray that Ehrenfest is able to secure the best results possible.”

“Understood!”

Once everyone had gone, I spent my time leisurely reading the books Ferdinand had given me in the common room. Aside from the apprentice scholars and Justus popping in to ask Ferdinand for instructions, it was peaceful. Ferdinand was reading reports from Justus, of course, as well as various documents that had been organized by Wilfried, Charlotte’s apprentice scholars, and my apprentice scholars. The papers were apparently “homework” that Ferdinand had given them through Justus as part of their scholar training.

Third bell rang and a delicious smell began drifting in from the kitchen. It wasn’t long before the scholars and attendants returned in staggered groups to eat lunch.

“Lady Rozemyne,” one said, “the tournament this year is proving to be quite

something.”

“I’ve never seen Ehrenfest receive so many visitors before,” replied another.

The returning students excitedly told me about the Interduchy Tournament. As it turned out, even researchers from the Sovereignty had approached us with gleaming eyes to discuss the research on Schwartz and Weiss. Hirschur had happily explained what she had learned, and they had engaged in lively discussion about solutions to the gaps that remained in the magic circles.

It seemed that the shumil variation of my drivable highbeast had also been put on display, and the idea of not having to change into riding clothes had drawn the attention of many women.

“Even though you were not there, it felt as though your name is known to all, Lady Rozemyne.”

“The commander of the Dunkelfelger knights came too, asking for the archduke candidate considered to be Lord Ferdinand’s disciple.”

I wasn’t the only one to grimace at that news—Ferdinand did too. His frown seemed to suggest that he knew exactly who this knight commander was. Maybe they had attended the Academy together and this was the man Ferdinand had beaten to a pulp using his devious strategies.

“It seems that I was wise to not attend,” Ferdinand said.

“Since we have not yet spoken of your recovery, Lady Rozemyne, Klassenberg’s and Dunkelfelger’s archduke candidates came with their guardians and offered us gifts to help with your illness. Aub Ehrenfest was quite tense as he handled them.”

Woo! Fight, Sylvester, fight!

As we talked, the apprentice knights all returned at once; it seemed their battle had ended. The atmosphere was somber, not excited, and everyone but Angelica looked at me with a conflicted expression. Had the blessing not been enough to help them?

“Cornelius, how did the game of ditter go?” I asked.

“Still not as good as one would expect for our rank, but compared to previous

mock battles, we slew the feybeast incredibly fast."

"You all seem rather solemn for an achievement like that."

Cornelius glanced at the other apprentices and then grimaced. "We had to fight a grun, and considering that you use one as your highbeast, it was a bit..."

"I do not actually know what gruns are. What manner of feybeast are they?"

"They are foul-smelling and truly vicious."

"Wait. They smell...?" I was hit with a sudden wave of regret, but Ferdinand interjected before I could speak again.

"Apprentices, save the grun discussion for later. Finish lunch and then assist the attendants. I am being told there are so many visitors that they do not even have the manpower to properly turn people away."

The apprentice knights snapped to attention; they wolfed down their lunches and then rushed back outside again. Once the dining hall calmed down a bit, Ferdinand and I started eating lunch ourselves, with Rihyarda serving us.

"I do feel that this has been unfair for you," Ferdinand muttered as we ate.

"What do you mean?"

"Forbidding you from attending the Interduchy Tournament. Missing the tournament means you will also miss the awards ceremony."

According to Ferdinand, the competition part of the Interduchy Tournament ended around fifth bell, at which point they would announce each year's honor students.

"Hirschur said in a letter that you are likely to be first-in-class. Under normal circumstances, you would be receiving direct praise from the king and basking in the praise of all; and yet, due to our circumstances, you have been denied this."

"I'm glad that I'm missing it, actually... I couldn't speak to the king as I am now."

I would practically die speaking to the king after being crowned the top of my class in a place where all the royalty and archducal couples were in attendance.

Just thinking about all the ways I could mess up was terrifying.

"I hope that you will be able to attend the Interduchy Tournament next year, but thinking of ways to educate you is quite the struggle. Your thinking and culture differ fundamentally from ours, and I do not know what to do about it. I have tried already, and the results are as you see."

"Milady was raised in the temple, so it's only natural that she would think differently from most nobles. She just needs to get used to it. Time heals all wounds," Rihyarda said with a calm smile. "She's lived as an archduke's daughter for a year and a half since being baptized, and then she slept for two years before entering the Royal Academy. If you subtract the time she spent in the temple, she's only lived as a noble for about half a year. Everything will surely get better soon."

Ferdinand had quite a precise memory; he began counting the number of days I had actually spent in the castle as a noble. "Hm... It is more than half a year, but she certainly has spent only a short amount of time in the castle. It did not feel that short to me, as I also educated her in the temple, but..."

"You're the only noble in the temple, my boy—the blue priests technically don't count. Milady won't ever learn how to think like a noble while she's there. The castle, on the other hand, is filled with nobles."

"I see," Ferdinand said with a nod.

"You always want immediate results, but raising people takes time. Take your time."

Rihyarda was right—raising people took time, and the temple wasn't like the castle at all. There, I didn't have to be tense at all times, since there weren't nobles surrounding me. I could guess, then, that any recreated education plans from Ferdinand would have me spending a lot less time in the temple.

That sucks...

I knew that Rihyarda was right, and that I needed to sort out my socializing skills... but if the solution involved taking away the one place I could feel at peace, then I felt nothing but miserable about it.

Angelica's Graduation Ceremony

The graduation ceremony would take place the day after the Interduchy Tournament. The archducal couple had rooms in the dormitory, but all the other parents would need to return to Ehrenfest for the night.

That explains why so few came to watch the tournament.

So many consecutive days of teleporting required a lot of mana. For this reason, mednoble and laynoble guardians wouldn't come unless they already knew that a relative would have a position of honor or unless their relative wanted to marry someone from another duchy.

Angelica's father was more concerned about seeing her sword dance at the graduation ceremony than the game of ditter, so he would be coming tomorrow after taking a day off work. Incidentally, Angelica's mother served as Florencia's attendant, so she had seen the game today alongside her lady. Lieseleta had said that she would have tomorrow off.

Angelica really is the lone knight in a family of excellent attendants...

The graduation ceremony was due to begin at third bell; there would be dedication whirl and sword dance performances, and then the High Bishop of the Sovereign Temple would come to give a blessing. It was also a coming-of-age ceremony, though that was treated as just a part of the day's events. In the afternoon, the graduating students would gather in the hall for the graduation ceremony while wearing their best clothing.

"I'll be staying home for that too, right?" I asked Ferdinand in the common room after dinner. He had said that he'd be staying in the Royal Academy overnight, so I assumed he was going to be supervising me tomorrow as well.

"The same important figures who attended the tournament will be attending the ceremony. Your attendance would make all that we did today entirely meaningless. Or what, are you dissatisfied with reading books in the dormitory?"

I knew there was no chance for me to participate in the graduation ceremony after missing the tournament, but still, I was really curious to see Eglantine dedication whirl and Angelica sword dance at maximum power, the latter of which I had never seen since sword dancing was practiced in a separate location from whirling. The fact that these were once-in-a-lifetime dances only served to intensify my enthusiasm.

"I am quite happy to be reading, but I would have liked to see Lady Eglantine's dedication whirl and Angelica's sword dance. If only we had a (video camera)..."

"And what is that, exactly?"

"Something which would record the performances and then allow us to view them again later. Hm... Remember the magic tool that Professor Hirschur uses in her lectures? Think of it like that, but it captures motion as well."

Ferdinand marginally raised an eyebrow. "Hirschur does have a recording magic tool; she used it once during a lecture, I recall, but it took such a ridiculous amount of mana that she shelved it soon after. If you were to move your mana to a feystone and activate it, perhaps it would last long enough for the sword dance and the dedication whirl."

"Really?!" I exclaimed. *I can't believe there's already a magic tool that works like a video camera!*

I gazed up at Ferdinand with hopeful eyes, spurring him to take out his ordonnanz feystone with a displeased grimace. "The problem is, doing this will inform Hirschur of my presence," he said, "although I suppose it cannot be helped if it is for the sake of keeping you docile. Pour your mana into these feystones; the recording will cut out partway through if you do not provide enough."

Ferdinand handed me some feystones and then began sending his ordonnanz to Hirschur. In the meantime, I dutifully carried out my task as a battery; I gripped the feystones one after another and filled them with my mana. It was easy work, since my excitement was making mana course through my body.

Tralala. Tralalalala. I get to see the sword dance and the dedication whiiirl.

Just as I was beginning to wonder when we would hear back from Hirschur, I

received my answer. Her response did not come via an ordonnanz, however; she threw open the dormitory door and rushed inside, carrying a magic tool and a bundle of documents in her arms.

“Ferdinand, why didn’t you tell me you were here sooner?! There’s so much we must discuss about the documents you sent me!”

“I imagined you would say that and abandon the Interduchy Tournament, so I opted not to contact you despite how rude that may have been. It is good to see you again, Professor Hirschur. Does the magic tool still work?” Ferdinand asked. His tone was more polite than usual, but he still plucked the tool from Hirschur’s hand and started fiddling with it.

“What do you need it for after all this time? I tossed it away long ago due to how much mana it requires.”

“The need arose to record tomorrow’s performances. Rozemyne will provide the mana, which eliminates that problem... Good, it still works. I appreciate your continued dedication to performing regular magic tool upkeep. If only you would send reports as regularly...”

Hirschur didn’t respond; it seemed that she had ignored everything that wasn’t convenient to her. Instead, she started spreading the documents she had brought out onto the table.

“Getting back to the library tools—these are all the theories I’ve crafted alongside the many researchers who approached me at the Interduchy Tournament,” she explained. “Some of them were researching the royalty’s magic tools in the Sovereignty and were familiar with what they saw, which would mean this part of the magic circle likely has to do with the God of Life. However, the magic circles they recalled did not seem to match completely.”

“Hmm, interesting... What manner of magic circles were they?”

And so the discussion between mad scientists began. The scholars listened on with interest, although their expressions gave away that they understood nothing of what was being said.

Once I had finished pouring mana into the last feystone, I swiftly exited the room; I cared more about the books that Ferdinand had brought for me than

their incomprehensible ramblings about magic circles. I went back to my room, read, took a bath, and then went to sleep.

I headed to the common room after breakfast the next day, only to find Ferdinand and Hirschur still discussing things in the exact positions they had been in the night before. Only the increased number of strewn-about documents revealed how much time had passed.

Eckhart was leaning against the nearby wall with a determined grimace, presumably having stayed up all night with them. It seemed that even when Ferdinand had these overnight research talks, his guard knights were forced to accommodate him. Maybe this had been a regular occurrence for them when they were attending the Academy?

“Ferdinand, Professor Hirschur—good morning to you both. Are you still talking? Would it not be wise to at least eat breakfast?”

“Ah, Rozemyne. Morning already, then? Professor Hirschur, today is the graduation ceremony. I believe we should end this here for now.”

“The graduation ceremony, hm? And we were making such great strides too...” Hirschur said with a look of genuine vexation.

Ferdinand shook his head, exasperated. “You will have to make do for today. You were weeping about having no successor, but you have found a promising disciple, no?”

“Indeed. It took much longer than I would have liked, but there’s a promising student in this term’s batch of second-years. It’s unfortunate that they’re a mednoble with so little mana that they’re almost a laynoble, but in terms of improving designs, they’re quite excellent indeed.”

Ferdinand was a genius when it came to coming up with ideas and finding things to focus on, and this had led to him developing all sorts of unique, one-of-a-kind magic tools. However, because he had so much mana, he often invented things that only he could use. Hirschur’s new potential apprentice was currently absorbed in researching whether there was a way to reduce these mana costs.

“Thanks to this apprentice, I feel as though I’ve returned to my glory days. My time is filled with lively research and discussion. You said that nothing but boredom and melancholy awaited you following your graduation, Ferdinand, but did that come to pass? Have you found at least a little joy in Ehrenfest?” Hirschur asked, her expression swapping from that of a mad scientist to that of a teacher concerned about her pupil.

In a rare development, Ferdinand faltered. He gazed into the distance, a deeply nostalgic look in his eyes, and then answered with a hint of wryness. “My days are quite lively now. They are anything but dull.”

“That’s a relief. I will be waiting to hear from you, whether it be about new magic tools, research results, or even attempts at romance,” Hirschur said. She then gathered up her documents and swiftly left for the dining hall. It seemed that she needed to hurry and prepare for the graduation ceremony after breakfast.

Justus came in from the dining hall, as if swapping places with her. “What will you do now, Lord Ferdinand?” he asked. “Will you prioritize sleep?”

“Yes. Wake me up at second-and-a-half bell.”

“As you wish. Rest well... Eckhart, shouldn’t you get some sleep too? I got plenty since I’m stuck with Traugott, but it must’ve been rough for you having to deal with those two again.”

Eckhart glared at Justus and then followed after Ferdinand.

“Why did you leave the dining hall, Justus?” I asked.

“Aah. I was serving Traugott when Professor Hirschur came in, so I knew their research discussion had finally wound down.”

“Does that mean you abandoned Traugott in the middle of his meal...?”

“What choice did I have? Lord Ferdinand is much more important. He takes priority.” After that casual statement, Justus smiled and returned to the dining hall.

“Traugott is only allowed one adult attendant in the Academy like everyone else, and they’re prioritizing someone else,” Judithe whispered. “I’m starting to

feel kinda bad for him, knowing that his meals and baths are being ignored for Lord Ferdinand's sake."

As students finished their breakfast and started filtering into the common room, the parents of graduating students began teleporting in. The apprentice attendants who had been waiting for them guided them to their children's rooms as they came out of the teleportation hall. The parents needed to help their children prepare for the graduation ceremony—or rather, they wanted to see for themselves that everything was in order.

"Father. Mother." Lieseleta welcomed her parents but they ignored her, moving to greet me before even thinking of going to Angelica's room.

"Lady Rozemyne, it is good to see you. On this day, we—"

I waved a hand to interrupt them. "No need for a formal greeting. There is not much time today. Lieseleta, guide your parents to Angelica's room—her laziness will no doubt cause her to slack in her preparations, and she will need the three of you there to keep her in line. This is an order from me."

Her preparations for the sword dance might have been perfect, but she would slack on her formal outfit for the graduation ceremony and pick a plain hairstyle for the dance without giving any consideration to looking flashy. She just couldn't be trusted to prepare on her own. With her parents and little sister watching over her as three skilled attendants, however, not even she could get away with slacking.

"Understood." Lieseleta gave me a half-smile and then took her parents out of the common room. That solved the Angelica problem. I nodded to myself, only for Damuel to enter the common room for some reason. He looked around, walked over to me, and then knelt.

"Damuel... why are you here?" I asked.

"Lord Ferdinand sent an urgent request last night—due to most of your retainers leaving for the graduation ceremony, he asked me to serve as your guard today."

It seemed that Ferdinand had planned to nap in the morning after spending an entire night discussing research with Hirschur from the very beginning.

“Now that Damuel is here, you can all go prepare for the graduation ceremony,” I said to my attendants. They got to work on their respective tasks, and after seeing them off, I turned back to Damuel. “How has the castle been? Is Grandfather doing well?”

His eyes turned vacant and the smile disappeared from his face as though he had remembered something terribly unpleasant. “Yes,” he answered after a pause. “Lord Bonifatius has been very, very lively. He charged into the Knight’s Order and spoke with the higher-ups about training the recruits. I imagine the apprentices will have quite the painful spring.”

Damuel spoke sympathetically, but I was glad that Bonifatius was so motivated. I could expect good things from this.

Second-and-a-half bell was when all the students, save for the graduates and their escorts, would be leaving the dormitory together. They would be preparing the hall before the graduating students arrived. Amid the crowd of attendants seeing their lords and ladies off, I saw Justus disappear to wake up Ferdinand. As expected, he was prioritizing him over seeing off Traugott.

“Rihyarda, this is just too sad,” I said. “Could you please help Traugott for a moment?”

“I’m afraid not. Putting aside that you have no other attendants right now, I cannot leave your side with so many people passing by,” Rihyarda explained, flatly rejecting the idea. I gave a curt nod; if she said no, that was that.

A short while after the students had departed, Ferdinand arrived back in the common room. He was with Justus and Eckhart, and to my surprise, Eckhart was wearing formal clothes that were unfamiliar to me.

“That is an unusual outfit for you to wear on guard duty, Eckhart...” I observed. “Is something happening?”

“I can hardly wear my armor when escorting Angelica, can I?”

“Whaaat?! You’re escorting Angelica?!” I widened my eyes in surprise, which made Eckhart widen his eyes in turn.

“You didn’t know? Hasn’t everyone in the dormitory been gossiping about who’s escorting whom?”

“Lieseleta seemed to know, but nobody else. We were all trying to guess who it was going to be, but Angelica only ever stared at us quizzically when we asked, so most of us just concluded that her parents had made a decision for her without telling her. When did you two get so close?”

Eckhart had come to the dorm with Ferdinand yesterday, but he hadn’t had any friendly conversations with Angelica since then, nor had they seemed to exchange any furtive glances. No matter how you looked at it, they didn’t look like a couple in love.

“We didn’t. Grandfather has been thinking about marrying Angelica to someone in the family ever since he took her as a disciple. He didn’t make his decision before the deadline, so she might not actually know who was chosen. She simply said to Bonifatius, ‘I’ll leave it to you, master.’”

Aah... Of course she left everything to Bonifatius and then stopped thinking entirely.

“This winter sure was a struggle, what with Grandfather demanding that Angelica be wed into our family...” Eckhart sighed.

Marrying one of Bonifatius’s descendants meant wedding into a family that was closely connected to the archducal family. It was a great honor under most circumstances, but it was also far more status than a mednoble like Angelica would normally receive—not to mention, while she was strong as a knight, she completely lacked the personality and socializing skills expected of an archnoble’s first wife. Her parents had desperately searched for any way whatsoever to avoid the marriage, but it was far beyond them to overturn a decision from someone like Bonifatius.

Exhausted, defeated, and anxious about their daughter’s future, they had suggested to Elvira that Angelica become second wife to one of Bonifatius’s grandchildren of a suitable age. They had initially tried pushing for her to become a third wife, but Bonifatius simply wouldn’t tolerate the idea; and in the end, after some backbreaking negotiations, she was secured a place as a second wife.

“The question was, whose second wife would she be?” Eckhart continued.

The plan had initially been for her to become Traugott’s second wife. Angelica

had no thoughts of marriage herself—she was a somber, beautiful young woman who cared only about getting stronger—and so her parents had thought she would be better with a younger boy who wouldn't marry her right away, unlike an adult man. Traugott had also been planned to become my guard knight, which would have made them a good pair.

Unfortunately, Traugott had resigned from serving me, and not under pleasant circumstances, considering that I had pretty much fired him. He had earned Bonifatius's wrath and in turn lost any chance of marrying Bonifatius's beloved disciple Angelica.

"We didn't just have to talk about Traugott's future at the family conference; with the graduation ceremony looming over us, we also had to rethink Angelica's marriage partner. It ultimately came down to a decision between my brothers and me."

"Given that they wanted someone younger, I guess Lamprecht and Cornelius were the first picks?" I asked. Eckhart must have been last in line, considering Angelica's age.

"That's right. But we didn't want to involve Lamprecht while the Ahrensbach business is still going on, and Cornelius had said previously that he didn't want to escort Angelica because he has feelings for someone else. It ended up falling on me, the widower."

After so many years of sticking to his guns about not taking a wife until Ferdinand did, it seemed that Eckhart would finally be getting married. It was time to pay the piper... or rather, maybe it wasn't? Realization struck me.

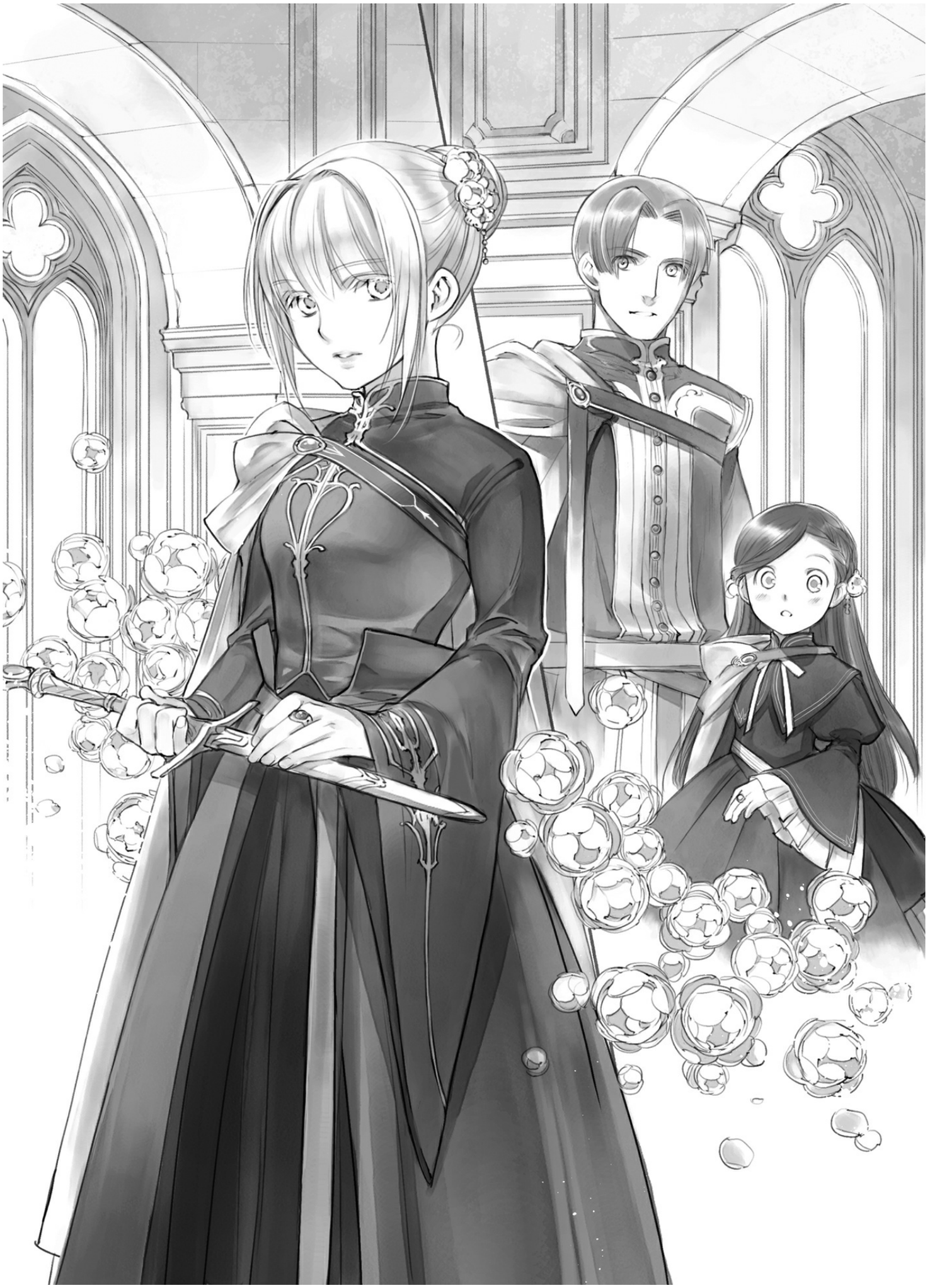
"And since Angelica has no intention of getting married for some time, you can avoid Mother pestering you about marriage without having to take any action yourself."

"Precisely," he replied with a smile. It was evident that he still didn't intend to get married for years to come, so in a way, he and Angelica were a good match. The only problem was that Eckhart had agreed largely for his own personal gain, while Angelica had most likely agreed without spending so much as a single second thinking about it.

"Lord Eckhart. Thank you for waiting." Angelica's parents returned to the

common room with a dressed-up Angelica in tow. She was clad in Leidenschaft blue to symbolize her strength, and while one might have assumed she was wearing a skirt at first glance, she was actually wearing culottes—the same piece of clothing used for riding gear. Their hem was long enough to hide her shoes, due to her having come of age.

I balked a little, especially when I saw her bundled-up hair in the style adult women wore. Angelica, with the added benefit of a light layer of makeup, looked so stunning that not even I, someone who had already spent so long basking in her beauty, could believe my eyes.



“I see they’ve made you quite beautiful. I’m looking forward to your sword dance,” Eckhart said casually.

“I hope to perform the best sword dance yet,” Angelica replied, smiling softly as Eckhart took her hand. In that moment, they looked like a heroic knight and a bashful, innocent princess. But no matter how perfect they appeared on the outside, it was the inside that I was really worried about.

“Are you sure you’re fine with Eckhart?” I asked before anything else.

Angelica nodded without any hesitation. “I said that I would trust my master with this, and this is what he has arranged. He has my full trust. Though I do feel bad for Lord Eckhart—he could be anyone for all I care, so long as I can continue to serve you, Lady Rozemyne.”

What a blunt, Angelica-like thing to say...

I was equally impressed and exasperated, but I accepted her reasoning. Her parents, however, went pale. “What do you mean, he could be anyone for all you care?! That’s incredibly disrespectful to Lord Eckhart!”

After lambasting her at once, they pleaded for Eckhart to rethink escorting someone so shameless. They were desperate to get Angelica out of the picture entirely, but Eckhart blew them off with a casual smile.

“That would make Grandfather angry with me. Not to mention, a girl so uninterested in love and romance is a perfect match for me right now,” he replied.

At third bell, Eckhart escorted Angelica out of the dormitory. They had with them the video camera magic tool that Ferdinand had made and the feystones I had packed full of mana.

“Please do remember to record Angelica’s and Eglantine’s performances, dear brother,” I reminded him as they went.

And with the last of the graduating students out of the dorm, it was time for me to resume my idyllic reading. Meanwhile, Damuel was going through some paperwork, in the process of being worked to the bone by Ferdinand.

Everyone returned after fourth bell. They had lunch, and then the graduating

students going to the graduation ceremony checked their clothes to make sure everything was in order. Angelica, having performed her sword dance, had to go and put on more formal attire. She would be leaving as soon as she finished changing.

"Now then, Eckhart—show me the sword dance and dedication whirl," I asked, since he seemed to be doing nothing while he waited. Rather than doing it himself, however, he handed the tool to Ferdinand; playing the video apparently required a great deal of mana.

"I cannot spare the mana right now, considering that I need to escort Angelica at the graduation ceremony," Eckhart explained.

"So I have to wait, then?"

"No," Ferdinand replied, fiddling with the tool. "It does not have to be Eckhart's mana—you can display the image with your own, if you wish. Simply pour your mana into this feystone when it is ready."

It seemed that some preparations needed to be made before I could use the magic tool. As he worked on that, groups of graduating students started leaving for the ceremony. Those escorting students from other duchies would be meeting them in tea party rooms.

"Angelica, congratulations on graduating."

"It's thanks to you that I'm graduating at all, Lady Rozemyne. I need to show my gratitude. Thank you ever so much," Angelica said, bowing her head and kneeling before me. Her parents and Lieseleta did the same.

"Our entire house expresses its gratitude, Lady Rozemyne. It is thanks to the assistance of you and Angelica's allies that she stands here today," they said. It seemed that Angelica's parents were quite moved about her graduation, since they had steeled themselves for her expulsion.

"Eckhart, take care to escort Angelica properly and not let any cracks show. I trust that you will know what to do, dear brother."

He ruffled my hair; then he took Angelica by the hand and the two of them went on their way. The other graduating students left after them, and once the guardians and archducal couple were gone, only students unrelated to the

graduation ceremony remained.

“Ferdinand, is the tool ready?” I asked upon my return to the common room. He gave a brisk nod in response. Several nearby students were peering at the video camera magic tool, since they hadn’t seen anything like it before.

“The recording is displayed on this board, so position it in a way that is easy for you to see. Then begin pouring in your mana,” he explained. There was a smooth metal board about the size of an A4 sheet of paper that gleamed all the colors of the rainbow when touched by the light. It looked similar to the guild card that I had.

I eagerly started pouring my mana into the tool, and the recording began on the metal board. The gathered crowd of students all made awed noises.

“It’s the sword dance,” one said. “Incredible. I’ve never seen a magic tool like this before.”

“Show me too, Rozemyne,” Wilfried said as he pushed closer for a better look. He and all of our retainers were squishing together behind me.

In all honesty, the video quality was rather poor—there was color, but there wasn’t any sound and the resolution left a lot to be desired. Still, I was glad to see the two performances I had missed.

“Is that Stenluke?” I asked.

“Uh huh. Angelica did the sword dance with Stenluke. She let sparks of mana fly with each swing as the blade glowed blue. It was the most breathtaking sight ever,” Judithe told me with a happy smile, her love and respect for Angelica oozing out of every word. It seemed that even in the Royal Academy, not too many people wielded manablades. Both growing and using them required mana, so basically zero mednobles used them.

There were other female knights participating in the sword dance, but Angelica clearly stood out among them. The sight of a young beauty freely manipulating a glowing blade was so alluring that it was hard to look away.

“That was splendid,” I said with a wistful sigh once the dance was over, but the recording of the dedication whirl began immediately after. It seemed that Eckhart wanted to preserve as much mana as possible, so there was no time for

me to get lost in thought.

Eglantine began the dedication whirl with graceful hand movements. I could hear the music in my head, considering that I had practiced the same whirling myself, and started to hum as I watched Anastasius join her in the dance. He must have taken his practicing pretty seriously, as they actually looked like a good pair now.

Oho. Prince Anastasius is a lot better at whirling now.

I had thought it would be a bit awkward for there to be a clear skill gap between those playing the parts of the King and Queen gods, so it made me very happy to see that Anastasius had worked hard to match her talent. They warmly smiled at one another when their eyes crossed amid the whirling. It was such a heartwarming sight that I wanted to bless them from here.

Okay, I'll bless them both. May their happy smiles be protected forever.

"Rozemyne! Take your hands off the feystone!" came a shout.

"What?" I glanced up just in time to see Ferdinand sprinting over. There was a surprising intensity to his expression as he grabbed my wrists and pulled them up above my head, in what was half of the praying pose. The light of a blessing shot out of my ring and flew off somewhere.

"What in the world were you thinking...?" he asked.

"U-Um... I just thought it'd be nice for Prince Anastasius and Lady Eglantine's happiness to last forever. Oh, and I decided to bless them."

My blessing had, to perhaps nobody's surprise, disappeared in the direction of the hall. I could imagine the light had suddenly shot in and rained down on the couple midway through the graduation ceremony. It had presumably created quite a stir.

"Ferdinand... is it possible to take back blessings?"

"Of course not, fool."

"Darn. Is the ceremony going to be thrown into a slight bit of chaos?"

"I do not know, but feign ignorance no matter what anyone asks you. All those present now, understand that this blessing is not to be spoken of. You will

suffer a fate worse than death should anything leak.”

Ferdinand’s deadly serious expression made it clear that his threat was in no way a joke. The students, having had little interaction with him before, trembled in place as they vigorously nodded their understanding.

“To think you would manage to cause problems even while essentially under house arrest. Good grief...” Ferdinand rubbed his temples and let out a deep, deep sigh.

Sorry, Ferdie... I didn’t do it on purpose.

Year One: Complete

“We’re back. Anything happen while we were gone?” Sylvester asked as he and Florencia entered the dormitory. The graduation ceremony had just come to an end.

The graduating students were still in the hall; they were loath to say farewell to their friends, and many were busy introducing people to their parents. At least, that was the explanation I received from an exhausted-looking Sylvester. I gulped. My blessing had no doubt had some sort of consequence, and he was well aware who the culprit was.

Ferdinand stepped forward with as flat of an expression as always. “Nothing happened at all, Aub Ehrenfest.” His body partially hid me from Sylvester, and I used the opportunity to scoot completely behind him. “Incidentally, how was the graduation ceremony? Did anything of note happen?”

“...Yeah. I’ll tell you all about it. Come to my room. You too, Rozemyne.”

“I greatly appreciate the invitation, but as a humble young girl, I am unfortunately not allowed on the second floor where the boys stay.”

Sylvester’s brow twitched with anger at my uncouth attempt to escape. “This is an order,” he grunted. Florencia, who was standing next to him, smiled softly and attempted to reassure me that everything would be fine, since she would be coming with us. There truly was no hope of escaping.

Sylvester flourished his cape as he turned to head to his room. I slumped my shoulders and followed after him. Our retainers weren’t allowed to enter the archduke’s room with us, meaning it was just the archducal couple, Ferdinand, and me. Karstedt and Eckhart were standing guard outside the door.

“We were all watching the second prince and Klassenberg’s archduke candidate walk into the room, when suddenly a blessing flew in from nowhere,” he began. The light of the blessing had apparently rained down upon them, but nobody could tell where it had come from. The audience had immediately

begun to stir, with many asking whether the High Bishop of the Sovereign Temple was responsible.

The commotion persisted until the Sovereign High Bishop himself raised his hands, demanding silence. He then declared that the blessing was not from him, but from the gods—that they had blessed Eglantine's coming-of-age and wedding.

"Wait, Lady Eglantine? Not both of them?"

"The light was clearly focused on her," Florencia said. "It gave the impression that Lady Eglantine had been chosen, with Prince Anastasius simply being blessed alongside her."

That didn't make sense; I had prayed for both their happiness.

"Then I suppose I have nothing to do with it," I mused aloud. "This almost certainly happened because Lady Eglantine truly is loved by the gods."

I decided to push this as having literally been the blessings of the gods, only for Ferdinand to rub his temples and glare at me. "Your blessings, when given unconsciously, are swayed heavily by your emotions; it would not be at all strange for it to have prioritized her. Do you not recall how extensively you practiced for Charlotte's baptism?"

"Eep..."

I had desperately practiced so that my blessings would look similar to those of the other children, so I couldn't argue with that. It only made sense that me liking Eglantine more would have impacted the blessing.

"Anyway, everyone's treating it like a blessing from the gods, so don't mess that up. Keep all this to yourselves," Sylvester said. "Did anyone else see it?"

"The students who remained, yes. I ordered their silence. Now that the High Bishop of the Sovereign Temple has recognized it as a blessing from the gods, attempting to claim it as Rozemyne's would only lead to mockery, as if we must resort to lies to assist her reputation." If nobody said anything before we all returned to the duchy, then by next winter, everyone would have accepted it as a blessing from the gods.

“Lady Eglantine being loved by the gods is a good cover story, but we still need to know the details,” Sylvester said wearily. “Tell me what happened before and after the blessing. Which god did you even pray to?”

I couldn’t help but falter; that wasn’t an easy question to answer, since I hadn’t actually been praying this time. “I just wished for Prince Anastasius and Lady Eglantine to be happy. I didn’t think of any god in particular, nor did I speak any words of prayer.”

Sylvester looked at me doubtfully and then turned to Ferdinand.

“She speaks the truth. Had she begun a normal prayer, I would have stopped her before the blessing was able to fly away.”

“Oh my. What were you doing at the time, Rozemyne?” Florencia asked in a soothing voice. Feeling a bit calmer, I explained that I had been watching Angelica’s sword dance and Eglantine’s dedication whirl on the video camera magic tool.

“...Show me,” Sylvester said. “I’ve never seen a magic tool that can record things like that.”

Ferdinand shook his head. “There is still much we need to discuss, Sylvester.”

“This takes priority. The recording might contain some useful clues.”

Ferdinand muttered something about not buying that, but nonetheless opened the door and instructed Eckhart to retrieve the magic tool. Once it was here, I started playing the whirling video in question.

“Now this is cool,” Sylvester remarked.

“It uses an absurd quantity of mana,” Ferdinand warned. “It is not to be used lightly.”

“This dedication whirl was truly splendid, and I am glad to have the opportunity to see it once more,” Florencia said, having felt that this year’s dedication whirl—and Eglantine’s whirling in particular—had been marvelous. I looked up at her, feeling happy myself.

“Lady Eglantine is something else, isn’t she? Especially the part where they go, like... ‘I vow that I shall pray to thee, gods of nature; I shall thank you—’”

“Rozemyne, were you perhaps singing to yourself at the time of your impromptu blessing?” Ferdinand asked.

“Yes. This tool doesn’t record or play back sound, so I added some myself. Why’s that?”

Ferdinand rubbed his temples. “That would be what caused the blessing.”

“What would...?”

“The dedication whirl song—what else? It is part of the offering to the gods. The song you played for Leidenschaft at your debut became a blessing as well. There is nothing unusual that a song crafted in old language for the gods would have such a result. It would be quite unusual for anyone else, but this happens surprisingly often with you.”

Upon hearing that one man’s miracle was my daily life, Sylvester gave Ferdinand a thoroughly troubled look. “How can we stop her?”

“Do not ask me. It is impossible to control when Rozemyne feels compelled to bless someone.”

“I knew that I’d need to be careful when whirling my heart out at my instructor’s direction, but I didn’t think that something as simple as humming could result in a blessing...” I murmured. “Even I’m surprised.”

All those gathered cradled their heads at how abnormal I was.

“I just realized something even worse—Rozemyne already has her schtappe,” Ferdinand said with a deep grimace. I looked at Sylvester, unsure what was being implied, only to see that he was equally as confused. Ferdinand frowned even harder. “Do you not recall why one absorbs the Divine Will into themselves and creates a schtappe?”

“To make mana easier to control, to help prayers reach the gods, and for divine protection to... Ah.” Sylvester stopped mid-sentence and cradled his head; it seemed that my schtappe was making my prayers reach the gods much more easily than before. “We’re not gonna find any solutions to this just mulling over the situation; we need to prioritize thinking about other things.”

“Is there something more important than this?” I asked.

“Yeah. We had a lot of people coming to us at the Interduchy Tournament and the graduation ceremony asking who our first-in-class trendsetter-slash-saint is engaged to. We’ve managed to sidestep the situation for now, since they were all from lower-ranking duchies, but we need to get your engagement in order before higher-ranking duchies come knocking.”

Ooh! In other words, I’m super popular with the boys?!

It was the first time in my life that I was being faced with a string of proposals. But as I savored the slight giddiness that I was feeling inside, Ferdinand poked the side of my head.

“Do not get excited about these troublesome matters, fool. So? What did you tell them, Sylvester?”

“Naturally, I said that she has someone waiting for her in Ehrenfest. I hinted that she’d be settling with Wilfried this winter and said that I’d be announcing her engagement at the Archduke Conference.”

“A suitable answer. We cannot allow Rozemyne to be taken—not only due to the mana shortage, but because I cannot envision her surviving in another duchy where she needs to remain proper at all times. She is a dangerous gremlin who is a headache to deal with, mentally unstable, and untrained in the ways of mana control.”

“‘Gremlin’? You’re really going to throw out an insult like that, Ferdinand?!” He was pretty much right in every sense, so I had no room to argue, but I could at least protest his choice of words.

Florencia gave a troubled smile and shook her head. “Rozemyne, please focus on the fact that the details of your marriage are being decided here.”

“Well, I was adopted because of my profitable ideas and mana, and has it not always been the case that I am to be thrust into an arranged marriage to benefit our duchy? I am fine marrying anyone, so long as I am granted full access to their library.”

“You have taken exactly the same position as Angelica,” Ferdinand said. “What a terrifying combination...”

Wow. He’s right. But wait... Does that make me a waste of beauty too?

“Y’know, in terms of compatible mana capacities and controlling Rozemyne, Ferdinand is actually our best choice here...” Sylvester mused.

“Do not be foolish,” Ferdinand shot back.

I opened my mouth to say, *“Would you hate marrying me that much?”* but then promptly swallowed my words; Ferdinand was wearing such a deadly serious expression that it was almost scary.

“That would remove the possibility of one of your children becoming the next archduke,” he explained. “It is not something to joke about.”

“What do you mean...?”

Ferdinand sighed. “There are, at present, five people in Ehrenfest considered to be candidates for the archducal seat.”

“Umm... And those are Wilfried, Charlotte, and Melchior, since they’re Sylvester’s children... And then me, as his adoptive daughter, and you as the son of the former archduke, right?”

“Correct. Bonifatius is technically also a candidate, but given his age and the fact that he has already retired, he has left the nobility’s collective mind in this regard.”

Oh yeah, Grandfather was the son of an archduke too.

“Wilfried has a stain on his reputation from entering the Ivory Tower; Charlotte, as a woman, must marry an archduke candidate from another duchy; Melchior has not yet been baptized; and my being ostracized by Veronica means I lack a proper support network. You, on the other hand, are the center of various trends sweeping Ehrenfest, and your mana surpasses almost all others. From an objective standpoint, is it not obvious who is best suited to become the next archduke?”

“But I—”

“I used to be a commoner” was what I wanted to say, but Ferdinand interrupted me to continue.

“To those who do not know your circumstances, you have Karstedt and Elvira as parents, with Bonifatius and the Leisegang house supporting you from

behind. I have no such backing.”

Almost nobody knew that I had once been a commoner—and with that impediment ignored, I was Bonifatius’s granddaughter and the daughter of the knight commander, with archduke blood flowing through my veins. There was no problem with my lineage whatsoever.

“The printing industry is going to continue expanding with you and Elvira at its center, and considering your lineage, it is safe to say that Haldenzel, Groschel, and Leisegang collectively form the Rozemyne faction already. Count Leisegang in particular has practically spent his life suffering at the hands of the Ahrensbach bloodline; he will no doubt put his all into ensuring you become the next aub, as you are his blood relative and entirely unrelated to Ahrensbach.”

Florencia paled. Bonifatius was my grandfather on my father’s side, his wife was a Leisegang noble, and my grandmother on my mother’s side was a Leisegang as well. From an outsider perspective, I was a purebred Leisegang.

“It is clear to see what would happen were I to marry Rozemyne—I would be positioned to become the next archduke with all certainty,” Ferdinand continued. “My fault is a lack of support, but with Rozemyne as my partner, I would have all the backing she has. Even if our marriage were to take place when she comes of age, Wilfried and Charlotte would also just be coming of age; they would serve as no competition to me.”

That wasn’t arrogance or anything of the sort—it was hard to imagine that Wilfried or Charlotte would ever manage to beat Ferdinand right after their coming-of-age ceremonies.

“If you wish to form plans before Rozemyne is taken by another duchy, get her engaged to Wilfried. That increases the likelihood of him becoming the next archduke, as you so wish.”

“True. Alright, Ferdinand—if we’re gonna make Rozemyne get engaged to Wilfried, are you gonna get engaged to Charlotte?” Sylvester asked in jest, wearing a sly grin. It was a joke that nobody would laugh at, and a vein popped out on Ferdinand’s forehead as he curtly shot down the idea.

“That’s right!” I exclaimed. “That would be much too sad for Charlotte! By the time she comes of age, Ferdinand will be an old man! The only husband I’ll

accept for her is a kind young man who will treat her right! Not a grouch like Ferdinand!”

“Oho? Say that again.” Despite my agreeing with his position, my support only angered Ferdinand further. He pinched and pulled on my cheeks.

“Ow, ow, ow! M’mm showwy!”

I defensively rubbed my cheeks when he finally let go, at which point Florencia let out a breath. “You would not oppose marrying Wilfried, Rozemyne?”

“Not at all, so long as I can do as I please with the castle and temple book rooms.”

“Will you support Wilfried...?”

“I shall do what I can,” I replied. I needed the archduke to get a grip so that I could manage my libraries in peace; surely I would have the motivation to support him at least a little.

And yet, Ferdinand scoffed at my resolve. “Florencia, it is unwise to expect that from Rozemyne,” he said. “Rather, you should worry about whether Wilfried will be able to keep a firm hold on Rozemyne’s reins.”

“Do you think I’m a wild horse or something?!”

“Considering the impact you have on your surroundings, a wild horse would be much easier to control.”

Florencia watched our sharp exchange with a conflicted smile. Sylvester, who had at some point fallen into thought, abruptly looked up.

“If we’re all in agreement here, I’ll announce Rozemyne’s engagement to Wilfried to all the Ehrenfest nobles during the spring feast. Then do the same to those of the other duchies at the Archduke Conference. Alright?”

“Understood,” I said. “Please do tell Wilfried about this as well, though.”

And so the meeting came to a close. Upon my return to my room, I received get-well letters from Eglantine and Anastasius. Eglantine’s said that she had wanted me to bless her during the graduation ceremony, since it was by my word that Anastasius had made his move and settled things in the best way

possible for her.

Is this her probing about the blessing...?

She also mentioned that the hairpins and rinsham had proven highly popular, such that even her grandfather and Aub Klassenberg were interested in them, and that she had spoken positively with Aub Ehrenfest at the Interduchy Tournament.

Sylvester came back exhausted, but if the aubs of greater duchies were happy about their exchange, it was probably worth all the suffering...

I wrote a reply in which I expressed my deep regret at having missed her dedication whirl and then read my letter from Anastasius. His was about fifty percent criticism about me being so absurdly weak that I had fallen ill during some of the most important ceremonies of the year. My response went as follows:

I deeply apologize for my ill health. If possible, I would have liked to attend. I am told that you were blessed by everyone during the graduation ceremony. I would have liked to bless the both of you as well.

Indeed, I made sure to maintain the position that the blessing had nothing to do with me.

Once my replies were done, I moved on to writing a letter of apology and thanks to Hannelore, who had sent her well-wishes during the Interduchy Tournament. I then asked that it be delivered to her alongside a book.

With all that done, I looked over my room, which was being cleaned up bit by bit. Real-deal preparations for leaving would be done tomorrow, now that the graduation ceremony was complete.

“I will need to go to the library tomorrow to supply Schwartz and Weiss with mana,” I said aloud. “Not to mention, I will need to return the book I borrowed the other day...”

“Milady, please discuss that with Ferdinand first. You may be able to supply Professor Solange with enough mana to last until next winter.”

My discussion with Ferdinand bore fruit, and it was decided that I would lend

Solange feystones filled with mana. Since large feystones were exceedingly expensive, however, Ferdinand would be accompanying me there and signing a contract with her for the lending. Once I had Sylvester's permission, the two of us headed for the library with our retainers.

"I don't believe Professor Solange would be one to do anything shady with the feystones," I said, feeling a bit hesitant about the whole contract business.

"These are large feystones filled to the brim with your mana; it is only natural to prepare ahead of time such that they are not stolen or misused. You may lend your mana and magic tools freely with no sense of danger, but do so only while assuming what you lend will never return. Mana is not normally something to be given out so freely."

I nodded to indicate my understanding. If that was common sense for nobles, I needed to try to learn and practice it myself. I had the feeling that Ferdinand lent out his own feystones pretty freely, and I was lending my mana without issue, but maybe that was because things were different in one's own inner circle.

"Milady's here."

"Milady. Time to read?"

Schwartz and Weiss greeted us when we arrived, at which point I went ahead and returned the book that Lieseleta had carried here for me. Ferdinand saw the two shumils walk circles around us and blinked in surprise.

"To think you truly are their master..." he said in a half-surprised, half-exasperated voice.

"Lady Rozemyne. And my, if it isn't Lord Ferdinand. How many years has it been?" Solange asked. She apparently knew Ferdinand from his days in the Academy, when he would go in and out of the library to borrow documents for Hirschur.

Ferdinand turned to Solange with a nostalgic look in his eyes. "Too many. I was told by Rozemyne that the librarians I knew were gone, so it is a relief to see at least one remains."

Solange smiled softly in response, realizing that Ferdinand had deliberately

said that so she wouldn't have to relate the painful explanation of why there were no other librarians present.

"Professor Solange," I said, "we came here today to discuss the return of some books and a supply of mana for Schwartz and Weiss. Do you have a moment?"

"Oh yes. Thank you ever so much for your concern."

Since it was the day after the graduation ceremony, the library was pretty much empty. I couldn't believe how barren some of the shelves were too. They had been filled with gaps the last time I had been here, since a bunch of students had taken out books for their final exams, but how could one explain them now?

"Are there still this many books being lent out?" I asked. "It's already time for everyone to return to their duchies..."

"It gets worse every year, but the fault ultimately rests with me..." Solange replied, her eyes lowered sadly. Even among those who went through the proper procedures for taking out books, some looked down on Solange for being a mednoble and never bothered to return them. She also explained that she couldn't even investigate to find out who had taken books into carrels and then made away with them without going through the borrowing process.

"You cannot investigate them?" Ferdinand asked. "That cannot be right. For what purpose are Schwartz and Weiss here? I recall their records being used to send letters of recall in the past." He raised his eyebrows at the very thought of the library being different from how he remembered it.

As it turned out, Solange couldn't get the necessary information from Schwartz and Weiss because she wasn't their master. "And I would not dream of putting even more of a burden on Lady Rozemyne," she said.

"This is no burden," I replied. "Helping the library is the duty of any library committee member. I will do all that I can to help, when able."

Up until now, I had only been refraining from fulfilling my duties outside of reading because I didn't want to bother Solange by helping unprompted. If she actually had work for me, then as a committee member, I wouldn't hesitate to

do it.

“I do not know what this library committee business is about, but Rozemyne has both the mana and motivation,” Ferdinand said. “Or rather, if this state of affairs is allowed to continue, I expect that she will curse all those who have mistreated books.”

“Curse? Please do not use such violent language. I would never.”

“I still clearly recall you proposing we hold a so-called ‘bloody carnival’ after someone merely made a mess of the book room. It would be wise to settle this matter before the library is stained with the blood of the executed.”

I had no intention of holding any mass executions... but to be fair, when books are involved, one does not always have the luxury of choosing one’s methods.

“Rozemyne, this is your job as Schwartz and Weiss’s master. Tell them to state those who have not returned their books or have borrowed them without permission. Meanwhile, I will speak with Professor Solange about the feystones.”

“Okay. Schwartz, Weiss—please tell me the names and duchies of everyone who has borrowed books from the library without permission or who hasn’t returned their books.”

As per Ferdinand’s instructions, I summoned Schwartz and Weiss and then started to write out a list of sinners from each of the duchies. My retainers were helping me with this endeavor.

“Non-returner. From duchy...”

“Unauthorized borrower. From duchy...”

Schwartz’s and Weiss’s eyes glowed as they started muttering names, which my retainers and I speedily recorded. Once the list of names was complete, we learned that there was no need to send letters to the higher-ranking duchies; it was the lower-ranked duchies that had exhibited poor library manners.

“I see nobody from Ehrenfest has sinned,” I said.

“No one would be foolish enough to inconvenience the library you are so

invested in, Lady Rozemyne. Their future depends on returning their books," Cornelius said with a shrug. Everyone else nodded in agreement.

I took the finished list and went to Solange's office. "Ferdinand, Professor Solange, I have finished writing down the names."

"And we have finished the feystone contract," Ferdinand replied. "Show me the names."

I showed him the list, and his brow furrowed hard at just how many people had borrowed books without permission. "I shall send the ordonnanzes for having the books returned," he said. "If they hear the voice of an adult man they are unfamiliar with, they will almost certainly misinterpret the situation as the Sovereignty getting involved."

That was a good idea; Solange would be ignored as always, while a message sent in a voice as young as mine would possibly earn even more scorn. Having Ferdinand contact them in his harsh, chilly tone would terrify them and have them running to return their books.

"I never expected you to help with the library, Ferdinand. I'm so moved." But as I sincerely thanked him, his lips curved up into a grin.

"Rozemyne, show me the magic circles on Schwartz's and Weiss's stomachs later. I wish to see the real things. That much is a suitable reward for my assisting the library, no?"

Was that his plan all along...?! I knew it was kinda weird that he would go out of his way to come to the library and help out like this! Well, hmph!

As I stewed in my newfound anger, I thought about the pros and cons that came with this assistance from Ferdinand. Showing him the magic circles wouldn't be a problem, since he had already seen the written copies anyway; he would also help with Schwartz's and Weiss's outfits and pressure people into returning their books. There was much that I stood to gain.

"Ferdinand... If I leave this with you, are you certain all the books will be returned?"

"Yes. I will send them messages that will leave them no choice but to return the books," Ferdinand said. His voice then became dark and threatening as he

spoke his message to be sent to the relevant dorms. “The Royal Academy’s library is under the administration of royalty, and its books are consequently the property of royalty. Those who do not return their books before leaving the Academy will be deemed criminals, and their aub will be informed of this in the name of the king. From that point, we will exercise the contract magic, for the vow given to Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom will have been broken.”

It’s the day after the graduation ceremony, so a lot of the archdukes are still in the dorms, right? The archdukes are probably going to yell at them super hard.

That day, I happily assisted Solange and Schwartz with the flood of panicked-looking students coming to return their books, while Ferdinand sat in Solange’s office spewing out notes upon notes regarding the magic circle on Weiss’s stomach. It was quite chaotic.

Ferdinand and I returned to Ehrenfest, both feeling pleased. I had gotten to do my job as a library committee member, while he had realized something or another from observing Weiss’s stomach.

Buying Information and the Mana Compression Lecture

Upon my return to Ehrenfest via the teleportation circle, Charlotte was the first to run up to me. “Welcome home, Sister! I heard that you were first-in-class for the first-years. That’s amazing!” she exclaimed. Her praise sent me straight to heaven; hearing her call me amazing made literally everything I had gone through worth it.

“I’m home, Charlotte. I aim to be first-in-class next year as well,” I replied, eager to earn my little sister’s praise once again. I made sure to clench my fist as I made the declaration to emphasize the strength of my resolve.

Charlotte blinked in surprise; then she copied me and clenched her fist as well. “I, too, will aim to achieve first-in-class when I join the Academy next year. I am your little sister, after all.”

“Then we shall work together.”

We smiled at each other as we left the teleportation hall. Our attendants followed us out, as there were students waiting behind us to come over, but Wilfried and his retainers were still hanging around outside the door. Things soon got pretty cramped as a result.

“Wilfried, would you mind moving?” I asked. “We wish to return to our rooms.”

“Ah, sorry. Everyone, let’s get out of their way.”

Just as we all started to walk, however, there came an echoing cry from somewhat far away. “Rozemyyyne!” I recognized the voice at once—it was Bonifatius.

“Here!” I called back with my hand raised. I wasn’t sure whether he would even see that, considering that I was surrounded by people, but he found me soon enough regardless.

“I heard you were top of your class!” he gushed. “Good job! That’s my granddaughter for you!”

“Grandfather, I was also chosen as an honor student,” Cornelius noted.

“Oh, you too, Cornelius? My grandchildren sure are smart. Excellent. Hrah!” Bonifatius grunted as he plucked Cornelius from the group, spun him around, and then threw him up into the air.

“Guh?!”

I have to admire the amount of strength it must take to pick up and throw a man who’s almost come of age...

As I blinked in awe, two large hands slid under my arms. “You’re next, Rozemyne. Here, up you go!”

“Grandfather, no!” Cornelius shouted the very moment he landed on the ground, but it was too late—I was already in the air. The speed at which I, someone with the body of a child who had only recently had their baptism, and Cornelius, someone who had the body of an almost-adult man, were thrown couldn’t even be compared.

“GYAAAAAAAAAH!” I screamed.

“Wait, no!” Bonifatius let out a panicked shout, but there was nothing he could do—I was already mere moments away from crashing into the ceiling.

As everyone cried out, Cornelius alone leapt up, grabbed my cape, and pulled me back down. His quick use of enhancement magic had saved me from my collision course, but my cape was fastened around my throat; I could only gag as my airway was abruptly blocked.

I’m going to die!

To make matters worse, the direction of my momentum had suddenly changed, and now I was falling down toward Cornelius. I plummeted as though I were a silent meteor, no longer even able to speak.

“Ngh!”

I was caught by none other than Karstedt, who had returned to Ehrenfest ahead of time with Sylvester. He secured me in his arms, looked around to

make sure that nobody else was hurt, and checked that I was simply dazed and not actually injured. He then entrusted me to Rihyarda before fixing Bonifatius with a stern glare.

"Father, why would you *ever* do that to Rozemyne?!" he barked.

My retainers were all gathered around me. They knew that Bonifatius's actions were the result of his extreme (and evidently dangerous) love for me as his granddaughter, and so they responded only with harsh looks... but had he been anyone else, he would have been arrested on the spot for attempting to murder a member of the archducal family.

Bonifatius faltered with wavering eyes as he endured the reprimanding stares of all those around us; then he clapped his hands together in realization. "Well, er... You know... I was actually testing Cornelius to make sure he has what it takes to protect Rozemyne. He passed, of course. That's my grandson for you!"

It was the worst attempt at damage control that I had ever seen.

Karstedt planted his feet firmly on the ground and crossed his arms. "Father, stay away from Rozemyne. You're going to end up killing her one day," he declared flatly, paying no mind to Bonifatius's cry of disbelief that immediately followed. "Cornelius, you did good protecting Rozemyne from Father. Rozemyne, you weren't even given a chance to recover from your teleportation sickness before you were tossed up into the air. You should spend today resting."

"Yes, Father."

The shock of the whole situation had rendered me unable to move, so Rihyarda carried me back to my room. It was strange having all of my retainers follow me around as they did in the Royal Academy, but they would henceforth be working even in the castle. Things were probably going to be a lot busier from now on.

"Welcome home, Lady Rozemyne," Ottilie said once I was back in my room. She had prepared everything for my return, meaning I could climb straight into my already made bed. I rolled onto my side as soon as I was under the covers; my head was still spinning from my impromptu flight, and I was still feeling uncomfortably queasy.

Somebody please *teach Grandfather to control himself.*

My retainers had their own luggage to deal with, so they all dispersed shortly after introducing themselves. Their jobs in the castle would be explained to them tomorrow.

Damuel would take the lead when it came to dividing work among my guards, while Rihyarda and Ottilie were due to teach my apprentice retainers what they would be expected to do in the castle. I was going to be attending a meeting with the archduke alongside my apprentice scholars that afternoon, so Hartmut was currently receiving an explanation on how we sorted out this information.

"Previously, we sorted the information like so and purchased what we needed from those who gathered information in the Royal Academy. We expect the same higher-ups of the knights and scholars to be attending this time as well," I said. Information would probably sell pretty nicely, considering that this year they would need all sorts of information as they headed into the Archduke Conference.

As Hartmut was sorting through the information, I turned to Philine. "We will also need to arrange compensation for those in the dormitory who did transcribing work for us. Do you have a list of who transcribed what, as well as how much ink and paper they used?"

"Yes. It is all detailed on this sheet here."

"Thank you. I will have you calculate the fees, then. We will need to ask Ferdinand to prepare the payment for us." I started teaching Philine how to calculate the fees for each of the transcribed books. A look at the list she had provided showed a lot of names not from Ehrenfest. "Did you make many friends in other duchies, Philine?"

"The sum you offered for transcribing books is higher than usual, Lady Rozemyne, so students from other duchies wanted to participate too. I simply arranged the work for them."

"I taught Philine how to make a profit by charging a referral fee for the transcribing work," Hartmut said. He may have been an archnoble, but he evidently had the skills of a natural-born merchant. It seemed that Philine had made quite a considerable amount of money too; she couldn't help but smile as

she informed me that she might have saved just enough to learn the mana compression method.

It was afternoon by the time all the information was sorted out, and we were due to negotiate with the higher-ups. I couldn't just bring all of my retainers along, so I chose a select few: Rihyarda and Brunhilde as attendants; Hartmut and Philine as scholars; and Damuel, Angelica, and Cornelius as guard knights. Judithe and Leonore were going to be spending the afternoon training with Bonifatius.

"When will I get to guard Lady Rozemyne?!" Judithe cried out, her violet eyes wet with tears. She had spent the entire term in the Royal Academy off duty, and now she was having to wait even longer. Unfortunately, there was no helping it.

"Bonifatius's training is important for the guard knights of all members of the archducal family. Give it your all," Damuel said. Whether his intention was to console or encourage her, I couldn't quite tell.

After seeing Judithe and Leonore off to the training grounds, I climbed into Lessy and drove to a meeting room near the archduke's office. Wilfried and his retainers had also been summoned so that they could provide information on the time I was absent.

"Alright," Sylvester began, "how about you tell me what you all learned in the Royal Academy this year?"

The scholars who had gathered information described the changing trends, the newly invented magic tools, and the danger levels of several duchies. In turn, the higher-ups of the various specialties asked questions, noted down changes from last year, and discussed what was new.

Eventually, it came Hartmut's turn to speak. "We have learned a bit about Ahrensbach's internal situation through contacts made by the children of the former Veronica faction," he said.

"We've what?!" Sylvester exclaimed, his eyes wide with surprise.

Ferdinand's lips curved into an amused grin. "Due in part to your orders, students were staying clear of Ahrensbach in the Royal Academy. But when

Lord Wilfried started to attend, I observed renewed closeness between students of our duchies, so I exploited the opportunity. Would you consider this treason to Ehrenfest?"

"No, we want as much of this information as we can get now that we're keeping socializing to a minimum."

With support from Ferdinand, Hartmut started to give his report. It seemed that Ahrensbach was a total mess internally at the moment.

"We put together everything we've learned and concluded that they have almost no archduke candidates suited to be the next archduke," Hartmut said. "The mana of the family meant to support the archduke has decreased dramatically. Their provinces are likely suffering greatly as a result, though we do not know any specifics, since none of our sources were able to provide any details. One thing we know for sure, however, is that Ahrensbach has only two candidates suited to becoming the next archduke, one of whom is Lady Georgine's youngest daughter, Lady Detlinde."

This was news to Ehrenfest's higher-ups; they all fell into thought, looking immensely shocked.

"Only two, you say? But what about the children of the former first and second wives? My older sister had three children too. How do they only have two candidates?"

"It may be for the same reason that their ranking is falling despite them being a greater duchy. At the moment, we do not know whether Lady Detlinde is approaching Lord Wilfried because he is of Ahrensbach blood and she seeks the archduke seat or because she is looking for a husband to wed and wishes to avoid the seat. Either way, we know that she is in quite a troubling predicament," Hartmut said, concluding his report.

Ferdinand let out a long sigh and started rubbing his temples; then, he looked at Hartmut with great interest. "That was unexpected news. Excellent work. What would you say about coming to work for me?"

"Let me stop you there, Ferdinand—Hartmut is my scholar," I interjected, promptly shutting down his ballsy attempt to take my retainer. "He's going to serve as an important aide and will veritably shoulder the printing industry. Do

not even think about taking him from me.”

Hartmut responded with a sensible chuckle of amusement. “That is a very appealing offer, Lord Ferdinand, but I’m afraid that I must decline. I need to stay by Lady Rozemyne’s side so that I can properly research her.”

Oh crap. Should I have let Ferdinand have him to save myself...?!

“You are researching Rozemyne?” Ferdinand asked, his brow furrowed. “She certainly is an amalgamation of notably bizarre peculiarities... but what exactly are you focusing on?”

There was a sparkle in Hartmut’s orange eyes as he responded. “Her way of granting blessings differs from what is normal. That is what I wish to research.”

“Hm. A fascinating research topic, to be sure. Come show me your results so I can see how far you have progressed.”

“As you wish. I was hoping to be granted the opportunity to ask you some questions, Lord Ferdinand, since you knew her during her temple days.”

Oh no, no, no, no. I feel as though a terrible alliance has just been formed.

I decided to put aside the weirdos being weird and focus on the matter at hand. Each piece of information gathered at the Royal Academy was assigned an appropriate value, and this value determined how much each information gatherer was paid.

“Ferdinand, I would also like to compensate those who have transcribed books for me,” I said. “Please put aside a portion of my budget for these payments.”

“That will not be a problem, but why so soon? Could they not be paid at a later date?”

“I instructed the students who wish to learn my compression method to earn their own money. It is for this reason that I will need to pay them before my lecture begins.” I went on to explain how an archnoble had complained to me about having to earn his own money, which Ferdinand responded to with exasperation—but he didn’t criticize my decision. “By the way, have you decided who shall be taught my compression method yet?”

“Yes. We have already contacted those who have been granted permission.”

As it turned out, we would be teaching Wilfried, the archducal family’s retainers—including my new retainers—and the giebe houses related to my family. That meant Bonifatius, the Leisegangs, the Haldenzels, and Traugott. Not everyone was pleased about Traugott being included, but I had made a promise to him that I intended to keep. Far be it from me to inspire some petty revenge by spiting him here. Not to mention, he was suffering so much at the Academy with Justus as his attendant that I thought allowing him a little hope was for the best.

“How did inquiring about the children of the former Veronica faction go?” I asked.

“It will depend on faction movements and Ahrensbach’s actions at the Archduke Conference. Our current intention is to give them two options: they can wait until they come of age and are able to select a faction themselves, or they can accept magic contracts with more restrictive terms. Do you have any particular thoughts on this? We cannot allow them to sign with no restrictions whatsoever.”

“...If that is what you have all determined to be appropriate, then I shall agree. I am satisfied so long as the children do not have their futures closed off entirely.”

Refusing them flat out was much too sad, but I was completely fine with the enforcement of terms that required them to put in a great deal of work. The children of the former Veronica faction knew more about faction politics than I, so I was sure none of them expected to be embraced outright.

“I will deliver the payments two days from now,” Ferdinand said. “Oh, and that reminds me—Rozemyne, if you wish to summon the Plantin Company to once again sell books at the end of winter, you will need to apply for permission soon.”

Oh, right. We sell books at the end of winter.

I took out my diptych and wrote down that I needed to request permission for the Plantin Company. I would submit it as soon as my meeting was over.

Two days later, it was time to pay those who had gathered information for us in the Royal Academy. The students were lined up with excited expressions, with my retainers among them. Rihyarda, Damuel, and I were sitting opposite them, among those providing the compensation.

As I handed each person their payment, I gave them words of encouragement and conveyed any praise spoken by the higher-ups, much like I had the previous year. “The knight commander was very pleased with your findings,” I said to one student. “The aub’s scholars send their regards,” I told another. Even the archnoble child puffed out his chest upon receiving our commendations, positively beaming at the money he had made himself. It was heartwarming to see the satisfied smile of a job well done.

“Lady Rozemyne, I’ve saved up all the money I need. Now I can buy your mana compression method.”

“Indeed. May we meet again during my lecture.”

Once the payments were complete, the mana compression lecture was scheduled for the next day. We didn’t have much time before the feast celebrating spring. I returned to my room while praising my retainers for their hard work.

“Lady Rozemyne, will you be teaching the fourth step too?” Angelica asked. She already knew the normal method, so this extra stage was all that she cared about. It made sense, considering that this alone had been her motivation to finish her classes.

“I will teach you, Angelica, since you passed your classes in time. But the plan is to only teach the fourth step to my retainers. The others will receive an opportunity to be taught it at a later date, on a separate occasion—after everyone else has learned the standard method,” I explained.

Everyone looked very pleased, but Philine wore the happiest smile of all. She had gathered information just as Hartmut had taught her and even put her all into transcribing works, which had resulted in her earning enough money to afford the method. Her efforts had at last paid off.

“I see you are pleased, Philine.”

“Absolutely. Now I can learn the mana compression method alongside everyone else,” she said, her cheeks flushing a warm pink. She had been born into a laynoble family that was by no means wealthy, and so she had been forced to endure going without ever getting what she wanted since she was born. She knew that her parents wouldn’t have been willing to cover the necessary expenses, so she was overjoyed about having earned enough to cover them herself.

“Things have been especially difficult ever since Mother died and Father had to remarry...” Philine continued. “I am truly glad that you made a book of my mother’s stories, Lady Rozemyne.”

She hadn’t said it outright, but it was very heavily implied that she and her younger brother had suffered greatly due to being the children of a previous wife. Philine considered the stories passed down to her by her mother her most precious memories; she had such a strong attachment to book-making because she wanted to forever preserve them in physical form. My two-year slumber had delayed this process, but she had spent her days writing them all down so that she wouldn’t forget.

“There was an occasion when my stepmother confiscated all of the stories I had written, but Father gave them back to me. He said it was because you had given me the paper, Lady Rozemyne.”

If one treated gifts from the archducal family without respect, it was impossible to say what twists and turns might follow, or what disaster might be brought to one’s family. It was for this reason that Philine’s father had made it clear that nobody was to touch her paper.

“Their treatment of us has been much crueler since the summer, when they had a new child. I am terribly worried about how my little brother has fared while I was away...” Philine said. As my retainer, she could always ask for a room in the castle if she wished, but her little brother hadn’t even been baptized yet, so she didn’t even consider this an option.

“Your little brother surely has the divine protection of the gods as well,” I said.

“...I thank you, Lady Rozemyne.”

The next day, when I was due to teach my mana compression method, Philine didn't show up to work. An ordonnanz came to inform me that she was ill of health, but in the distant background of the message, I could hear her scream, "Give me back my money!"

"I need to go help her," I said, immediately moving to stand up.

"Lady Rozemyne." Hartmut placed a hand on my shoulder to stop me. "There are already many nobles gathered here to learn your method. There is no time to go to Philine."

"Are you telling me to abandon her then?"

"I am not, and I know that you would never abandon her no matter what I advise. Rather, I am saying that I believe it is best to postpone providing her with assistance. I know well the extent of your compassion, but abandoning a promise with this many archnobles for the sake of a single laynoble is simply not something that can be forgiven."

My other retainers nodded in agreement. "Who knows what the nobles would say to Philine afterward. They would unquestionably blame her," Cornelius said.

Damuel concurred. "Your behavior will impact Philine's reputation as well."

"Furthermore, they have only taken her money," Rihyarda noted. "Her life is not in danger."

"You can teach her the method at a later date, when you teach us the fourth step. For now, I must ask that you please contain your emotions," Hartmut concluded.

Everyone was in agreement. I wanted to declare that I was going to help her regardless, but I clenched my fists and swallowed down the words.

"Very well," I conceded. "I will teach the nobles the compression method first."

My retainers circled me as we moved to the scheduled room, no doubt cautious that I might abruptly run off. By the time we arrived, a great number of

nobles were already gathered. I had already taught my compression method to all of the archducal family's guard knights, except those serving Wilfried, so the majority of the attending nobles were scholars and attendants.

There were many children here learning without their parents, since kids had a better time developing mana and the lecture fees were anything but cheap. There were also many younger people. The primary exceptions to this were Bonifatius and the giebe couples sitting in the front row. I couldn't help but balk a little when I saw the grandpas who looked even older than mine.

Are they really planning to grow their mana at this point...? I'm scared they're going to keel over and die as soon as they even attempt to.

"May I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?"

The nobles I hadn't met before came forward to greet me one by one. The situation with Philine had me wracked with anxiety and impatience, but I couldn't allow that to show on my face, so I returned the greetings with a fake noble smile.

It was then that the oldest man among the grandfathers hobbled forward. He was of such an advanced age that he needed a caretaker to accompany him, and he knelt before me with tears in his eyes. "I am the previous Giebe Leisegang. May I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?" he asked.

"You may."

"Now that I have met you, Lady Rozemyne, I can meet my grave with no regrets."

Holy cow, talk about a heavy greeting! He's literally risking his life by being here!

"He was quite pushy with Count Leisegang about coming. As your great-grandfather, he wanted to see you at least once," Rihyarda whispered to me.

Say what?! This is my great-grandfather?!

The old man weeping tears of joy over getting to see me was apparently Karstedt's grandfather. Never before had I met one of my great-grandfathers, even in my Urano days. It appeared to be a miracle that this man was even still alive—he was old enough that it looked as though he might drop dead at any moment. He had apparently reached the point where he seldom socialized or even left his estate.

"I am glad to have met you as well, Great-Grandfather. I— WHAT?!"

No sooner had I given him my blessing than he closed his eyes and collapsed with a *thump*. He was completely motionless; the most I could do was stare down at him in shock.

"...Did I cause this with my blessing?" I asked.

"Fear not, Lady Rozemyne—this happens often. He is fine."

Um, sorry, but that doesn't make me feel any better!

This moment of shocked silence quickly turned into a buzz of whispers as my great-grandfather was carried out of the room. I was assured again and again that his life wasn't in any danger, but it sure didn't look that way. Attempting to learn my compression method certainly would have pushed him to climb the towering stairway, so I was at least thankful that he hadn't reached that stage.

That was crazy. I thought my heart was going to stop.

Never before had I witnessed someone abruptly collapse, so it was only then that I truly understood how much I had traumatized others when passing out myself. I couldn't have been more apologetic.

Eventually, the whispers quelled, and the current Count Leisegang humbly stepped forward. "I am Giebe Leisegang. May I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the harsh judgment of Ewigeliebe the God of Life?" he asked.

"You may."

"I deeply apologize for my grandfather shocking you so. He pleaded to attend this seminar, as he wished to see you at least once before the supreme gods welcome him. I, too, am glad to have finally met you in person, Lady

Rozemyne.”

The current Count Leisegang was fairly young—perhaps just a little older than Karstedt. I could feel the ambition burning in his eyes, and I suddenly understood why we previously hadn’t been allowed to meet, despite us being family. This meeting had most likely only been allowed because my guardians had finally decided that Wilfried and I were to be engaged.

“I shall now teach my mana compression method. But first, I ask for the payments to be made and the magic contracts to be signed.” I gestured to the scholars, who were going to be handling the payments, and then to Sylvester, who was managing the country-wide magic contracts. He would be watching carefully as everyone signed their names—both because I couldn’t yet recognize everyone, and to show that this lecture was taking place under the guidance of the archduke.

Once all those participating had paid their fees and signed the contracts, I started teaching the method with Damuel as my assistant. We would only be going up to the third step today, and as expected, showing the actual process made things a lot easier to visualize than just giving vague analogies. Many people found it simpler to compress their mana this way, and everyone there said they had never before seen folded material being stamped down.

“Even knowing the method, the amount of mana you can compress ultimately relies on your mental fortitude,” I explained. “Also, know that your mana density increasing too suddenly due to rapid compression will cause mana sickness. Take care to increase your mana at a leisurely pace that will not interfere with your work.”

Now, anyone who got mana sickness had only themselves to blame.

“To think that even fully grown adults such as ourselves can increase our mana density through artful compression... I am moved,” Giebe Haldenzel said, his enthusiasm clear in his voice. “This is knowledge that one could monopolize for their own benefit, and yet for the sake of the duchy, you are willing to teach it even to competing archduke candidates. I am left speechless at your compassion.”

Following these words, Giebe Haldenzel exited the room. Wilfried and his

retainers went to leave shortly after, though I noticed they were all wearing very focused expressions—a clear giveaway that they were compressing their mana even as they walked. I instinctively called out to them.

“What is it, Rozemyne?” Wilfried asked.

“I understand that your guard knights will wish to work especially hard to compress their mana, considering that they have learned it much later than the other archducal family retainers, but it is dangerous for all of you to compress your mana while on duty at the same time.”

Several of the retainers exchanged nervous glances. They had evidently been so focused on compressing their mana that they had forgotten their surroundings entirely.

“The risk of mana sickness aside, you will all want to take care not to let the compression method interfere with your guard duty. Wilfried, perhaps you should adjust your schedule to make it easier for everyone to compress their mana and order them to not compress it while at work.”

“Good point,” Wilfried replied with a nod. He and his knights paused their attempts to compress their mana, and then together they exited the room.

Once they had gone, I dashed over to where Sylvester and Ferdinand were.

Philine's Family Circumstances

"Sylvester, Ferdinand, may we go rescue Philine now?" I asked.

"...Oh yeah, one of your retainers didn't come. What's all this about rescuing her?" Sylvester asked, his brow furrowed. Unfortunately, I couldn't provide many details; I knew only what I had heard from the ordonnanz.

"I'm not sure what the full situation is, but I received an ordonnanz this morning. A woman was informing me that Philine was ill, but in the background, I could hear Philine screaming about her money being taken."

Ferdinand, who had been tapping his temple as he listened, lowered his hand and stared at me. "And you did not run off immediately?" he asked, blinking incredulously. "Gods, have you actually matured somewhat?"

"All of my retainers gathered together to stop me, and my emotions have calmed somewhat since then." Or rather, my thoughts had been dominated by the sight of my great-grandfather collapsing in front of me. "Now tell me, how can we rescue Philine while respecting her position and not bringing her more trouble? She worked so hard to earn money specifically so that she could attend my lecture. Her parents weren't going to cover the costs, and so she gathered information in the Royal Academy, transcribed books, gathered stories from other duchies, and ultimately put everything she had into saving up. She was so happy about getting to learn the method too..."

Not once had it occurred to me that Philine's parents might interfere instead of celebrating her growth. She had earned the money on her own terms precisely because her family was poor, and she knew that they wouldn't be able to pay for her.

"Her parents actually took money from their kid...?" Sylvester asked.

"In laynoble families, income is generally expected to go to the house—especially the earnings of underage children who still live at home," Damuel said. As a laynoble himself, he was able to give us some valuable insight.

Sylvester sighed. “You should have held on to the money for her, Rozemyne.”

“Perhaps, but she would have needed to make such a request herself. Had I made the suggestion, it would have come across as an order, no?”

In truth, I had at one point considered subtracting the cost of my mana compression lecture before giving out the payments. Sylvester had said that this would make things easier for us, since we wouldn’t have needed to prepare as much money at once, but I was of the opinion that it was more satisfying—and in turn more motivating—for one to receive the full amount. By having them physically pay for the method themselves, with money they had earned and not just received from their parents, I had hoped to teach the students the importance of self-investment.

Of course, my decision to pay everyone the full amount had unfortunately backfired.

“I understand how you feel, but the situation has already progressed. I don’t know how I feel about you interfering with someone else’s family matters,” Sylvester said.

“Philine is my retainer, and it is my duty to protect her from misfortune. Is that not what lords and ladies must do? I was taught as such when Lady Eglantine protected me in the Royal Academy.”

“Hm. Your thought process is not incorrect. You cause nothing but problems, but I see that you are at least learning in the process,” Ferdinand said, beginning to tap his temples once again as he fell into thought.

“I understand the role I must play, but how exactly can I protect Philine? I wish to resolve this matter peacefully, without causing her any harm.”

“You getting involved in a domestic matter will make it quite a scandal. If you wish to settle things peacefully, I would suggest having your retainer earn the money again and telling her to entrust it with you this time,” Ferdinand said plainly. Doing nothing about it was the most peaceful option, but we were having this conversation specifically because I refused to turn a blind eye to this.

I anxiously bit my lip, and that was when Hartmut interjected. “Oh no. I’ve

just realized something terrible," he said, speaking in a monotone voice like an intentionally bad actor. "I cannot believe I've done this, but I gave Philine the wrong money. She must have taken home the funds we were going to pay to the students of other duchies. In other words, I gave her money that rightfully belongs to Lady Rozemyne, and Lady Rozemyne the money that Philine was going to spend."

I knew for a fact that this wasn't true—I had paid everyone in Ehrenfest already, and the money for the other duchies was safely in my possession. I blinked, confused, only for Ferdinand to chuckle.

"That is terrible indeed," he said. "Rozemyne, it seems that your retainer took home money that was intended for other duchies. This could escalate into an interduchy scandal if something is not done. Go forth and retrieve that which is rightfully yours. And this time, do not forget to keep the money meant for the mana compression lesson separate."

It was only then that I understood what was going on. "Oh my, it certainly would be terrible for this to escalate into an interduchy scandal," I said. "I must go to Philine's home at once and apologize for the mistake."

"An unannounced visit would only escalate matters. I will explain the reason for your visit to Philine's father, Kashick. Return here when the money is prepared."

"Right!"

Now with justice on my side, I climbed into my highbeast and flew to my room at once. Rihyarda and Ottilie welcomed me with wide eyes, having declined to learn the mana compression method themselves.

"Rihyarda, please fetch the money for the other duchies," I said, explaining the situation to them as they carried out my request. From those funds I took out exactly as much as I had paid to Philine, and from that amount I took out the fee for my mana compression method and a small silver. I thought it only fair for Philine to get a little money to spend on herself, rather than it all going straight to her house.

"Milady, would it not be wise to grant Philine a room in the castle?" Rihyarda asked, looking notably concerned. "If she is with a family that will send false

reports to keep her from work, she will one day fail to carry out her duties, even if it is not her fault."

She was certainly right, but Philine had a little brother as well. It was hard to imagine that she would abandon him and enter the castle alone.

"I will grant Philine a room if she asks for one, but I expect she will not wish to enter the castle alone." I gave the money for Philine's family to Hartmut and then brought out my highbeast. "Let us go."

Naturally, I couldn't impose upon a laynoble's estate by arriving with all of my retainers. I needed to bring all of my guard knights, given that I was leaving the castle, but of my scholars and attendants I would only be bringing the fastest and most flexible thinkers: Lieseleta and Hartmut.

"We will prepare a room for her just in case," Brunhilde said. "It would not do for there not to be one available."

"Please do."

Despite being an archnoble, Brunhilde worked with and cared for Philine as a fellow retainer in the Royal Academy. With clear worry in her amber eyes, she saw us off to the room where Ferdinand was waiting.

"My apologies for the wait, Ferdinand."

"I have finished explaining the circumstances. My sympathies, Kashick; Rozemyne has certainly thrown you into the fire with her mistake." Ferdinand directed his second sentence at a pale-faced layscholar who was practically groveling after receiving such an abrupt summons. It was Philine's father, and as he made his submission clear, I apologized for my mistake.

"I truly am sorry for this. If we do not have the proper sum at hand, this could escalate into an interduchy issue."

"I-I had no idea," Kashick stammered. He had apparently spent the winter busily gathering information about mana compression, to the point that he had returned to his estate only to sleep. He consequently knew nothing of what was happening there and was beyond dismayed to learn that they were involved in such a large-scale diplomatic issue.

And so, with Kashick's guidance, we all flew to Philine's home on our highbeasts. Ferdinand was accompanying us both to apologize for my mistake and to observe the proceedings.

"Here we are," Kashick said as he landed at an estate in the southmost area of the Noble's Quarter, where the laynobles lived. His house was so much tinier than the castle that the two couldn't even be compared, but from a commoner's perspective, it was large and overall quite attractive. In terms of dimensions, it was likely larger than the Othmar Company.

"Oh my. Welcome," Philine's stepmother said once we arrived in the parlor. She looked quite young, as one would expect from a second wife, but also rather exhausted—likely because she had given birth during the summer just passed.

"This is urgent, Jonsara," Kashick said. "Philine apparently brought home a lot of money; do you know anything about it?"

"Has that girl done something? She lied about being the retainer of an archducal family member yesterday and came home with a small fortune. It was quite strange—after all, Lady Rozemyne would surely never accept a laynoble into her service. Philine must have become delusional after her vow in the playroom was rejected. The truth was just too much for her to bear," Jonsara spat. She then apologized to me for all the trouble.

"You seem to misunderstand," I said. "Philine truly is my retainer. She was officially assigned as such at the Royal Academy."

Jonsara offered no response; she merely stared at me in wide-eyed surprise.

"Philine spoke the truth," I restated, speaking more slowly this time to ensure there was no confusion. "She is my retainer."

Jonsara shook her head in disbelief. "But... But that can't be..."

"Philine isn't feeling well today, correct?" I asked with a smile. "Do allow me to see her. I will need to explain that this situation is not her fault and then have her return the money from yesterday."

"B-But... She is still unwell. Someone of poor constitution such as yourself would be at risk attending her. If you are in a hurry, I will fetch the money for

you right away," Jonsara said, panicking in such a blatantly suspicious manner.

I glanced over at Ferdinand, who subtly gestured to Hartmut with his chin. He was telling me to send Hartmut in my place, so I nodded and deepened my smile.

"I appreciate your concern for my health. Hartmut, accompany Jonsara and ensure the proper sum is being returned. Lieseleta, go in my place to express my well-wishes to the ill Philine. I will wait here, so you need not worry."

If going to see her myself wasn't an option, I could just send my retainers. I had no intention of going home until Philine's safety was ascertained, especially now that I had seen how maliciously Jonsara acted toward her. Damuel and Judithe would be following Hartmut and Lieseleta as guards; when it came to money-related problems, the more witnesses, the better.

Not long after they all exited the parlor, we heard a large slamming sound and a scream come from somewhere deeper inside the house. I instinctively went to get up from my seat, but Ferdinand extended a hand beneath the table to stop me. Meanwhile, Angelica and Eckhart drew their weapons and assumed defensive stances.

However, nothing followed but silence. The lack of any report or contact made me feel sick.

"My apologies. I will go check on them," Kashick said. Just as he moved to leave the parlor, however, Damuel shouted, "Get out of the way!"

"Philine!" I cried.

Damuel entered the room with Philine wrapped in his cape. There was a painful-looking mark on her face, and her grass-green eyes were wet with tears. Behind them were Lieseleta and a young boy of around five years of age, who was clearly not being treated well.



“Philine, what in the world just happened?” I asked.

She looked my way in a daze; then, her eyes shot open as though she had suddenly come back to reality. “Lady Rozemyne, please. Save my brother. Save Konrad,” she choked out.

Philine went on to explain that Jonsara was abusing Konrad and that she had taken away his life-saving magic tool—the one given to all noble children, that sucked out and stored their mana in feystones until it was time for them to attend the Royal Academy. Jonsara had drained the mana from his magic tool and feystones and then unregistered his mana from his magic tool, which she had given to her newborn baby instead. She had been able to do all this unopposed, since Kashick was barely at home during winter socializing and Philine had been at the Royal Academy.

“At this rate, he’s going to die!” Philine wailed. “He’s already filled with mana!”

“However, this is a domestic matter. It is not an issue for Rozemyne, the daughter of the archduke, to oversee.” Ferdinand stepped in faster than I could open my mouth. He was clearly telling Philine and me to think carefully before speaking.

I clenched my fists on my lap.

“Indeed, it is as Lord Ferdinand says—this is a domestic dispute and not one for Lady Rozemyne to concern herself with,” Jonsara said venomously. “Philine, you must not display such arrogance simply because you were chosen as a retainer. Know your place.” She was standing by the door with her newborn in her arms, watching us with defensive eyes and showing no intention of entering the parlor. She was cradling her baby and the magic tool as though they were precious treasures.

However, I was not about to let this fly. Noble children would die without magic tools to drain their mana, in the same way that commoners with the Devouring would. I knew better than anyone how it felt to die slowly as the heat consumed you.

“Ferdinand, I do not wish to let Konrad die.”

“A child that has not yet been baptized is not even considered a person,” he replied. It was the same thing he had said to me countless times before.

I squeezed my eyes shut; that way of thinking was something that I would never get used to. How could one see a child standing right before them and not even consider them alive?

“As this is a domestic dispute, I certainly have no place in it, but I refuse to overlook the life-threatening condition of this child. What do you think of this, Kashick?” I asked, turning to him since he was more directly involved in the situation.

“I was aware of my wife’s wish, but I did not think she would forcibly go through with it while I was away,” he replied. In other words, he hadn’t purchased another magic tool even after Jonsara had consulted him about the situation. That was enough to convince me that a conclusion had been made—a conclusion to raise only one of their children.

“What will you do, then? Will you purchase a new magic tool?”

“Our house does not have the funds to do such a thing. We shall prioritize the child with more mana.”

“Father?!” Philine shrieked in protest, but Kashick stating his intentions before me had finalized the decision. It was only natural for a noble house to prioritize those with the most mana, and as a result, none of my retainers voiced any objections; they merely lowered their eyes sadly.

Meanwhile, Jonsara sighed in relief. She tightly hugged her baby and the magic tool she had stolen from Konrad to her chest, wearing the expression of a mother who wished to protect her beloved child more than anything else. The sight made me feel conflicted, to say the least.

As this went on, Konrad stood in a daze; not only had his lifeline been stolen from him, but now his father had cut him off completely.

Philine looked at her little brother, tears streaming down her face. “B-But... If you do that, Konrad will...”

“I will take him,” I interrupted. “If the uncontested guidance of the supreme gods will force him up the towering stairway, then living in the house of the

gods will surely make no difference.”

Kashick and Jonsara grimaced. “Unfortunately, Lady Rozemyne, we do not have the wealth to support a blue priest,” Jonsara said. “Our expenses are only rising, and we will need Konrad’s mana when he becomes a servant. Furthermore... while it is an honor for Philine to have become your retainer, Lady Rozemyne, preparing everything that her new role requires is no easy matter. That is why I ask that you relieve her of duty.”

Philine looked away, now making the same face she had made when she had given up on the picture books in the winter playroom. She had probably survived at home all this time by enduring and masking her true feelings behind the same expression.

“It is my duty to protect my retainers,” I declared. “I will grant Philine a room in the castle and give her all that she needs for work, such that she will no longer burden your house. Philine, prepare your things with Lieseleta. I have no intention of letting you go.”

She beamed a happy smile for a second, but then she looked at Konrad and lowered her eyes.

“Philine, we will take Konrad to the temple,” I assured her. “He will not die.”

“You may trust Lady Rozemyne. Now, let us go,” Lieseleta said. Philine was promptly urged out of the room, but she walked with heavy footsteps and continually glanced back at her little brother, reluctant to leave his side.

“Konrad, may I cast healing upon you?” I asked.

“That would be a waste,” Kashick began, but I silenced him with a look.

“I did not ask you, Kashick.” I crouched down so that I was at eye level with Konrad. He was smaller than me, clearly unkempt, and covered in wounds. “You don’t want to be in pain, right?”

I took out my schtappe, but this immediately sent Konrad into a panic—he recoiled and started to flail about as he tried to get away from me. The desperate fear in his eyes told me he had endured mana attacks in the past, so I made my schtappe vanish and turned my attention to Jonsara.

“This is a domestic matter,” she repeated with a thin-lipped smile. “Children need to be trained.” It was clear to see that she didn’t consider herself as having done anything wrong.

I gave up on using a schtappe and instead poured mana slowly into my ring. “O Goddess of Healing Heilschmerz, of the Goddess of Water Flutrane’s exalted twelve, hear my prayers. Lend me your divine power and grant me the power to heal those who have been hurt. Play the divine melody and cast the blissful ripples of your pure divine protection.”

Green light shot from my ring and enveloped Konrad. He looked down at himself with wide eyes as his wounds were healed and whispered, “It doesn’t hurt anymore...”

“I am Rozemyne, the lady of your older sister. This place has no magic tools for you. Will you live on as a servant, allowing the heat of your mana to devour you? Or will you live in the temple?”

“Lady Rozemyne,” Jonsara interjected. The mere sound of her voice caused Konrad to recoil again. “We cannot afford—”

I cut her off with a wave of my hand. “I do not recall saying that he will become a blue priest. He shall join the temple as one without parents—as a gray priest. From that point onward, he will have nothing to do with this house. You may consider him as having passed away.”

“I will miss using him as a servant, but I take no issue with him being removed from our lives entirely,” Jonsara replied, suddenly in a much better mood. Meanwhile, Konrad stared at me, his expression a mixture of surprise and curiosity.

“The orphanage will grant you food, clean bedding, and an education,” I said to the young boy. “At the very least, you will not be abused as you are now. If you wish to remain here, however, I will accept that. Now, would you like something delicious to eat?”

Konrad hesitated. His eyes wandered all over the place before eventually resting on me. “I’m... I’m hungry...”

“I see. Then you may leave with us once Philine is ready.”

Soon enough, Philine came back into the parlor with Lieseleta. She looked relieved to see me standing protectively between Jonsara and Konrad, but her expression also seemed to be tinged with resignation.

“Philine, I am going to be taking Konrad to the temple,” I said.

Her brow trembled for a moment; then she glared up at her father with eyes full of anger and frustration. “Konrad’s magic tool is an heirloom from Mother. Why would you let Lady Jonsara take it? Why do you permit her tyranny?” she demanded.

The stolen magic tool had once belonged to Philine’s birth mother; for Jonsara to have reregistered it with her own son’s mana was unforgivable in Philine’s eyes. Her lips trembled and she glowered as hard as she could at both her stepmother for her actions and her father for having allowed them to happen.

“The mana’s already been replaced. Nothing can be done. And furthermore, it’s normal to prioritize the child with more mana,” Kashick replied, his attitude unchanged even in the face of such desperate pleas from his own daughter.

Philine knew then that her words and feelings would never reach him. She looked down at the floor and squeezed her eyes shut, trying her hardest to hide her emotions, but she couldn’t hold back the tears.

I can’t believe they’d steal her late mother’s heirloom...

I may not have liked it, but nobles prioritizing children with more mana was something that I could at least understand. Stealing such a sentimental heirloom from a child, however...

“Ferdinand, how expensive are the magic tools given to babies?” I asked.

“A new one will cost around five small golds, I suppose. The materials are also expensive, but that is because they require a significant amount of mana to create. I have never bought one myself, though.”

It made sense that he wouldn’t know the exact price of magic tools for babies, considering that he had never been married.

“Philine, I will give you the money that you need, but I expect you to pay me

back," I said. "Use it to purchase your mother's magic tool. I would not like for you to lose such a precious heirloom."

"An old magic tool that has had its mana forcibly overwritten will not be worth more than three small golds," Ferdinand said, taking out a card that shone like a rainbow. It looked a lot like a guild card, and this comparison only became more appropriate when he held it out to Kashick. "We are going to buy the magic tool. We shall pay three small golds. You have no complaints, I imagine."

Overwhelmed and unable to defy Ferdinand, Kashick swallowed hard and took out a similar card. He touched his to the one that Ferdinand had produced and then reached for the baby's magic tool.

"No! Stop this at once!" Jonsara exclaimed. "This is my baby's magic tool!"

"You can always buy another one."

"No! Who knows when we'll be able to?!" Jonsara protested, but Kashick wrenched the magic tool from her grasp and held it out to Ferdinand, who then set it down in front of me. I, in turn, handed the magic tool to Philine.

"Lord Ferdinand, Lady Rozemyne... I thank you both ever so much..." Philine said. She hugged the magic tool close and continued to cry, but this time she wept tears of joy.

I sighed in relief, glad to see that her smile had returned.

After wiping her eyes, Philine looked up at her parents with resolve. "Father, Lady Jonsara, I will now live in the castle as Lady Rozemyne's retainer. Now that Konrad is going to the temple, I will never return here."

The blood drained from Kashick's face, while Jonsara sighed in relief—two contrasting reactions, to say the least. Meanwhile, Philine's grass-green eyes were shining with a firm, resolute light.

"The day will most likely never come when Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time weaves our threads back together, but I pray that you live in peace with the divine protection of the gods," Philine said. It was her final farewell, and with that, she took Konrad by the hand and left what had once been her home.

Taking Konrad to the Temple

“You are taking him to the temple now, Rozemyne? This was not a part of our plan,” Ferdinand said the moment we left Philine’s home. He was glaring down at me with the eyes of a parent about to tell their child to put a stray cat back where they had found it. Had we been alone in the temple, he certainly would have chastised me for “helping everyone you see without thinking.”

However, I knew him all too well now. Although he would complain and prioritize acting like a noble in public, beneath the surface, he had conflicted feelings about children suffering from abuse. He wouldn’t abandon them unless there was a significant reason preventing him from getting involved.

“I am the temple’s orphanage director; it would be beyond me to abandon a child in need. Could you have abandoned him, Ferdinand?”

“...Fine. I would like to go to the temple and get this over with, but you have many underage guard knights with you. We must first return to the castle.”

Hartmut smiled. “One of the requirements for an apprentice scholar to be involved with the printing industry is being capable of entering the temple and speaking with commoner merchants. Please do bring me with you, Lord Ferdinand,” he said.

It was written on his face that he spoke less out of a passion for his job and more because he wanted to see the saint’s temple for himself... but perhaps that was just my imagination. Either way, I could use his justification to bring Philine along too.

“Ferdinand, surely there is no issue with us bringing the apprentice scholars,” I said. “They are going to be visiting the temple soon enough anyway, so...”

“Excuse me, Lady Rozemyne!” Judithe shot her hand up. “I want to do guard duty with Angelica!”

“It is one thing to have the apprentice scholars come with us, but apprentice guard knights are only allowed to work in the Noble’s Quarter. We can decide

whether to expand your duties in a meeting with Aub Ehrenfest, but you must return to the castle for today," Ferdinand said. He glanced at Judithe, Leonore, Lieseleta, and Cornelius in turn while writing a white bird letter to my attendants stating that we were coming to the temple with an orphan.

Judithe hung her head. She couldn't defy orders from Ferdinand, and so she brought out her highbeast in preparation for going back to the castle.

"I feel for you, Judithe, but I wasn't allowed to go to the temple before I came of age either. You should hurry and come of age too," Angelica said. She puffed out her chest with a bit of pride while bringing out her highbeast.

Judithe smiled. "Angelica, what kind of place is the temple?"

Angelica looked up as she pondered the question; then she smiled in turn. "A delicious place."

After receiving an answer like that, I could understand why Judithe looked so utterly bewildered. "My personal chefs are there, so the food served in the temple is the same as that produced in the Royal Academy," I explained. "That is what Angelica is trying to say."

"Whaaat?! That's so much better than what we get at the knight dorms! Wh-What else is different?" Judithe asked, her violet eyes sparkling as she looked up at Angelica.

Angelica paused in thought again; then she clapped a fist into her palm. "The temple is tough."

"What?" Judithe looked at me for an explanation, but not even I knew what was meant this time. I shook my head, which prompted Angelica to explain.

"In the temple, everyone has to do paperwork like scholars. I train with Lord Eckhart there too, so it just feels like a tough place in every way."

Angelica's baseline was utterly bizarre. Cornelius was shaking his head, having been to the temple before, while those who hadn't simply looked on in confusion.

"Oh gosh. It's so romantic for you to look forward to training with your betrothed. I'm jealous!" Judithe said.

Um, wait. What part of that was even the slightest bit romantic?

As Judithe squealed with delight, I concluded that her baseline for things was equally bizarre. It was hard to tell whether Angelica and Judithe were on the same page at all, and while everyone was stunned by it, not everyone was stunned in the same way.

Lieseleta, Angelica's little sister, opened her eyes wide and looked between Angelica and me in disbelief. "Everyone does scholar work...? Are you telling me that my sister does paperwork?!" she exclaimed.

"No, I guard the door. All by myself," Angelica replied with a heroic expression, spurring everyone to start nodding to themselves. They knew her grades—she couldn't possibly have been capable of doing paperwork.

"I thought for a moment that you were being a burden to Lady Rozemyne not just in the Royal Academy, but in the temple as well," Lieseleta said. "Please continue to refrain from spoiling the paperwork, Sister."

"Right. Her temple attendants are really good, so they know not to give me anything."

Just how much did Angelica mess things up when she tried helping with paperwork? I was starting to feel exceedingly uneasy, but Lieseleta didn't provide any further details; instead, she just summoned her highbeast.

"Enough chatter, Rozemyne. Prepare to leave," Ferdinand said. "Allow the child and your apprentice scholars to ride with you in your highbeast. We want everyone who needs to be guarded together."

"Okay."

After seeing off the underage retainers who were going back to the castle, I gestured Hartmut, Philine, and Konrad into Lessy. Konrad looked relieved about leaving home, and while Philine was holding his hand to reassure him, her own expression was clouded. Hartmut must not have seen my bigger Lessy up close before because he started looking around everywhere the moment he was inside.

"Hartmut, please sit quietly. I do not answer questions while driving."

“...Who asked you questions while you were driving?”

“Justus.”

Hartmut chuckled in response, perhaps imagining the scene.

I shot up into the sky in Lessy, following after Ferdinand, at which point Konrad let out a cry of surprise; he had evidently never ridden a highbeast before. We soared through the air and made our way to the temple with guard knights surrounding us. Our destination wasn’t too far from Philine’s home since laynobles lived at the south end of the Noble’s Quarter, close to the north gate. We passed over the Noble’s Gate and arrived at the front entrance of the temple’s noble section.

“Welcome back, High Bishop, High Priest.”

Fran and Monika were waiting for us alongside Ferdinand’s attendants. Even Wilma had come out, since a new orphan was arriving.

“I will compose the documentation for the new orphan,” Ferdinand informed me. “You give him food or what have you.”

As instructed, I took Konrad and the others to the orphanage director’s chambers, where I then asked Nicola to start preparing food. “I apologize for the suddenness of all this,” I said to her.

“Fourth bell was about to ring anyway. This is perfect timing.”

While Nicola was preparing food, I introduced my temple attendants to Philine and Hartmut. “These are Fran, Zahm, Monika, and Wilma. I have entrusted Wilma with taking care of the orphanage. Nicola is currently preparing the food, while Gil and Fritz are in the workshop. I will introduce them to you later. Everyone, these are Philine and Hartmut, my retainers in the castle and apprentice scholars. They will soon be visiting the temple to assist with the printing industry.”

Nicola started bringing in dishes while I was introducing everyone. Each plate made a quiet *clink* as it was set down.

“Today we have bacon, fluffy bread, and vegetable soup,” Nicola said. “The meal is a bit simple, since we hadn’t planned for your return, Lady Rozemyne.

Furthermore, we have sweets on the side. I must admit, I made them in a hurry."

Nicola placed on the table some crepes with thoroughly beaten cream and rumtopf wrapped inside. I ate one, and then everyone else began eating as well. Philine and Hartmut were immediately taken aback when they tasted the sweets for themselves.

"Sweets like these are served in the temple?"

"Only for Lady Rozemyne," Angelica explained between graceful mouthfuls of crepe. "Lord Ferdinand doesn't care much about sweets, so they aren't served in his chambers. So, Hartmut? The temple *is* delicious, isn't it?"

Guard knights took turns to eat, and Angelica's higher status dictated that she always ate first. Damuel watched us with a longing hand on his stomach as he carried out guard duty, and shrugged as Hartmut and Philine delighted in the sweets.

"Those in the orphanage here are given the leftovers of the blue priests in the form of divine gifts, so their food is better than that served in the knight dorm. There's plenty to go around too," Damuel explained. "The orphans are also taught to read and do math before being baptized, meaning they can serve blue priests as attendants or join Lady Rozemyne's workshop to make books. The gray priests are devoted to the teachings of the gods, and there are none who commit acts of violence... I imagine Konrad's life will be much better here."

Philine's eyes widened in surprise, and then she gave a genuine sigh of relief. "That is good to hear," she said.

"Fran, how much longer do we have before the High Priest arrives?" I asked. "I wish to write a letter to the Plantin Company, and I will need Gil or Fritz to deliver it."

"Have you decided on a date to sell the books?" Fran asked while preparing my desk for writing a letter. It seemed the workshop had already finished preparing to sell in the castle.

"Lady Rozemyne, may I observe to see what kind of letter you write?" Hartmut asked.

“...Certainly,” I replied.

Hartmut watching meant I would need to write in strict, formal language, and this struggle would only continue once scholars began arriving in the temple. Putting something like, *“Eheheh. I came first in class at the Royal Academy. Isn’t that awesome?”* simply wasn’t an option, and with that in mind, I wistfully started writing my letter.

Just as I finished, Ferdinand came with the necessary paperwork for Konrad to be accepted into the orphanage. He apparently wanted to leave a special record, since while the children of nobles had been taken in as blue priests in the past, never had one been taken in as an apprentice gray priest.

Ferdinand and I sat next to each other at the table, while Philine and Konrad sat opposite us. Angelica and Hartmut stood behind me, while Damuel despaired at the crepes being taken away. He had seemingly missed his chance to eat one.

“Now then—we will temporarily take Konrad into the orphanage,” I said. “Since orphans and gray priests can be purchased, you need only save up enough money, Philine. Then you and your brother can be reunited.”

Ferdinand immediately fixed me with a harsh glare. “Hold it. Where do you expect him to live? He cannot live in the room you have granted Philine in the castle. She will need to save enough to buy an entire estate, and that is no simple task. Furthermore... no matter how hard either of them works, that child can no longer become a noble.”

“But why not? We retrieved the magic tool, so if she saves up enough money before his baptism ceremony...” I trailed off. We had managed to reclaim the magic tool for children that had used to belong to Philine’s mother—if we put new feystones into it, surely Philine would just need to buy Konrad when she was able. That was the assumption I had made, at least, but it appeared that living as a noble wasn’t quite that easy.

Philine set the heirloom on her lap and stroked it, her eyes lowered sadly. “Lady Rozemyne, money can be saved and borrowed, but the mana is lost,” she said. I didn’t understand though; the tool was right there.

Ferdinand sighed at my confusion and explained. “You must not consider

yourself on the same level as a laynoble child without even enough mana to be a suitable successor. You may have been compressing mana since long before your baptism, but you are an exception; most cannot dye multiple feystones in the blink of an eye. Laynobles use magic tools such as that one to prevent their mana from being mixed with that of others, and they spend years preparing feystones to be used in lectures."

"Lord Ferdinand is correct—Konrad is already almost five, and all the feystones he saved until now have been lost. He no longer has enough time, even with the tool and the feystones returned to him."

"No way..." I murmured. I had been sure that, now that they were away from their abusive parents and receiving my support, they would eventually be able to live happily as siblings again. But reality was not so forgiving.

Ferdinand rubbed his temples, having never considered that I actually intended to return Konrad to noble society. "The most you can do as the High Bishop and orphanage director is save the life of a child deemed unnecessary by his parents. You cannot support his life as a noble," he said. "Furthermore, it would be problematic for you to show such obvious favoritism to just one of your retainers. Be careful of all that you say and do—you are the archduke's adopted daughter, and it is precisely because you were made High Bishop that you must know what lines are not to be crossed."

I could only bite my lip in response. He was right. I couldn't do the same for every noble child who was put before me, and putting some above others based on my feelings would only make me the same as Bezewanst.

"Don't look so down, Lady Rozemyne." Philine looked between Konrad and me; then she gave a bright smile. "I feel at peace just knowing Konrad has a safe place to live. I had feared more than anything that he would be left in that place and climb the towering stairway. On top of that, you even recovered our mother's heirloom for us. I am grateful from the bottom of my heart. I will serve you with my absolute all and return the money that you lent me as soon as possible. I will even save up enough to buy Konrad so that we can live together, even if not as fellow nobles. He is my only brother, after all."

I saw Philine and Konrad smile at each other, and my feelings on the matter

settled—the world would be a better place without mana prejudice, and without children dying from having their magic tools stolen.

“Ferdinand... how many children are in situations like Konrad’s?” I asked.

“Magic tools are expensive, so I would say there are likely others among the laynobles.”

“Is there any way we can save them? And commoners with the Devouring too, if possible?” I asked. These questions earned me exasperated looks from not just Ferdinand, but Hartmut and Philine as well.

“You would overreach that much while you are already so busy with the printing industry? You must be a fool,” Ferdinand said.

“But does it not bother you? Plus, given the duchy’s mana shortage, I believe things could change a bit if we accepted them into the orphanage.” The shortage was a serious problem, and we wanted to scrape up as much mana as we could get.

“The mana shortage is temporary. What will you do when the nobility repopulates? The inefficiencies you introduce will be shaved away first. Rather than being driven by emotion, you must think of the future. Right now, you are considering only what is right in front of you.”

I took a deep breath. He had a point, but the children would surely be able to use their mana to secure them some other jobs to do. Perhaps they could work on finding future employment while helping to fill the land with mana. They could prove useful to society while earning their own income. Even if they couldn’t live as nobles, there were other paths available to them—ones that were much better than death, in my opinion.

What can I do...?

“You must stop contemplating this,” Ferdinand said, interrupting my train of thought.

“Hm?”

“In almost all cases, when you begin to contemplate an issue, things shift in an unfathomable direction. Furthermore, something this large will require the

aub to make any final decisions. Do not think of such extraneous matters before you first clean up your own business."

"Understood."

Still... I want to think about this!

I clenched my fists under the table, and in an instant, Ferdinand sighed from beside me. "You are letting it all show on your face," he said with a glare, prompting me to raise my hands to my cheeks. "Before you throw noble society into complete chaos by barging into the domestic problems of strangers and giving unrequested assistance, finish your printing work. Is your wish not to become a librarian? One cannot become a scholar without first gathering experience as an apprentice."

In short, Ferdinand was admonishing me for trying to do too much at once.

"The date for selling books in the castle is fast approaching. Have you finished organizing it with the Plantin Company?"

"Indeed. Fran has reported that the workshop is fully ready too," I replied. Even during the two years I was asleep, Charlotte and the others had communicated through Ferdinand to set up the Plantin Company's book fair. It had consequently become a regular event, and I was looking forward to seeing how it turned out this year.

The Book Fair and the Follow-Up Meeting

A great number of customers came to and made purchases from the book fair this year. The most notable attendee to all those present was no doubt my great-grandfather, who had been at the very front of the customer line. He had recovered since his collapse during my mana compression lecture and, to everyone's surprise, arrived with his caretakers. Upon tottering to the stand with his walking stick, he had bought one of every book.

I heard Benno and the others inhale sharply at the sudden huge sum of money. There hadn't been many books when we had initially started the fair, but now there were a variety of types available. No other customer bought one of everything.

"Great-Grandfather certainly is rich, isn't he, Rihyarda?"

"He wanted to purchase one of each, considering that his descendants—you and Lady Elvira—published them, milady. He has only just recovered, so Count Leisegang was quite worried about him coming."

Um, Great-Grandfather?! You're pushing yourself way too hard! Isn't there a good chance you'll collapse again?!

I watched over him anxiously until he eventually left the room, all the while empathizing with those who had to watch over me in the same way.

Ngh... This is bad for my heart. No wonder everyone yells at me to keep calm. I need to search for the self-restraint I abandoned so long ago...

As I passed the nerve-racking time, newly baptized children came for karuta and playing cards, while adults came for books. There were many female customers, and our best-selling fiction book was the collection of romantic knight stories Elvira had written. Once again, love stories set in the Royal Academy were proving popular. They were based on tales she had heard from women across many generations so that people of all ages could read them and enjoy both savoring their nostalgia and sharing theories on who a particular

character was based on.

With that said, the best-selling product across all types was the star of this year's book fair: *Rozemyne's Ravishing Recipes*. It was our first color book and the product of many people's labor. Hugo and Ella had selected their simplest, easiest-to-make recipes; Nicola had done her best to write them all down; Wilma had drawn the art; and Heidi had created the colored ink that had made the coloring possible in the first place. Incidentally, the final page included an advertisement for the Italian restaurant.

We were able to produce color books through mimeograph printing. It was exceedingly time-consuming and expensive compared to printing in black and white, and it was extremely hard to keep the overlapping colors from mixing together. Gil had informed me as such, slumped over in exhaustion at just the thought.

The recipe book was slim with only ten recipes in total, but it was our most expensive book yet. Even so, because it included recipes for consommé and pasta dishes, nobles who had eaten the meals prepared by the castle chefs over winter socializing bought it in droves. The cooking style was quite different from local traditions, so it was yet to be seen whether their chefs would actually be able to make proper dishes from the recipes alone. Ella and the others had said that one would still need to get used to balancing the heat and the timing and such.

Of course, instructions to make natural yeast were not included, so the castle remained the only place where one could eat fluffy bread.

"We will return to the temple after breakfast tomorrow," Ferdinand said. "The Plantin Company will be there, but only for our meeting. Know that we will be returning to the castle by dinner."

"Understood."

We had a meeting with the Plantin Company scheduled in the orphanage director's chambers, where we were going to discuss what to print next and the upcoming Haldenzel visit. I was completely ready to meet Lutz and Benno again after so long. I had given them an official summons during the book fair and

slipped a letter to my family in the list of things we would be talking about.

"I would like to participate in the meeting as well," Hartmut said to me.

Please, no...

Hartmut being there meant I would need to dress up my words just as I had done when writing the letter. Was this just going to be my life now?

And I was finally going to get to meet everyone again too.

Due to having brought him to the temple before, there was no reason for me to refuse him this time. But as I regretfully went to give him permission, Ferdinand shook his head with a frown.

"There will be a meeting two days from now with the scholars recommended by the various giebes. It is then that work for the printing industry will be officially distributed. The aub's permission shall not be granted before then, so now is not the time for Philine or Hartmut to come to the temple. Instead, I would advise them to prepare documents to be distributed to the scholars regarding the steps and materials necessary for building paper-making workshops and printing workshops," he said.

"As you wish."

Ferdinand silenced any potential protests by giving my apprentice scholars work to do. I did feel a little bad for Hartmut, but I was super relieved that I wouldn't have to bring him or Philine with me—so much so that I wanted to pray in thanks for Sylvester working so slowly that he hadn't given Ferdinand permission yet.

Don't worry—I'm not actually praying. Though I may be grinning a little.

After breakfast the next day, I departed for the temple with Ferdinand. Damuel and Angelica were accompanying me as guards, while the underage knights remained behind as they had before. They would be spending this time participating in Bonifatius's apprentice training.

"Hurry back soon, Lady Rozemyne. For their sakes. I am terribly worried about how excessively motivated Grandfather seems to be. The apprentices might

even be worked to death," Cornelius said as he saw us off. His mental scars from his time being trained among the archducal family's guard knights were evidently long from being forgotten.

I really don't think my return will change Grandfather's inability to control himself...

Upon arriving at the temple, Ferdinand went straight to the High Bishop's chambers and held a pre-meeting for our talk with the Plantin Company, which was scheduled for fourth bell.

"I suppose this will have to do..." Ferdinand said once our preparatory discussion was over.

"Indeed," I replied, still writing down what he had said on my diptych. "I imagine they will have many questions, concerns, and requests regarding the cleanup of the lower city and the selection of scholars, which will need to be settled through a meeting with the aub."

"I will arrange that at once," Justus replied. He wasted no time in getting to work.

Now that our pre-meeting had concluded, Fran brought in tea and sweets. We were having crepes again, since Damuel had tragically missed his chance before. These crepes were especially fancy, with parue juice having been mixed into the batter.

Ferdinand didn't like his sweets to be *too* sweet, so his crepes had lots of rumtopf and a conservative amount of cream. In contrast, mine had parue chunks mixed in and extra cream. Juice from the parue chunks filled my mouth with joy. It was a delicious winter flavor, but parues were now out of season; this would be my last opportunity to enjoy them this year.

"...More new sweets, hm?" Ferdinand observed.

"The crepes themselves have been around for quite some time; these are just made with slightly different ingredients," I replied.

Once we were done, Ferdinand took out the sound-blocking magic tools. I gripped one, and that was when I noticed his expression twist slightly with what looked like sympathy for me.

“Scholars will henceforth accompany you to the temple,” he said. “This will be the last time you can use the hidden room here.”

I had known that this day would come eventually, but his words hit me like a truck nonetheless. The presence of scholars meant I wouldn’t be able to clear my chambers and bring only specific merchants into my hidden room. I was feeling the same sadness I had momentarily felt when Hartmut had asked to come. It was all over.

“Did you stop Hartmut from coming so that I could have time to say goodbye to Lutz and the others...?” I asked.

“I imagined it would be better for you to finalize matters yourself, rather than have everything so abruptly taken from you.” Ferdinand lowered his eyes and then slowly exhaled. “The plan was for you to stay with your family until you entered the Royal Academy, but you ended up being taken from them all the same. I have turned a blind eye to this hidden room business to help ease your fears and anxieties, but you are now a student. You will be attending all future meetings with scholars at your side, and they will not be so willing to overlook such things.”

“Indeed...” I replied. Ferdinand had kept this going for as long as he possibly could, probably at some personal expense. Knowing that, there was nothing more I could say.

“Most importantly of all, your engagement to Wilfried is due to be announced during the feast celebrating spring. It would be unthinkable for a commoner man to enter the hidden room of an engaged woman. Such a controversy would even damage the Plantin Company’s reputation, and you certainly would not want that, would you?”

I shook my head. Benno had desperately expanded his store to accommodate the unreasonable demands of the nobles, plus he was running all across Ehrenfest with Lutz and the other Gutenbergs. I couldn’t undo all of their efforts for my own selfish reasons.

“Justus is going to accompany you into your hidden room today,” Ferdinand said. “He knows of your circumstances and already has connections with the Plantin Company. You will find his presence much easier to ignore than mine, I

imagine.”

I apparently had to bring at least one scholar with me. This was because we would be talking about things that needed to be mentioned at the upcoming meeting with the scholars, but it was also presumably his job to make sure I said my farewells for real. Otherwise, there wouldn’t actually be a reason for me to bring him to my hidden room in particular.

“Very well,” I said after a reluctant pause. “I shall bring Justus.”

And so, I moved to the orphanage director’s chambers with Justus and my attendants to await fourth bell. We were going to be talking leisurely over lunch.

“It was Ferdinand who chose this meeting time, right?” I asked Justus. “Isn’t fourth bell a strange time for a meeting?”

“Lord Ferdinand calculated that it would give you marginally more time than a standard meeting.”

“His kindness is roundabout and hard to understand...”

“Surely you are used to that by now. He is roundabout and hard to understand in general,” Justus said with a small smile.

The attendants assigned to Ferdinand after his baptism had all been Veronica’s men. They had taken away from him anything that made him happy and forced upon him anything that he didn’t like. As a means to protect himself, he had learned at a young age to develop a flat expression that hid his emotions from those around him.

“From his perspective, milady, you are a very simple creat— *Ahem*. You are a very easy to understand individual with clear emotions and no ulterior motives. On top of that, he recognizes that any noble euphemisms will only go over your head and result in problems at a later date, so he has adopted a rather easy to understand attitude around you in turn.”

If that attitude is meant to be easy to understand, what the heck does that say about me?

I pursed my lips, at which point the Plantin Company arrived. Fran brought

them up to the second floor, and Nicola brought in food while we greeted each other.

“Mark, Lutz—you may eat with us today. My attendants will serve you,” I said.

Gil glanced uneasily between Justus and me as he started serving Lutz. “Please be at ease. It is an invitation from Lady Rozemyne,” he said.

Lutz snapped back to reality and then gracefully took the seat offered to him. I was told that he had learned etiquette at the temple over the two years I was asleep, and it certainly appeared to have paid off—he really had mastered it. The Lutz of a bygone age who had stuffed his face with food when Benno had first invited us to lunch was nowhere to be seen.

On a similar note, Gil, who was pretty much an adult now, was a perfect attendant. It was hard to believe that he had been the biggest brat and a regular of the repentance chamber when he was a kid. He did his job so well that it was hard to imagine him getting punished for tossing his duties aside.

I had been so busy since waking up that I hadn’t had any time to actually take in my surroundings. Now that I was really looking at them, they had grown up so much. They would no doubt accept the news that we were going to be separated with the utmost calm, without getting all weepy and overly attached like I was. It made me feel as though I were a child throwing a tantrum by comparison.

“The sales were adequate,” Benno began as we ate our appetizers. Most books were sold in the castle, but as the head of the Printing Guild and the Plantin Company, he still handled all the numbers himself.

“Since the recipe collection sold well, might I suggest our next work be a new recipe collection with contributions from Hugo, Ella, and Leise? If we pay them a small percentage of the money we make in return for their input, we might get even more recipes to use.”

“Perhaps, but sales all across Ehrenfest are gradually on the decline. This is likely due to us having reached our entire sales base, but either way...”

Not that many people could afford books, and so it seemed the Plantin Company was looking to expand into new demographics. But that would

require the archduke's permission. As I sipped my consommé, I mentally started picking out which books I wanted to spread.

"I want to maintain our advantage in the Royal Academy, so the bible picture books and the yet-to-be-made textbooks will not yet be sold to other duchies. We will, however, think about starting to sell the other books—that is, the knight stories and the sheet music. Considering the chaos that will ensue from the increased number of duchies doing trade here, we will presumably need to wait until next year for that to begin. We will not be able to handle the demand unless we create more printing workshops before then, so you would do well to plan on building more and printing more textbooks this year."

Benno gave an emphatic nod and frowned at the word "chaos." There was no denying that the lower city had been struggling to prepare for a while now.

"Furthermore, it seems that the books regarding etiquette are not selling particularly well..." I said. Tuuli had been the one to suggest that we make them, but there simply hadn't been much interest. It saddened me a little to see all the unsold stacks.

Lutz, however, shook his head while picking up some fluffy bread. "Oh, those are for a different demographic. We're selling them to laynobles who cannot afford good tutors, rich families with connections to the nobility, and town chiefs and mayors who deal with nobles. They aren't selling poorly in the least," he explained.

As it turned out, they were actually selling rather well. They simply weren't needed by those in the castle, since everyone there already understood etiquette.

"We sold them on the way to Haldenzel by stopping at towns and cities in the Central District, discussing what had happened in Hasse, and then warning them that they could suffer the same fate unless they worked on their etiquette. We'd made a ton of sales after that," Lutz said with a proud grin.

I couldn't help but smile; the people had presumably had no choice but to buy the books at that point. Hasse wasn't the only city that was used to how Bezewanst had once done things, so they couldn't just pass it off as someone else's problem.

“Judging by the sales in the castle, Haldenzel seems like quite a melting pot for stories deemed acceptable by the nobility,” Mark reported. “The stories your mother wrote sold more than any other, Lady Rozemyne.” He was eyeing the thigh meat cooked with wine that was sitting on his plate as he spoke.

At the moment, Elvira’s romance stories had firmly gripped the hearts of all the duchy’s noblewomen. Faction politics were no doubt at play to some degree, but the more important takeaway was that a noble was better suited at writing stories that other nobles would enjoy.

“Haldenzel is beating us in sales. We want something that feels palpably more Ehrenfest,” Benno said, his tone polite and formal.

Most children had the illustrated bible, karuta, and playing cards by now, so they weren’t likely to make many more purchases going forward. We were planning to appeal to them with textbooks in the long-term, but Benno wanted something that would bring more immediate profits. I pondered what we could produce while cutting my meat.

“What if we were to focus a bit more on stationery?” I suggested.

“What other stationery exists?”

“Perhaps something like a (file folder) or a (binder) for organizing paper. We could also create standardized order forms for merchants, especially considering that a great number are soon going to be arriving from other duchies. They would be convenient to have, don’t you think?”

Mark nodded in agreement several times as I explained how hard it was to process orders, since they were often written in different formats. It was a grand struggle to get people to write them in a consistent way.

“Speaking of which—the guildmaster had a question. You said there are going to be specific duchies chosen for us to do business with, but how will we determine which merchants have received this permission?” Benno asked, looking at me as he stuck a spoon into the pudding served for dessert. They had thus far been able to do business with whatever merchants came to them, but now they were going to need to restrict themselves to a select few. There simply wasn’t enough product for them to sell to absolutely anyone.

"...That is something we will have to think about. Did you consult Otto for his opinion?"

"His input was that he could say no more than the fact things would likely differ based on the duchy. As a former traveling merchant, he wasn't particularly informed on merchants doing business on the orders of their archdukes," Benno replied. If even Otto and Gustav didn't have any ideas as experienced merchants, then I certainly had no clue either.

"I suppose it would be wise to investigate how other duchies are handling this. Though perhaps the most reliable method would be to make something special in Ehrenfest that other duchies cannot emulate..." I mused aloud.

The first thing that came to mind were red-seal ships—Japanese merchant vessels from the early seventeenth century that traveled with red-sealed letters patent issued by the ruling Tokugawa shogunate. We could probably copy that system by making it so that only merchants with red-sealed letters patent could do business, although I had no idea whether we could actually issue those or whether they would even work in the first place. It was too dangerous to make this kind of decision by myself.

"I will consult the archduke," I said. "This is perhaps something that will need to be decided at the Archduke Conference."

"We thank you for your consideration."

Mm... Food really does taste better when you eat it with other people.

Such was the thought that crossed my mind as I finished the last lunch I would ever eat with Lutz and the others. I could have lunch meetings with Benno in the future, since he was the head of the Plantin Company, but eating with a leherl apprentice like Lutz was simply out of the question. It might be possible ten years from now, but that felt like forever away from where I stood now.

"Lady Rozemyne, here are the documents regarding this year's sales, the thoughts on layscholars, and the reconstruction of the city."

"Much appreciated. I will send them to the aub," I said. "And here is a letter from the aub."

Lutz held out the documents as Benno spoke. I took them, and upon

confirming that there was a letter slid between them, swiftly put them into a box and closed the lid. At the same time, Lutz noticed the envelope I slipped into the documents I handed him and glanced at Justus.

I wonder if this will be our last time exchanging letters too...?

Even after steeling my resolve, that thought still pained my heart. I held back the urge to cry as I ordered Fran to open the hidden room.

"Benno, Mark, Lutz—there is something very important we must discuss. Damuel is going to accompany us as my guard, Gil and Fran as my attendants... and Justus as my scholar."

Lutz's eyes widened in disbelief the very moment I spoke that last name. Mark turned his gaze to the floor, while Benno squeezed his eyes shut as if to say, *"So the day has finally come..."*

I looked at the door Fran had opened and then gave Lutz the best smile I could muster. "It's very, very important."

A Promise

I went inside, with everyone else following behind me. I sat in the chair that Gil pulled out for me; then, once Fran had shut the door, I calmly looked over everyone.

Damuel stood behind me, Fran stood by the door, and Gil stood to my right in the standard attendant position. They were all in their usual spots, but the three from the Plantin Company looked awkwardly between Justus and me, unsure of where to go.

“Benno, Mark, Lutz... It’s fine. Justus is here, but he knows everything. You can sit and act as you normally do.”

“Wha?” Lutz exclaimed. He looked up at Justus, who in turn looked down at him with an amused cocked eyebrow.

“I’m the one who sussed Myne out way back when, at Lord Ferdinand’s order. That’s why he trusted me with the Plantin Company and the workshop for the past two years. To be clear, I’m here at Lord Ferdinand’s order too.”

Lutz grimaced at that. He took a seat in front of me and then gave me a worried look. “Lady Rozemyne, what did the High Priest say?”

“Lutz, please. Speak normally.”

“Normally...?” He looked around the room; then he sighed and shut his eyes tightly. It took him a moment, but his green eyes eventually looked straight at me. “Alrighty then. What happened?”

I was relieved to hear his familiar tone, but at the same time, I was struck with a sense of unstoppable desolation. My eyes started to feel uncomfortably warm, and through the blur of tears I saw Lutz and Benno reaching toward me.

I clenched my fists on my lap. “Today’s the last day we can use the hidden room. So he told me to... say my goodbyes...” I said, choking the words out between deep breaths, tears now streaming down my cheeks.

I heard Benno grunt as I watched the beads dripping down onto my hands. “Figures. Putting aside how you look and all that, you’re ten years old as far as the public’s concerned. We knew you wouldn’t be able to use the room like this for much longer. Noble society’s too strict for that,” he said with a bitter expression.

Lutz’s eyes widened with surprise. He was the only one of the trio who hadn’t expected this to be our last farewell—Benno and Mark had both known it was going to come eventually.

“Age is one factor, but you also show favoritism to only a select few merchants,” Mark said to me. His tone was peaceful, but his smile was tinged with concern. “There are already many merchants saying that you have too much of an attachment to the Plantin and Gilberta Companies. If rumors spread that you have been taking commoner men into your hidden room, all of us will suffer greatly.”

The impact would be even more severe if people came to assume that all of the Plantin Company’s success was due to my favoritism. According to Benno, it would impact his workers’ motivation, and the last thing I wanted to do was damage his business’s reputation.

“Yeah, I guess a saint can’t be at the center of talk like that...” Lutz said.

“Not just that,” I noted. “The engagement is about to be announced.”

Lutz blinked at me, completely stunned. “Whose engagement...?” he asked, his brow contorted in bemusement.

“Mine. The announcement that I’m getting engaged to my brother, Wilfried. The son of the archduke.”

Naturally, this surprised everyone. Both Benno and Mark looked wholly taken aback, while Lutz stared at me quizzically as though he couldn’t quite accept the idea of me getting engaged.

“Uh... Wait. You’re engaged...? I-Isn’t it kinda early for that?”

“Uh huh. A lot happened in the Royal Academy. The engagement is necessary to stop bigger problems from happening.”

“You sure do cause trouble wherever you go, huh?” Lutz said with an exasperated look. He then grimaced with worry. “Guess these aren’t problems I can help you with anymore...”

His conflicted smile made my heart ache. I wanted to hug him tightly like usual, but I couldn’t find the strength to reach out to him. I just opened and closed my fists on my lap, staring at the creases that were forming on my skirt. It was like there was a wall between us or a vast chasm that I was only now noticing. Perhaps I had always known it was there, but I had simply ignored it... and now I was being made to face it head-on.

It really was hard to put what I was feeling into words.

“The High Priest said it would sound terrible for an engaged noble girl to invite commoner men into her hidden room...” I said.

“I mean, that sounds terrible regardless of you being a noble,” Lutz shot back immediately. “I see your head still isn’t screwed on right.”

I pursed my lips, which made Lutz scratch his head just as Benno always did. He had clearly picked up the habit from him.

“Err, alright. I get that we can’t see each other here anymore,” Lutz said. “But... are you fine with that? Really?”

“...Obviously not,” I replied, tears dripping down my face as my true feelings started to spill out. I hadn’t been fine with it before, and nothing had changed. “You accepted the real me, helped me make paper and hairpins while watching out for my health, and helped me to figure out our next step whenever we hit a wall. You were there for me when I was so lonely and worried that I thought I might die, and you brought letters to my family when I got separated from them... Everything I’ve done has been possible because of you. I never would have been able to do it all alone.”

“Look, if you’re not okay with this...” Lutz began, but I raised a hand to stop him.

“It doesn’t matter how I feel. It’s too late. The High Priest had planned to stop overlooking all this once I started attending the Royal Academy. He allowed it to continue for a bit longer when my two-year sleep caused me to almost lose my

mind with fear, but... this farewell should have happened a long time ago."

Lutz wore a pained grimace, while Benno and Mark averted their gazes, staring at the floor.

"I understand why we can't stay together more than anyone, but I don't understand it either," I continued. "Why did I need to sleep for two whole years? Why wasn't that enough time for me to become fully healthy? Why do we have to say goodbye already? They say it's because I'm too old now, but to me, nothing's changed."

Lutz reached out to console me but then stopped short. Instead, he gripped my hand in a tight fist.

"...Don't cry."

His voice came out low, almost like a growl. I looked up to see that he was now on his feet, staring down at me, his teeth gritted in frustration.

"Don't cry anymore, Myne!"

I was so shocked to hear Lutz yell at me and call me "Myne" that my tears stopped in an instant.

"From this point on, no matter how much you cry, I won't be there to calm you down. So... just don't cry anymore," he continued. His face made it clear that he was desperately holding back the pain, while his voice told me he was agonizing over his own powerlessness.

Lutz sat back down, and silence fell over the room. Justus was quietly watching me. His eyes were just like Ferdinand's—the eyes of someone evaluating another for their worth. I very nearly averted my gaze out of weakness, but Lutz called out to me at the same time, drawing my attention to him rather than the floor.

"Myne. Do you remember talking about our dreams on the way to the forest, way back when?"

I recalled the time I had breathlessly walked to the forest with a tiny basket on my back, eager to forage firewood and food. Lutz had set my pace, Tuuli was there leading the children, and even Ralph and Fey were accompanying us. All

the kids went to the forest in one large group, but I was so slow that I would always leave first and arrive last.

I vaguely remembered us discussing our dreams back when I had been desperate just to make some clay tablets. At the time, we hadn't known anything about city citizenship, the lives of traveling merchants, or what people thought about it. But with that ignorance came a sense of freedom and fearlessness.

"You said you wanted to be a traveling merchant, right?" A gentle smile touched my lips as I thought back on the memory, but Lutz returned a nod with a look of complete seriousness.

"Right. I wanted to become a traveling merchant to leave this city—to explore *other* cities... and thanks to you, that dream came true. I'm leaving this city all the time as a Gutenberg. I've gone to Hasse, to Illgner, and most recently to Haldenzel. Haldenzel was a long trip even by carriage, so we stopped at all kinds of cities and towns on the way. I've been to so many places, and I'm gonna go to so many more. Because we've gotta make more printing workshops." Lutz began to list all the other cities and towns he had visited, looking directly at me with his green eyes. Then he eventually asked: "Do you remember what your dream was...?"

I blinked and scoured my memories. I hadn't had any paper or ink at the time, so my aim had simply been to have some kind of way of recording letters. I was small, weak, lacking in stamina, and essentially broke... yet I wanted things to read so, so badly.

"...I wanted to live surrounded by books. My dream was for there to be several new books published each month, and for me to live a life where I could read them all..."

Aah, right... Compared to back then, I'm really, really blessed right now.

I had made paper, ink, a printing press, and a foundation through which the archduke could direct the growth of the printing industry. There were people helping me make books, and I had even befriended a fellow bookworm in the Royal Academy. There were book rooms in both the temple and the castle, which I could enter at will and freely browse thanks to my current status. Only

now did it occur to me that I had obtained everything I could have ever wanted back then.

I looked at my hands and then back at Lutz, who nodded at me in understanding. “There’s still only a few new books being written each year in Ehrenfest,” he said. “But if we keep building printing workshops, we’ll be able to manage a new book each month—hopefully even more than that.”

There was now a printing workshop in Haldenzel as well as Ehrenfest, and there were several other giebes who wanted to start printing in their provinces too. If the Gutenbergs continued to move around the duchy and spread their knowledge, the number of printing workshops would dramatically increase moving forward. These were concrete steps toward my dream of there being more books—more concrete than anything else we could do.

“I’ll keep making them,” Lutz said. “I’ll keep making more and more books for you to read.”

“Why are you willing to do so much for me...?” I asked. No sooner had the words left my mouth than it struck me that I had asked him a similar question in the past.

Lutz smiled a little, as if to say the answer was obvious. “’Cause you made my dream come true, and now I want to return the favor. I’ll make a ton of books for you and send them your way, so don’t cry. You just need to smile and wait for them to arrive.”

That didn’t make me happy, so much as it made me feel like it was a bit wrong. Lutz had been working with me this whole time, and now he was telling me to wait. I was truly happy about getting more books without having to do anything, but I didn’t really want Lutz of all people saying that. I thought about why that was, my brows furrowed, and then, the realization hit me.

“I really need to shape up, don’t I...?”

“Huh?”

Of course it didn’t feel right. We had gotten this far together. Our jobs had always been different, for sure—whether we were making hairpins and paper, saving the orphans in the temple, or selling books in the castle, we were doing

different things in different places, but I had never just sat and waited for him to do everything.

"You make the things I think up, Lutz. I can't just sit around and wait for you to toss things my way. I need to do what I can do myself. For me to waste so much time and potential, well... I wouldn't have the right to read your books."

Lutz grinned, while Benno's dark-red eyes flashed with a light that spoke louder than words: *"Yup, that's exactly right. If you've got time to cry then you've got time to work. Make money instead. Make a profit."*

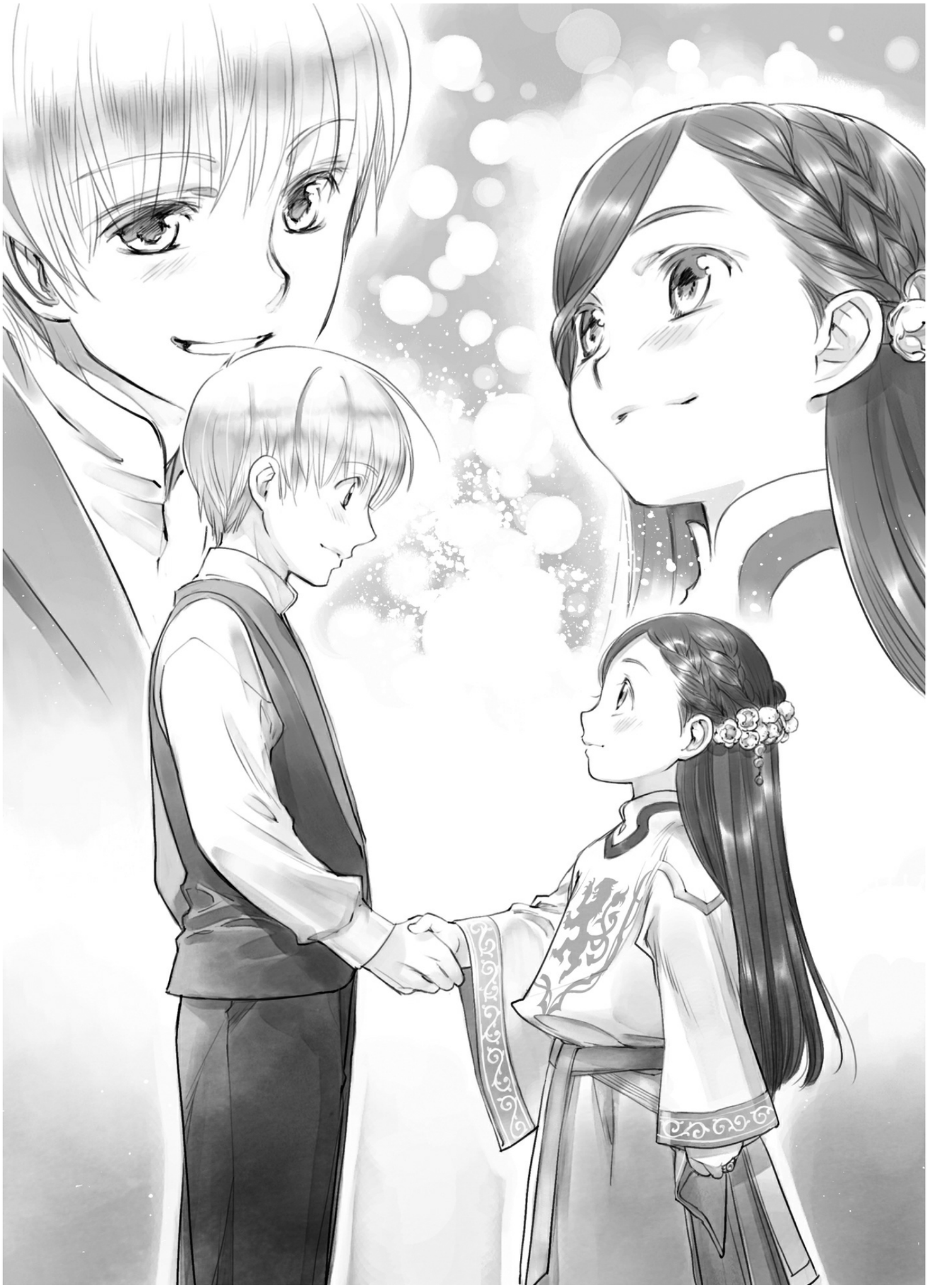
"I'll support you and the other Gutenbergs so that you can do your jobs well and make as many books as possible," I said. "And just like I promised my dad... I'll protect this city and everyone in it."

"Indeed," Mark said encouragingly. "The Plantin Company and Gutenbergs will continue to be involved with the nobility into perpetuity. The only one who can protect us weak commoners is you, the archduke's adopted daughter."

I nodded, at which point Lutz abruptly rose from his chair and stood in front of me. Then, he held out a hand. "It's a promise. Even if we can't meet each other like this anymore, I'll keep making books for you. And this promise lasts forever."

I stood up and took Lutz's hand, making sure to grip it tightly as I put my all into my own declaration. "Even if we can't meet each other like this anymore, I'll keep thinking of ways to help all of you. That's my promise to you."

We grinned at each other, hand in hand. Even when separated, we would continue walking down the same path—the path of making books.



“Later. Keep your promise, alright?”

“You too, Lutz.”

Once our promises had been exchanged, Lutz and the others exited my hidden room. Gil would be seeing them off to the gate, and I watched them leave the hidden room with puffy eyes.

“Justus.”

“Yes, milady?”

“Am I smiling right now? Do you think Lutz left without worrying about me?”

Justus quietly nodded. “You are smiling. However, if I may make a suggestion... There is still time before we must return to the castle. Why not make use of your hidden room? Adult noblewomen who must not allow their emotions to be shown use their hidden rooms to be alone and recover,” he said.

In addition, he suggested that I use the hidden room in the High Bishop’s chambers. My attendants couldn’t do their jobs while I was in this one.

“A hidden room should be to you as your family and the lower city merchants have been before now,” he continued. The comparison immediately made sense to me—my hidden room was like my lower city family in that it provided me an opportunity to reveal my true self.

“I see...” I said. “So my family was like a hidden room with a door that can no longer be opened, while Lutz and the merchants were like bedding with a canopy that could once be closed, or perhaps a blanket that would give me the energy I needed to work another day... Now that they are gone, however, I must find someplace else to rest.”

Following that conclusion, I gave an empty smile. Perhaps I would need to grow strong enough to sleep outside like a knight.

After I exited my hidden room, Fran stepped forward with a slight frown and placed a veil over my head. It blocked my face so that other people wouldn’t be able to see my puffy eyes or flushed, tear-stained cheeks.

As I sighed in relief, Fran said “excuse me” and picked me up. “Monika, Nicola,

I entrust the cleanup to you both. I will be taking the tired Lady Rozemyne back to the High Bishop's chambers," he said before briskly walking off.

I very nearly protested that I could walk on my own, but instead, I conceded and rested my head against Fran. This was his way of offering me comfort and physical affection without overstepping the boundary that sat between a servant and the one they served.

He's as hard to understand as Ferdinand... Just like always.

Damuel and Angelica were following me as guard knights, while Justus was walking beside us. Right after we arrived at the High Bishop's chambers, I was set down by the door to my hidden room.

"Milady, I will summon you when it is time to return to the castle. Please do use your hidden room in the meantime," Justus said. "This box contains something you want, correct?" He handed over the box he had brought for me while implying that he knew about the letter from my family that was wedged between the documents.

"I thank you ever so much, Justus."

Once inside my hidden room, I took the letter out of the box. It was a reply to the message I had given the Plantin Company during the castle's book fair—a message in which I had described Tuuli's hairpin receiving the prince's favor and my coming first-in-class at the Royal Academy. Everyone had read the letter, and they showered me with praise.

"You certainly are working hard, Myne. That really must have been very difficult. Take care not to fall sick—that's what I'm worried about the most."

"Whew. Tuuli got praised by the prince and you got better grades than all the nobles? Both my daughters sure are something else. I couldn't be more proud as a father."

"There are more craftspeople making hairpins, but I'm working hard so that I get to keep making all the ones for you, Myne. I don't want anyone else taking this job from me."

Just opening the letter had made me want to cry, so I was positively bawling by the time I actually started to read it. Once the scholars started following me

about everywhere, we wouldn’t be able to have secret exchanges like this anymore.

“Dad, Mom, Tuuli...”

I could no longer enter my hidden room now that my magic contract with Sylvester had effectively locked the door.

“Benno, Mark, Lutz...”

I no longer had a support blanket to wrap around myself and vent my emotions into.

“I’ll keep my promise, but Lutz... it looks like I won’t be able to stop crying.”

Ferdinand and I

As I was enjoying the relaxing nothingness of sleep, I heard the faint sound of someone calling for me. I didn't want to wake up yet—I wanted to keep sinking into the calming void—but the voice simply refused to stop.

"Rozemyne. Get up."

"Guhhh..."

Once the gentle shaking started, I had no choice but to slowly open my eyes. My eyelids were puffy and heavy, and perhaps due to how much I had cried, there was a throbbing and an uncomfortable fever in my temples.

"Ferdinand? Justus? Eckhart?" I said, speaking the names of everyone who was here to my surprise. I glanced around and then remembered I was in my hidden room; I had presumably cried myself to sleep after reading the letter from my lower city family.

I looked at Ferdinand and the two people behind him; then I lethargically lifted my head up off of my desk. Perhaps because I had fallen asleep in such a weird position, my body ached all over and my joints all felt uncomfortably stiff.

"Ow, ow, ow..."

"Good grief. You look terrible," Ferdinand said with knitted brows the moment I got up. "'Wretched' is the only word that accurately describes your current state."

I pursed my lips. "That's a very cruel thing to say to a girl."

"But it is the truth."

Congratulations... You somehow made it even more cruel.

"Your face is not only swollen from when you were crying, but it is also covered in ink from where you fell asleep on that letter. It is so bad that I can actually read the characters on your face," Ferdinand said, pointing at my cheek.

I touched my face; then I looked down at my desk and shrieked. “NOOOOOO! The writing’s all smudged now!”

“Forget about the letter you have already read and do something about your disastrous face.”

“I care more about the letter than my face!”

My tears had caused the ink to run, such that the letter was hardly in a readable state. “Ferdinand, is there any incredible magic that can fix this letter?!” I asked as I cradled my head.

“I do know of a magic tool that can completely strip away ink.”

“That would ruin it!”

“Indeed it would,” he said with an expressionless nod—a sight that caused Justus to clap a hand over his mouth as he tried to hold back his laughter. Still looking down at me, Ferdinand then let out a sigh. “You are doing better than I thought you would, at least.”

Fran had apparently activated the light magic tool to indicate that I should prepare to leave, but I hadn’t noticed it at all. He had then contacted Ferdinand, worried that I had collapsed, and together they had come to check up on me.

“It was quite surprising to enter the room and see you collapsed unconscious atop the desk, milady. We were enormously relieved when we realized you were just asleep,” Justus said. Then, after a pause, he added: “Ferdinand was, that is.”

Ferdinand glared at Justus, told him to keep such comments to himself, and then looked at me. “Do not read into that. I simply recalled the incident in the repentance chamber.”

“Lord Ferdinand, what is this repentance chamber incident you refer to? Did something happen?” Justus asked. His eyes were shining with curiosity, but Ferdinand shut him down and then touched a hand to my forehead and nape.

“You do not have a fever. Your pulse is normal. And it seems your mana has stabilized as well,” he observed.

“I may be healthy, but I’m not feeling well at all. In fact, I feel really cruddy.

But I have a goal in mind, so I'm okay. I can work hard so long as I focus on that. I'll do all I can to build and stock my own library," I declared, earning a blatant grimace from Ferdinand.

"You do not appear particularly depressed to me, but very well, I suppose. We can start by making your face bearable to look at."

"Please do something about your cruel choice of words, Ferdinand. You know too many insults," I complained, turning to face him just as he pointed his schtappe at me.

"Hold your breath."

I cocked my head in confusion, only for an orb of water to appear out of nowhere and crash into my face.

"Gblghuhguh?!"

By the time I realized he was using the cleansing magic he had used to clean Dad's cape at Hasse's monastery, I was already drowning in the orb, which then promptly disappeared. I had unintentionally breathed some in, but that too was gone, leaving only the sensation of water having rushed through my nose.

I started to splutter. "Ugh... My nose hurts."

"Fool. Why did you not hold your breath?!" Ferdinand exclaimed. I personally blamed his poorly worded warning. Had he said, "Hold your breath *because I'm going to use the cleansing magic*," then I would have happily complied.

I glared at Ferdinand while Justus patted me on the back. "You never explain yourself well enough," I said pointedly.

Ferdinand gave a dismissive scoff and then told me to close my eyes, since he was going to be casting healing magic. I did as instructed, thankful that he had at least this time given me a proper explanation, and then felt his hands rest against my eyelids.

"May Heilschmerz's healing be granted," he muttered. A gentle green light filled my vision, and the feeling of my eyes being puffy almost immediately vanished.

"I thank you ever so much, Ferdinand."

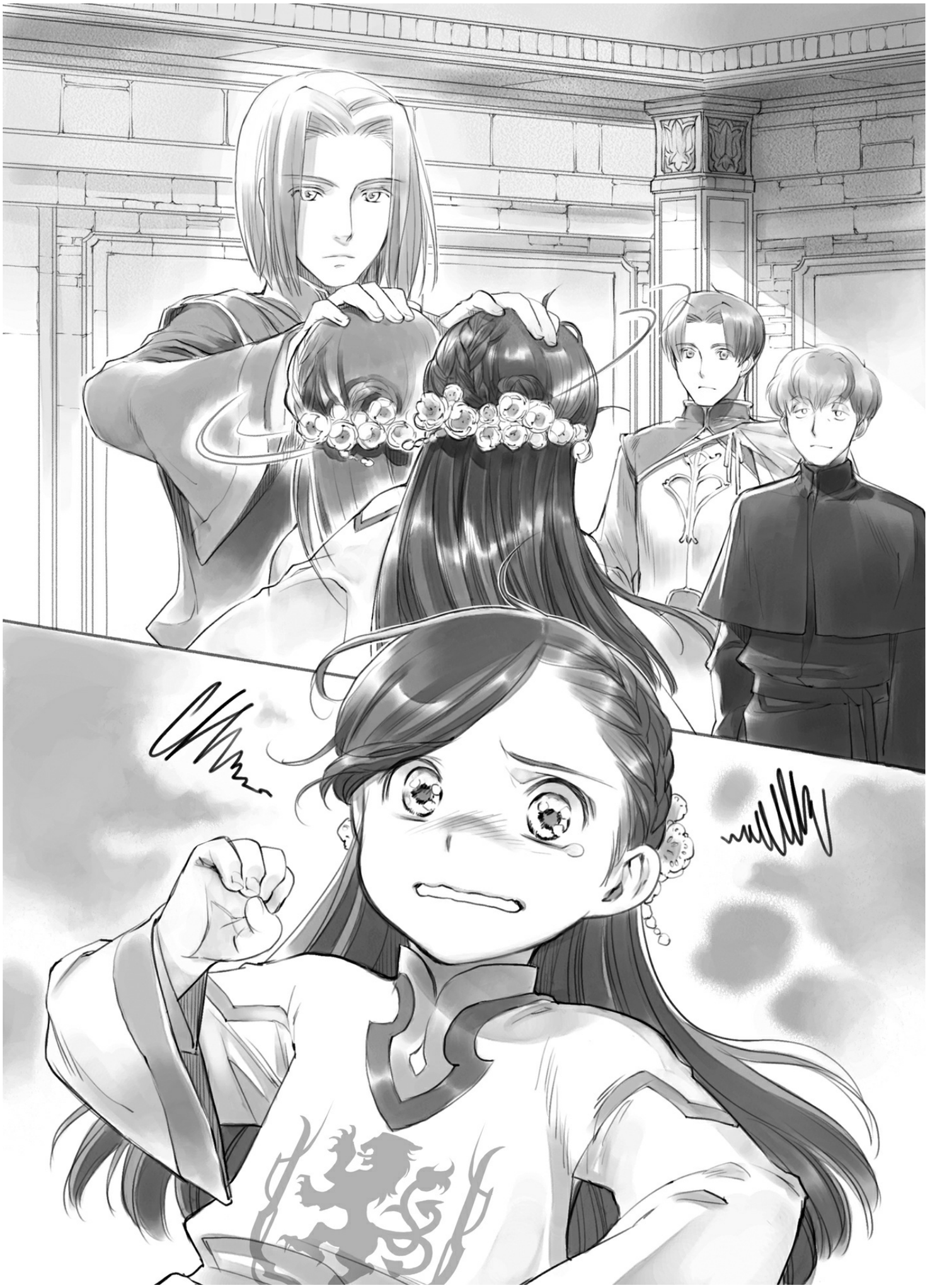
“Now you are more bearable to look at. You truly are a handful,” he said with a bored voice, at which point his gaze stopped on the letter in my hand. His eyes narrowed slowly, and I could tell that he was staring at it. As I wondered why, he suddenly extended a hand.

Is he going to confiscate it?!

I frantically hid the letter behind my back. A second later, Ferdinand rested a hand on my head and started moving it around as if attempting to twist my head. “Very good,” he said while shaking me from side to side hard enough that my eyes started to spin.

“Hold on—what’s going on here?!” I cried, blinking as the world spun around me.

“...I simply recalled that I had not yet praised you,” Ferdinand said. But if this was his interpretation of praise, then I was starting to feel that I would rather he never praise me again.



“Did I do something praiseworthy?”

“You came first in class, no? That letter reminded me that I did not praise you, despite being your guardian.”

“Did you get praised too when you came first-in-class?” I asked.

Ferdinand’s expression softened suddenly, and he fondly narrowed his eyes as if remembering a precious memory. Never before had I seen him wear such an affectionate expression—it actually made me feel incredibly curious. And speaking of which, he had apologized to me about my having to miss the awards ceremony. Maybe getting first-in-class was a very important and meritorious event.

“Ferdinand... Who praised you?”

“My father did,” Ferdinand replied. After being baptized and brought to the castle, he had been given a room in the northern building. He and his father, the previous archduke, had only had the opportunity to speak at dinner because they lived in separate locations. Since Veronica also attended those dinners, however, Ferdinand had eaten in silence to minimize any contact with her. He had spoken only when spoken to, and that lifestyle had continued until he entered the Royal Academy.

On the night that Ferdinand was made first-in-class among the first-years, he was summoned to his father’s room for the first time. Dormitories in the Academy were segregated by gender, with even the archducal couple having rooms on separate floors, which meant Veronica could not follow him. It was their first real father-son time together since Ferdinand had entered the castle.

Sylvester had been there too, and together with their father he praised Ferdinand for having come first-in-class. He had then spoken all about what had happened at the Royal Academy, and their father had listened with a peaceful expression. He had never usually made eye contact with Ferdinand, but here he looked right at him and listened to everything he said.

And so the three talked as men, with nobody else there to interrupt them. It henceforth became a tradition for them to converse into the night when the archducal couple visited the Royal Academy. All the legends about Ferdinand

had resulted from him going all-out in hope of receiving praise from his father during the rare opportunities they had to talk.

“Did your father praise you like this during those times?” I asked. I wanted to scold Mr. Past Archduke for having been so unnecessarily violent, but Ferdinand casually shook his head. The whole eye-rolling head shake was apparently his own invention, which explained why it had lacked any kindness or gentleness whatsoever.

“Then praise me as he praised you, Ferdinand.”

“As my father did...?” he repeated.

I held out both arms toward Ferdinand, eager for him to praise me. He sat down in the chair I had been sitting on, wrapped his arms around me, and then pulled me into a hug. I opened my eyes wide in surprise, having not expected a show of affection like that from a noble father and son.

Ignoring my yelp of surprise, Ferdinand spoke in a kind voice that I had never heard from him before. “Good job, Ferdinand. Ehrenfest could not ask for a better archduke candidate. You are my pride and joy.”

“I understand that your father was a kind person, but could you at least replace your name with mine?” I asked, puffing out my cheeks as I demanded a redo. It didn’t feel like he was praising me at all.

“Good job, Rozemyne. Ehrenfest could not ask for a better archduke candidate. You are my pride and joy,” Ferdinand said. It was actual praise this time, but it was spoken almost entirely in a monotone, maybe due to the memory filter having been turned off. Did he not realize how much it had dampened the words?

“Um, I would appreciate a bit of emotion being put into it...”

“That was more than enough,” Ferdinand scoffed. He then pushed me away from him in an unbelievably rough manner—something I was certain he hadn’t learned from his father. He was being a tad crueler to me than a guardian should if you asked me.

But he probably really isn’t used to praising other people...

After puffing with anger, I let out a sigh. I had known that Ferdinand was clumsy when it came to relationships, and that he didn't have much of a connection with his family or anyone else, but this was even worse than I thought—he had only gotten a few days with his father over the span of a year.

I hadn't really praised other people much back in my Urano days, but spending time in the lower city had taken away all of my resistance toward praising others and commending all their good points. Maybe Ferdinand needed that kind of education himself—mainly so that he would start praising me more.

"Ferdinand, I'll put my all into it too. So be sure to praise me like this a few times a year."

"If you come first-in-class then certainly."

W-Wait. Hang on a second. That's kind of a tall order!

It seemed as though my request had become an impossible dream. Perhaps it was best for me to give up on earning any praise from Ferdinand. Now that I had no connection to the lower city, I was walking down a thorny path into a barren wasteland devoid of any human warmth...

Or at least, that was how it felt.

Epilogue

After her request for praise, Rozemyne gave a half-hearted smile and lowered her gaze. It was the expression she made when giving up on something—such as when she had given up on visiting the library in the Royal Academy or when she had conceded that her separation from those in the lower city was necessary. But what had she given up on this time?

“Lord Ferdinand, that much is necessary for Lady Rozemyne.” Justus chastised his lord with a grimace, having noticed the significance of the situation. “As I reported earlier, she has suffered a loss equivalent to losing one’s bed and hidden room. You have been foisting responsibility for her emotional stability entirely on her lower city associates, but now that they have been taken from her, you must step up as her guardian.”

Rozemyne gazed up at Justus, her golden eyes wide with surprise. Her look of defeat was gone, now replaced with one of curiosity. Ferdinand, in contrast, wore a marginally conflicted expression as he contained his urge to protest and instead searched for Justus’s true intent. He looked at Justus while tapping his temple.

“You talk about responsibility, but does Rozemyne not already have a new family?”

Justus raised his eyebrows to indicate his doubt, which earned him a grimace in response. Had Ferdinand truly believed that Rozemyne’s new family was enough to support her, then he certainly would not have taken such great pains to grant her an opportunity to say farewell to her lower city associates.

Ferdinand turned his attention back to Rozemyne. “If your lower city family is equivalent to a hidden room, and the Plantin Company to a bed, then what are Sylvester and Karstedt equivalent to?”

“My fathers? They are like... doors,” Rozemyne answered after a moment of thought. “They block the entry of intruders, while serving to both protect me and stop me from leaving.”

“I see,” Ferdinand muttered. These analogies made the emotional distance between Rozemyne and her new family very easy to understand. There was little chance they would bring her any real peace.

“That’s an interesting analogy...” Justus observed. There was a noticeable gleam in his brown eyes. “How about Lady Elvira and my mother? What would they be?”

Regardless of what Rozemyne answered, it was important to know what she thought of those around her—after all, she had a different set of values than Justus and everyone else due to her lower city upbringing.

Rozemyne pondered her answer while eyeing Eckhart and Ferdinand. “Mother and Rihyarda are like fireplaces—they’re bright, warm, and absolutely necessary for me to survive... but I can’t lean on them. Getting too close just puts me at risk of getting burned.”

“Hm. Quite interesting...” Ferdinand said, his lips curving up ever so slightly in amusement. He and Justus went on to ask about several other names, and Rozemyne answered each in turn.

“Angelica and Cornelius... My guard knights are like bookshelves—they protect what I care about. That would make Damuel a locked bookshelf, I think. He knows my secrets and keeps them to himself.”

“I see you value Damuel more than I expected,” Ferdinand said, to which Justus nodded in agreement. They had known that Rozemyne liked him, but none had thought she valued him more than Cornelius.

“Fran and my temple attendants are like desks—a place to work, but also to read books. There’s both public and private life with them, and I need them to live.”

Justus couldn’t quite empathize with needing a desk to live; it was an analogy that made it hard to tell what Rozemyne considered important. “Perhaps you are the only one to mix your personal life with your work desk, milady?” he suggested.

“I don’t think it’s wrong to call it a personal space,” she replied, “since it’s where one can thoroughly enjoy their reading.”

Huh. A place to enjoy reading. It must be pretty important to her, then.

Justus came to realize this instantly. Rihyarda had mentioned to him that Rozemyne had maintained that she could forgo even food so long as she had books. In fact, he had seen this attachment with his own eyes at the Royal Academy.

Rozemyne's temple attendants were absolutely necessary for her to live, and an important source of compassion that healed her heart. Her answers showed that she valued people more the closer they were to the lower city, and that she had very little attachment to the nobility. Perhaps that was logical, considering how much more time she had spent with those in the lower city, but it still made one concerned for the future.

After bringing up several more names, Ferdinand fell into thought for a brief moment. "Rozemyne, you will henceforth need to rely on Wilfried, your betrothed... but what exactly is he to you?"

"Wilfried? Hmm... He's like a stool. A chair without a back. I can take a momentary breather with him, but not relax entirely. He's grown a lot over the past couple years, and given the state he was in before his baptism, it's clear just how hard he's working... but I would find no relief or comfort in attempting to depend on him."

Her answer was spoken flatly and without any of the deliberate euphemisms one would normally expect from a noble.

She's cut Lord Wilfried off so cleanly that I'm almost impressed.

Justus had noticed this with how she had made Traugott resign, but on the inside, Rozemyne very sharply delineated those she did and didn't need. She was called a deeply compassionate saint in the temple, but she just displayed an unusual distaste for death, and she wasn't particularly compassionate toward those she didn't care about.

Still, it's not good how little she thinks of Lord Wilfried.

As Justus pondered these things, Ferdinand raised an eyebrow to indicate his agreement. "He certainly is unreliable," he remarked. "We will need to raise him to the point that you can trust your back to him."

“If possible, I would appreciate having armrests too.”

“I will consider it.”

But will Lord Wilfried be able to keep up with Lord Ferdinand’s training...?

Rozemyne always completed the harsh tasks Ferdinand gave her one after another, despite how much she grumbled about them, but that wasn’t something that just anyone could do.

After all, Lord Ferdinand teaches from the perspective of someone who hasn’t slacked off a single time in his life.

Ferdinand had put his all into his studies to minimize the complaints he received from Veronica and to earn praise from the previous archduke. Attaining high grades in the Royal Academy had been necessary for him to be accepted as an archduke candidate, and that was precisely why he was so thorough with Rozemyne, an adopted daughter. However, with those grades and that drive for self-improvement came danger.

“Milady, what do you think of the last-generation Count Leisegang?” Justus asked.

“Great-Grandfather? He’s like a delicate ornament placed atop a shelf or fireplace—one so fragile that it might crumble to pieces if so much as poked, as though it were made of sand. I feel anxious just watching him from afar.”

“I agree. We don’t want anyone poking Great-Grandfather,” Eckhart said with a chuckle. Then, his expression hardened a little. “But no matter how fragile of an ornament he may be, he is still surprisingly tough and dangerous, Rozemyne. He is currently forming a political bloc around the Leisegangs, with the ultimate aim of making you the next ruling aub. Haldenzel and Groschel are answering his call while he works on Illgner, the first province to incorporate your paper-making industry. As you are the archduke’s adopted daughter and possess both the grades and mana capacity necessary to become the next aub, he views you as a beacon of hope for the Leisegangs, and the final blessing the gods have given to him in this life.”

“I get the feeling he might outright die of despair if I tell him I don’t want to be a ruling archduchess. Is that okay? We all know I don’t intend on becoming

the next aub, right?”

Rozemyne was a commoner by birth; it was unthinkable that she might become the next ruling archduchess. Sylvester wanted to preserve her connection to Ehrenfest through an engagement, and the first partner he had suggested in this regard was Ferdinand. The proposal made perfect sense—Rozemyne wasn’t Sylvester’s daughter by blood, nor was she someone Sylvester wanted to succeed him. It was easy to deduce that he didn’t even particularly want her to marry Wilfried.

“We likewise do not intend to make you the ruling archduchess,” Ferdinand noted. “The engagement with Wilfried will settle matters somewhat, but the last generation Count Leisegang is a crafty old man who has certainly earned the long life he has lived; getting a naive, affable girl like you in the palm of his hand would be nothing to him. You will most likely be interacting with the Leisegangs more often now due to the printing industry, so approach them as little as possible and rely on Elvira where you can. You may even pretend to rely on Wilfried, simply for appearances’ sake. Show that you are intent on supporting the next archduke, not becoming one yourself.”

But will even that be enough? I’m not so sure.

Assuming that Rozemyne continued to excel in the Royal Academy, spreading trends and achieving first-in-class grades while socializing with the higher-ranking duchies, the situation would potentially evolve beyond a point that Ehrenfest could handle. Things had already gotten so bad that they had been forced to stop Rozemyne from attending that year’s Interduchy Tournament and graduation ceremony.

I don’t think improving Lady Rozemyne’s socializing skills and educating Lord Wilfried on the whole is going to be enough to fix this.

So Justus thought, but it wasn’t as though he had any better ideas. It was also his duty to silently follow his lord, or at most, subtly indicate his perspective.

“I believe something else must come before educating Lord Wilfried,” Justus said. He knew that Ferdinand was trying to take the easy way out by placing the focus on training Wilfried, but that was something for his parents and retainers alone to concern themselves with. Instead, what Ferdinand needed to do was

protect Rozemyne, whom he had dragged into noble society against her will.

Despite now having the status of a noble, Rozemyne was still a commoner on the inside. She would doubtless continue to protect the lower city with all she had, as she had promised... and that ran the significant risk of her one day ending up opposed to the nobility. Given her exchange with Sylvester and his scholars after her old magic contracts were canceled, it was even easy to imagine her opposing the archduke head-on.

They needed to educate Rozemyne so that this wouldn't happen. She needed to learn to express her wishes and achieve cooperation in a way that was acceptable to other nobles, and the only one who could provide such an education was someone who knew about her commoner origins and that she desired connections to the lower city more than anything.

Ferdinand fell silent, having understood Justus's perspective at a glance. He lowered his eyes in thought before looking at Rozemyne. "You live a life with many secrets—secrets that you can discuss with almost no one. Justus has told me that you are not adjusting well to noble society as a result, and that, under proper circumstances, those who know your secrets would provide you with more direct assistance."

Rozemyne looked up at Justus with surprise. He nodded at her before providing an explanation.

"It is by no means easy to adjust to a culture and way of thinking that one is unfamiliar with. And this is not something we need merely to fake temporarily—you are going to be living in noble society for the rest of your life. I simply informed Lord Ferdinand that it would be unwise to force this without explaining why. Lutz said the same."

Gathering information through disguise required one to learn the culture of wherever they were sneaking into, but Justus needed only to appear normal temporarily. Rozemyne, in contrast, had to act the part of a noble indefinitely. Justus had seen Rozemyne and the others speak with complete honesty for the first time in her hidden room, and it was then that he learned that, despite her being so close to Ferdinand and speaking to him with apparent frankness, she was still dressing herself up quite a bit. Her acting skills were far better than

Justus had initially thought.

"Justus... you spoke with Lutz?" Rozemyne asked.

"Some things came up in conversation during our time together in the workshop. I have little in common with the people there, and so you were a regular topic of discussion. Details about the temple's gray priests, the Plantin Company, and the Gutenbergs were also mixed in, which made for some exceptionally interesting conversation. It makes sense that you would adapt so poorly to our culture, considering that you were of such poor health that you could rarely go outside, and that you saved the orphans with knowledge you gained from conversing with the gods in the world of dreams."

Justus couldn't help but laugh as he recalled his exchanges in the workshop, but Rozemyne just looked at him quizzically. "Oh? And what did Lutz say, exactly?" she asked.

"He said you were like a business partner," Justus replied, "in that he always needed to point out to you all the problems, why they were problems, and the ways to fix them."

It seemed that Ferdinand had more of a reaction to Lutz's thoughts than Rozemyne did. He fell into thought for a moment and then looked at Rozemyne with clear resolve. "As per Justus's advice, I intend to observe your behavior more carefully and identify errors going forward. Your adjusting to noble society is our greatest priority—it would not do for you to disclose any secrets."

Rozemyne listened to his resolve with an expression that made it clear she found this more of an annoyance than anything. In truth, nobody would be happy to hear that a perfectionist such as Ferdinand was going to be keeping an even closer eye on them with the intention of pointing out and criticizing their mistakes.

Still, she'll accept it, since she knows it's necessary for her to survive in noble society.

"It is not easy to live a life of secrets," Ferdinand continued, "but considering the ripples that would result if any were to leak, they must be kept at all costs. You can understand this, yes?"

“What secrets do you have?” Rozemyne asked, answering his question with a question.

Ferdinand glared at her. “They are secrets precisely because they cannot be shared. Do not ask what you know I cannot answer, fool.”

“Sorry.” Rozemyne suddenly looked rather distant, and then she muttered under her breath, “So Ferdinand has secrets too...”

Sadly enough, plenty.

Ferdinand often worked alone in the shadows; he likely had secrets that not even Justus knew. The hardships he had put his attendants through in the Royal Academy made him not unlike Sylvester.

“Listen well,” Ferdinand said. “Politics within the duchy will shift once again upon the announcement of your engagement to Wilfried. My intention is to attempt to organize all nobles under one banner. It is crucial that you act with the utmost care; speak with me before you try to make any moves. The trip to Haldenzel in the coming spring is of particular importance, since that is Elvira’s birthplace and a province of the Leisegang nobles who hope to make you the next aub. I intend to have Karstedt and Elvira accompany you, but take care to watch what you say and do.”

“Right.” Rozemyne nodded with a solemn expression.

It would be especially challenging for Rozemyne to avoid making any clumsy decisions when she didn’t even understand what she needed to refrain from doing. No matter how skilled Elvira was, it was no simple matter to cover for Rozemyne’s often incomprehensible actions, and Karstedt wasn’t particularly astute when it came to picking up on the subtle feelings of others. All signs pointed toward something significant happening in Haldenzel.

The discussion ended, despite Justus’s unease, at which point Ferdinand stood up. They had spoken for much longer than expected; he had come only to fetch Rozemyne, not to engage in lengthy debate.

“It is past time for us to leave for the castle,” Ferdinand said while heading for the door. Rozemyne began to follow him, and it was then that Justus realized—he had forgotten to ask her what her thoughts were about his lord.

“Milady, if we were to continue the analogies from earlier,” Justus began, interrupting their leave, “what would Lord Ferdinand be to you?”

Rozemyne looked up at Ferdinand and paused for a moment in contemplation. “A bench. I can lounge around and read on it, but were I to entrust my body to it and fall asleep, I’d suffer for it with aches and pains or a full-blown cold.”

“Oh? A bench, you say?” Justus stroked his chin as he repeated the answer. Associating Ferdinand with lounging and reading almost certainly meant she placed an extraordinary amount of trust in him—even more than she placed in her temple attendants. He would never have guessed that she had grown so close to Ferdinand despite how harshly he treated her.

Justus wanted to pat Rozemyne on the head and praise her for grasping his lord’s hard-to-understand kindness, but it seemed that Ferdinand felt quite differently about being compared to a bench.

“Hm. A very interesting answer,” Ferdinand said, his voice noticeably darker than usual, perhaps due to his displeasure at her answer. He wore a relatively bright smile, but Rozemyne knew him well enough to know it was fake; she had already turned white as a sheet.

“Um. Er. Eep...”

Her mouth flapped open and closed as she desperately tried to think of an excuse. Ferdinand stepped toward her, his smile broadening.

Ah. His amusement overcame his displeasure.

His expression and tone shifted somewhat. It was exceedingly rare for him to speak with another in this manner. Justus wished only for Ferdinand to enjoy himself, so he had no intention of interrupting. He and Eckhart were both loyal retainers; if their lord was content, then so were they.

What happened to Rozemyne next can easily be guessed.

The Passage of Time and a New Promise

The mostly empty temple was painfully quiet.

After leaving the orphanage director's chambers, we silently followed Gil down the hall; a carriage was waiting for us at the front entrance to the noble section of the temple. Master Benno climbed inside first, and then Mark. I moved to follow, but then I stopped and turned around. Gil was seeing us off, as he always would.

"Gil..."

He had been let into the hidden room before, so he surely knew what Rozemyne was going through right now. I met his gaze with a firm look, staring straight into his purple, almost black eyes, and my smile of a merchant fit to serve the archducal family distorted as I struggled to maintain it. "Keep a close eye on Lady Rozemyne, alright?"

"Like I need you telling me that. I'm her attendant, y'know?"

Gil didn't comment on my rude tone—in fact, he shot back at me in an equally crude way. I could feel the relief spread through my chest in an instant; if Gil said that he was going to look after her, he would. But at the same time, it felt like it was being shoved in my face once more that I was no longer going to be the one supporting Rozemyne.

I bit down on my lip and climbed into the carriage, trying to endure the indescribable pain in my heart.

The carriage began moving at once, bouncing high at the start. It went down the paved road of the temple and passed through the gate for carriages. There was no longer any need to act like a merchant; the fake smile I had been desperately trying to maintain crumbled in an instant.

...Fuck!

I glared down at my hands, feeling powerless. *"Why did I need to sleep for two whole years?"* Rozemyne's pained words were burned into my mind. She had

spoken from the heart then, and she had cried so hard, but I couldn't hug her or calm her down like I had been doing for so long anymore. Our lives had changed so much that I couldn't even ease her worries by saying that we'd always be together or that things between us were going to stay the same.

I squeezed my eyes shut, but I couldn't stop seeing Rozemyne's face and the tears streaming down her cheeks.

I told Master Benno that I'd get a grip—that I'd stay straight and help her when she got scared—and this is what happens...?

Master Benno had been given an advance warning about the nullification of the contracts, which had given me time to get my feelings in order and console Rozemyne when she needed me. But this goodbye had been too sudden—this announcement that we couldn't use the hidden room anymore had come completely out of the blue.

But Master Benno knew, didn't he?

The news had come out of nowhere for me, but both Master Benno and Mark had reacted as though they knew it was coming. That annoyed me. I slowly looked up and found myself making eye contact with Master Benno, who was watching me quietly.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked, my voice coming out so pointed and reproachful that it surprised even me. I reflexively clapped a hand over my mouth, but Master Benno didn't criticize me; he just raised an eyebrow and asked what I was talking about. Mark wasn't giving me a chastising look either, so I continued, relieved.

"You and Mark knew we wouldn't be able to use the hidden room forever, right?"

"Oh, that...?" Master Benno asked, furrowing his brow and crossing his arms. "We weren't trying to hide it from you, if that's what you think. We didn't mention it since you were in Illgner when Fritz brought it up."

It was something they had apparently heard from Fritz over two years ago, before Rozemyne had entered her long slumber. He had said they would probably lose access to the hidden room around the time she joined the Royal

Academy—and that even if not, she would be leaving the temple for marriage after coming of age.

"After we heard that, we knew it was important to make sure the hidden room being closed off wouldn't cause any problems for the business," Master Benno said. "But she ended up sleeping for two whole years, y'know? Our hands were so full with all the demands the nobles were making of us that we didn't have time to think of what was coming next."

He was right—we had spent years following Lady Elvira's unreasonable demands, on top of aiding the gray shrine maiden's birth in Hasse, traveling to Haldenzel, and so on. Without Rozemyne to stand between us and the nobles, the number of stressful jobs we had to endure had shot up dramatically. Our hands had been so full trying to make a dent in our mountain of work that we hadn't had time for anything else.

Even if I had known about the hidden room, I would've put off dealing with it while Rozemyne was asleep, much like Master Benno did.

As I recalled how little leeway we all had back then, my dissatisfaction melted like snow at the coming of spring. But what sprouted in its place? Unease.

"Then, Master Benno... Did I do my job? Is she going to have the strength to stand alone now?"

Master Benno looked at me with a conflicted grin—an expression like he had simultaneously swallowed something nasty and stared directly at a bright sun. "Yeah. You did good," he said. "Thanks to you, Rozemyne's managed to stand on her own two feet. She's stopped crying and is facing the future."

Our promises made Rozemyne face forward... I wanted to believe Master Benno was telling the truth, but I couldn't accept it that easily. I knew that I needed to swallow my feelings, but the sense of loss was just too great.

Mark knocked on the wall of the carriage with a wooden board. "Let Lutz down here," he said.

The carriage stopped along the side of the road. Outside the window, I could see that we had turned off of the main street and onto a road leading to the Plantin Company.

Master Benno directed me to get out of the carriage. “Go call Tuuli; her family needs to hear about this too,” he said softly. “Once noble scholars start getting involved with the temple, communicating through letters won’t be so easy.”

He then gave me a light pat on the head—something he often did when praising or consoling his apprentices. It served as a reminder that I had people who cared about me, which was heartwarming and encouraging... but it wasn’t enough to pull my heart out of the mud.

Even so, I nodded and climbed out of the carriage, making sure to take the wooden board that Mark had held out to me. “It’s pretty cold...” I muttered to myself.

Winter was clearly coming to an end—there had been fewer snowy days lately, and the sunlight was starting to feel warmer—but the wind was still frosty. After seeing the carriage off, I popped up the collar of my coat and started walking down the still snowy path.

...So I’ve gotta be the one to tell Tuuli, huh?

This was going to crush her. I wondered whether Effa and Gunther might even cry after hearing that exchanging letters with Myne was going to be even harder going forward... and those thoughts actually made me feel a little better.

Master Benno and Mark just don’t get it.

They had also been forbidden from using the hidden room, but they only viewed the situation from a business perspective; they couldn’t share my grief. This had also been the case with Myne’s funeral—Master Benno had propped me up, saying that time spent crying was better spent working and earning money, but he hadn’t shared my pain. I had only managed to process my feelings and get back on my own two feet after sharing the grief with Myne’s family and finding a goal to work toward.

At this bell, Tuuli should still be at the workshop.

Taking a guess, I passed by the Gilberta Company to go straight to Mrs. Corinna’s workshop. I had been coming here on errands ever since the time I was an apprentice in the Gilberta Company myself, so I already knew a lot of the people. One such seamstress came speeding over the moment I stepped

inside.

“Oh, Lutz. What brings you here today? Is it just me, or have you gotten even taller? Are you thinking of getting measured for new apprentice clothes?”

“No, Master Benno sent me here with a message. Could you call Tuuli for me? It’s going to be a bit of a long conversation, as I’m sure you can tell from the fact I’ve got an entire board here for her, so can you give her permission to go outside?” I asked, ignoring her barrage of questions and handing over the board that Mark had given me. I had learned years ago that being stupidly honest and answering her questions would get us nowhere.

“I can let her leave, but... Go straight to the Plantin Company, you hear me? I don’t want you two wandering down any alleys for some alone time.”

“Huh...? E-Er, no. We aren’t like that!” I exclaimed as she went to fetch Tuuli. But no matter how much I protested, her knowing grin didn’t falter in the slightest.

Gah, come on... I guess we are *old enough to be seen like that, though.*

In the past, others had considered us no more than fellow children from the poor part of town... but we were too old for that now. I had realized this a while ago. Ralph had a thing for Tuuli, and Fey wouldn’t stop talking about his first girlfriend; there were more and more people around us throwing themselves headfirst into romance. We were at an age where even delivering Tuuli a message at my boss’s order sparked teasing and rumors about a secret romance. For her sake, I needed to avoid inviting any unnecessary misunderstandings.

Same’s true for Rozemyne... It feels weird, since she looks the same as she always has, but she’s getting older too. Guess it’s not unusual that she’s engaged now.

I didn’t know too much about noble circumstances, but still, I couldn’t shake the feeling that it was all happening too soon. I sighed, hoping to expel even a bit of my frustration, and that was when Tuuli came rushing over. She was wearing a coat and accompanied by the same seamstress from before.

“Sorry for the delay! I— Wait, wha...?” Tuuli had come in such a hurry that

her breathing was labored and her cheeks flushed. She looked around anxiously, blinked a few times, and then looked at the seamstress. “Didn’t you say Master Benno was calling me?”

“Well, you’re about to go to his store! It’s pretty much the same thing! Isn’t it more exhilarating to meet your secret boyfriend out of nowhere like this? I thought it’d be a nice surprise!”

“Lutz and I aren’t like that,” Tuuli replied with a troubled look. I shared her concern. It seemed like everyone was getting weirdly excited about us supposedly being an item, but I didn’t get why. Had we done something to give off the wrong impression?

“Aw, so shy... Times like this are your only chance to see Lutz this time of year, right? Aren’t you lucky?” the seamstress gushed, ignoring Tuuli and pushing her out the door.

Tuuli gave me an exhausted look. I was fine, since I lived in the Plantin Company, but she was no doubt going to be teased about this for a long time to come. It made me feel a little bad.

“Sorry. I didn’t think I’d cause a stir like that,” I admitted. “Does it, er, make it hard for you to work there?”

“It’s not your fault, Lutz. Really, I should apologize for having gotten you wrapped up in all this. They love to talk about this stuff. They don’t take the teasing that far when Mrs. Corinna’s there, but ever since Knut was born, she’s been coming to the workshop way less often...”

Tuuli spoke as though she had already accepted the situation, although she still looked fairly depressed about it. I considered showing up less to ease her struggles, but not anyone could come give reports about Myne.

“If you want to get teased less, we could start having someone else deliver these messages... Couldn’t do that this time, though.”

“Ah... Right. It must be important for you to have come all this way to get me. Let’s pick up the pace.” Tuuli had most likely guessed why I was here, as she started to hurry down the snowy path. Meanwhile, my legs grew heavier as I remembered what I was about to have to tell her.

After Tuuli and I arrived at the second floor of the Plantin Company, Master Benno told us to go to the parlor. He had changed out of the clothes he wore when meeting nobles and into his usual attire. Mark was handling the store, and I was instructed to stand behind Master Benno as a leherl apprentice.

“Sorry to have made you come all this way, Tuuli. But I figure you know there’s only one thing I’d call you for.”

“Something major happened with Lady Rozemyne, right?” Tuuli asked. She sat down in the chair for guests and looked up at Master Benno so sharply that her blue-green braid swayed behind her head. Her blue eyes were filled with resolve, just as Myne’s had been when she had accepted our goodbyes and faced the future.

Master Benno told her everything that had happened in the temple—that we could no longer use the hidden room now that Myne was getting older and that nobles such as Lord Damuel, who knew of our circumstances, would not be the only ones accompanying her to the temple. From now on, she was also going to be with her other noble retainers, and since her scholars were going to be handling her paperwork, it was going to become much harder for us to smuggle letters to her.

Tuuli quietly listened to Master Benno’s dry explanation; she didn’t start crying or anything.

“Well, that’s all from me,” Master Benno said after finishing his business-like report. “I imagine you’ll want to discuss what you’re gonna do from here. I don’t mind if you two want to talk alone. I’ll be in my office, so just come get me when you’re done.” He glanced my way and then exited the parlor.

Tuuli watched Master Benno as he went; then, when the door was completely shut, she turned her blue eyes to me. “Lutz, do you want to sit down?” she asked, her face twisting with worry. “You look terrible.”

I had been standing behind Master Benno’s chair like a rock, and it was only at her prompting that I dragged my feet over and plopped down into the guest chair. The moment I no longer needed to mask my true feelings for work, my body and head grew heavy all at once. It was like I couldn’t support myself on

my own anymore.

“The hidden room in the temple was the only place I could treat her as Myne, not Lady Rozemyne...” I said. “And now there’s no way for me to speak to her as Myne. I can’t console her, and I can’t have frank business talks with her either. We can’t even trade letters anymore, even though I promised you all that we would... This was the real goodbye. Myne’s gone now.”

From now on, we’d only see Lady Rozemyne, not the Myne we knew. Just thinking about it made tears well up in my eyes unprompted. I lowered my face, not wanting Tuuli to see me cry, and she patted a hand on my head.

“I see... But her growing older and the situation changing is all noble business—it’s not anything that you or Mr. Benno could do anything about. Don’t let it eat you up, Lutz.”

Her head pats were kind and gentle, and she spoke in a tone that carried a peacefulness that made it seem as though she were able to accept anything. But that just made me feel worse, somehow.

“No!” I exclaimed. “I hate this! I can’t only speak to Myne with a fake smile and fake words—things that make it impossible for us to even know whether we’re understanding each other! Could you, Tuuli?!”

Don’t just accept this goodbye! Get mad with me! Get mad at how unfair this all is!

I gazed up at Tuuli, hoping that she would agree with me... but after a moment of contemplation, she slowly shook her head.

“Sorry, Lutz, but I don’t really feel much tragedy here. I’m sad that we can’t trade letters anymore, but I knew this was coming. I can accept it for what it is.”

It was as though someone had punched me in the head. I had thought that Tuuli would share my grief, since, unlike Master Benno, she wasn’t just worried about whether business would go smoothly now that they couldn’t communicate as directly anymore.

“Wh-What? But, why...?”

“Mm? Because, I mean, I’ve only ever been able to peek at her from the

temple's door. I've only ever spoken to Lady Rozemyne in the formal way that you hate so much; I haven't met her outside of work. You say that you can't use the hidden room anymore, but that doesn't really impact me much."

Her words pierced my heart like a spear. I thought I had understood, but I hadn't. Only Master Benno and I had been able to speak with Myne like the old days in her hidden room—Tuuli and the others were forbidden from interacting with her as family entirely, so they had never been taken there to talk normally. They had only been taken there initially because their speech and mannerisms hadn't been at an appropriate level for interacting with the nobility.

"You know, er... Sorry. I was just being selfish..." I said. Guilt was starting to rise up with me as I realized I had been complaining to Tuuli despite having been lucky enough to speak with Myne freely in the first place, but Tuuli knocked those feelings away too with a smile.

"Like I said, don't worry about it. I mean, I'm sad too, since we won't be able to trade letters anymore. But it was getting hard to hide them from Kamil, so this is good timing in a sense. You know, remember the karuta you brought earlier? He's started to learn his letters, and now he's super interested in reading."

There was nowhere in our tiny homes that we could stash our letters, and it wasn't easy to write them in secret when Kamil was away.

"I've been keeping the letters in my room in the Gilberta Company so that Kamil doesn't find them, but I'm too scared to open them for fear of someone seeing them," Tuuli explained. "Someone might suddenly come into my room to call me for work or food, right? None of us have been able to reread the letters from Myne much lately."

Things were changing all over the place. She had mentioned to me before that they were hiding Myne's circumstances from Kamil—as far as he was concerned, I was the one giving him the karuta, picture books, and so on—yet I hadn't fully grasped the situation there.

"I guess there's nothing I can do to keep you and Myne connected anymore..."

"Don't beat yourself up about it. I don't find it as painful as you do—that is, to

the point of wanting to cry—but I know how hard you've been working for us," Tuuli said with an encouraging smile as she started dabbing away my tears with a handkerchief. "There are still times when we get to meet with her directly, thanks to work. And since this is Myne we're talking about, I bet she's going to come back with more crazy jobs like an order from a prince. She may be surrounded by nobles, but I'll still get to see her when delivering her products. And Dad always gets to guard her on the way to Hasse, since she's already shown him her favor as the High Bishop, and that's not going away anytime soon, right? I mean, it happens way less often than your business talks, but... still. We at least get to see one another."

She was right. I had been racking my brain, desperately trying to think of ways for Myne and her family to still see each other... but even without the hidden room, there were thin little bridges connecting them.

"We're in positions now that aren't easy to get rid of. So, we're fine. And you'll get to meet her as a Gutenberg too, won't you, Lutz? Aren't you going somewhere this spring?"

"Yeah. We're going to Haldenzel, via her weird but surprisingly useful highbeast..."

My mood started to lighten a little as Tuuli listed off all the things we would be doing in the future. Even without the hidden room, I got the feeling we were still going to be doing pretty much the same things.

"I guess our main concern should be Myne herself," I said. But when I explained how she had burst into tears in her hidden room, Tuuli just gave a sad smile, looking only a little worried.

"I think she'll be fine too."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because, I mean, I'm making hairpins to help her out, right? So I can be with her even when she's in noble society. And you're making books for her. We're all doing things for her, and I know our feelings are reaching her. I trust Myne."

Somehow, it felt as though Tuuli had completely bested me. Maybe I was the one who didn't have faith in Myne. She had said that, no matter how painful

things got, she would be happy as long as she had books, and that she would always put her all into getting them. I just needed to make books so that she could keep giving it her all in noble society—so that she could feel content no matter how bad things got. I just needed to follow the promise I had made with her.

"Feels like a massive weight's been taken off my shoulders," I said. "But, y'know... I sure do always show you my weird side, huh?"

"It's fine. Your weird side isn't weird, like, at all compared to Myne's, and I'm her older sister. It's my job to clean up after her."

Hearing that made me relieved. I couldn't talk to my family about Myne stuff, so it was good to have someone to vent to.

Having calmed down a bit, I went to the workshop the next day. I wanted to make sure that Myne was doing alright. No sooner had I made eye contact with Gil than he gestured for us to go outside.

"Fritz, I'm going to check the tools with Lutz," Gil said. "I also want to ask how the forest is looking."

Some of the people who overheard the word "forest" dropped their work and came running over. They clearly were dying to go out after spending so long working inside the orphanage.

"Will we be going to the forest soon?" one boy asked. "If so, we can help!"

"You all have duties to learn before the Gutenbergs' trip," Fritz said, instructing the orphans to continue their work. "I will handle this, Gil."

Fritz let us go outside, having most likely guessed what was going on. Gil and I took some tools for visiting the forest from the workshop and checked over them beneath the cold sky, looking for any chips in the knives or holes in the baskets.

"Hey, Gil. How's Lady Rozemyne doing?" I asked. He had served Myne since her days as an apprentice blue shrine maiden and accompanied us to the hidden room as an attendant; he knew how different she was inside and outside the hidden room.

“She locked herself up in her other hidden room in the High Bishop’s chambers, but she was smiling when she left, so I think she’s fine. Though she’s not here anymore. She’s already left for the castle.”

“Nice...”

She had cried, as I expected... but in the end, she had found it in herself to leave for the castle while acting like a noble. I had been worried that she’d crumble, but it sounded as though she had gotten back on her feet.

“Once the archduke gives his permission, her noble retainers will start going in and out of the temple too,” Gil said. “Lots of things are gonna change—like, all documents are gonna be passed through her scholars first. Things like that.”

“I heard the gist from Master Benno. He said we won’t be able to exchange letters anymore.”

“Right. I imagine it’s gonna be tough on you guys,” Gil said with a nod. He then looked at me with his purple, almost-black eyes. “But since I’m her attendant here, once her retainers leave, I can tell her a little about you guys in my evening reports.”

“Gil...?” I blinked in surprise, realizing that while everyone else had given up, he alone was still struggling to keep us together. He returned a conflicted look—a mixture of awkwardness and frustration.

“Letters would leave a paper trail, plus they’d need to be kept somewhere... so any messages are only gonna be delivered verbally...”

“You don’t want to get on the nobles’ bad side, right? Why would you go so far for us?” I asked without thinking.

Gil wistfully gazed over the lower city. “I liked it down there. I liked taking Sister Myne home with you and Fran. The smell of the food being made was everywhere, and we talked about everything that had happened that day on the way back, remember?”

The memories came flooding back to me—memories of when Myne was just an apprentice blue shrine maiden. It was ancient history now, but after work in the temple, I’d walk home with Fran and Gil.

“Oh yeah. Fran would carry her sometimes when she couldn’t walk on her own, right?”

“Right, right. And it’d be so late by then that the stands on the main street would sell their food for cheap to get rid of it all. We couldn’t eat too much, though, otherwise Sister Myne’s family would yell at us about her not having room for dinner...”

I hadn’t spent that much time walking through the lower city with Gil and Fran, since Myne hadn’t been an apprentice blue shrine maiden for all that long... but even still, nostalgic memories came to mind one after another. We laughed and chatted about the past, and before we knew it, both our faces were soaked with tears.

“The truth is, back then, I hated that Sister Myne always went back to her family, no matter how hard I worked at serving her. The way there was fun, but the walk back to the temple with Fran always felt so lonely. At the very least, I loved the smile of relief Sister Myne would give when she got home and everyone came to see her,” Gil said, spilling secrets he had no doubt kept bottled up for years. No matter how many times he wiped away his tears, more continued to pour out. The same was true for me.

“I hated going to the temple too. It felt like the nobles were slowly stealing her away. I wanted to do anything I could to stop it, but Myne had to go to the temple to survive, and she’d never have been safe if she hadn’t become a noble herself. I’m grateful for her being safe—I really am—but now I can’t see her in the hidden room anymore. It sucks. And I’m worried about her.”

Gil nodded again and again as he listened. “I’m hurting too. I was always glad to see that nobody had changed at all when we were in the hidden room, so it hurts to think that Sister Myne can’t laugh and cry like that anymore. I hate it.”

A storm surged through my chest as I realized that Gil was sharing my grief and anger. After not even Tuuli had empathized with me, it came as a huge relief to have someone I could mourn with.

“So now it’s my turn,” Gil continued, puffing out his chest despite his face being red from all the tears he had roughly wiped away. “Just as you kept Lady Rozemyne connected to her family, I’ll keep her connected to the lower city.”

I exhaled, reassured that I had been doing the right thing up until now. Things had changed, but everything was still connected. We just needed to keep doing what we had always done—to keep supporting Myne as much as we could, in any way we could.

“I’m counting on you, Gil.”

I dried my tear-stained hand on my pants and then held it out to Gil. He grinned, and after likewise wiping away his own tears, he smacked his hand against mine.

“You can count on me. I’ll move right under those nobles’ noses to make sure she hears you.”

And so, a new promise formed between Gil and me—a promise between men.

The Blessing at the Graduation Ceremony

Today was the Royal Academy's graduation ceremony. With the morning's dedication whirl and sword dance complete, everyone headed to the dining halls for lunch. Most went to the doors to their dormitories, but the women escorted by those of other duchies retired briefly to the tea party rooms used for meetings and departures, since even those of other duchies could enter them. Since Anastasius was escorting me, I went to Klassenberg's tea party room.

"Welcome back, Lady Eglantine."

My retainers welcomed me, having returned ahead of time for this express purpose. There were fewer gathered than usual.

"If only I could hold this hand forever, my Goddess of Light," Anastasius said as he kissed my fingertips, loath to let them go. He had started performing these solicitous acts with regularity since earning my grandfather's and uncle's acceptance. I had asked him many times to stop, as I always struggled to remain calm and disguise the reddening of my face, but he refused.

As always, my retainers let out quiet gasps. I could feel their eyes on me, and my cheeks started to heat up with embarrassment. Anastasius often destroyed my composure like this, and it certainly wasn't helping that his outfit made in the image of the God of Darkness was making him look even more regal than usual. I was, to be frank, completely beside myself.

"You are too bold, Prince Anastasius," I protested weakly while pulling my hand away, but he just smiled.

"I will come for you again this afternoon," he said, and then he turned to leave.

It was beyond me to chase and reproach royalty, so I could only watch him go. Perhaps my eyes were a bit more pointed than usual, but there was nothing I could do when faced with his joyful smile. Once again, my protests turned to

dust as I found myself entirely unable to stay angry at him.

Once Anastasius had disappeared from sight, my retainers began giggling among themselves as though they could contain themselves no longer. “He must be particularly overjoyed today, considering how hard he worked to earn the aub’s and your grandfather’s permission,” one said. “Prince Anastasius truly is head over heels for you, Lady Eglantine.”

“You really do astound,” added another. “Who could earn such heated courting from royalty but you?”

A third nodded along in agreement. “The two of you are perfect for each other. When you whirled together as the God of Darkness and Goddess of Light, why, I simply couldn’t look away from the sheer beauty of it all.”

Their repeated references to Anastasius’s passionate romance kept my cheeks burning, and I soon found myself getting unbearably restless.

“Let us hurry to the dining hall,” I said. “Grandfather and the others are waiting for us.” I briskly walked over to the door to the dormitory while pressing my hands against my heated cheeks.

Upon entering the dining hall for lunch, I found that my grandfather; the archducal couple; my cousin, the next aub; his wife; and our dormitory supervisor, Professor Primevere, had already started eating. Grandfather gestured me over to the table, and so I moved to sit at the seat between him and Professor Primevere. My attendants served my food, placing a bowl of warm soup before me.

“Eglantine, your dedication whirl today was superb.”

“Thank you ever so much, Grandfather. I thought I whirled particularly well today, so I am pleased to know others thought the same.”

During my dedication whirl upon the stage, I had felt for a brief moment that the mana within me had been accepted by the gods. It was a very strange feeling indeed. Perhaps it was because there had been more onlookers than I was used to at practice? Or maybe it was because the stage was special and made to praise the gods. Either way, it felt as though my whirl had ended much quicker than I was used to. I had completely lost myself in the moment and

attained fluidity beyond thought.

If possible, I would like to whirl like that once more in my life.

Preparations for my marriage would begin tomorrow, and once I was wed, I surely wouldn't have any time for whirling. But even knowing that, my performance had been so blissful that I could not help but wish to experience it again.

"I must say, I feel a bit of sympathy for next year's Goddess of Light," my uncle said. "She's going to be compared to you, after all."

"That will be the Drewanchel archduke candidate, I suppose?" his wife replied.

I considered which archduke candidates would be graduating next year. It was generally the candidates of the higher-ranking duchies who played the parts of the God of Darkness and the Goddess of Light, so it was as my uncle said—next year's goddess would most likely be Adolphine.

"Prince Anastasius must have practiced so very hard," my grandfather remarked. "He managed to whirl without looking that much worse than you."

"That is a terribly rude thing to say," I replied.

"It's true. I doubt anyone has ever practiced as passionately as you have. I had been pitying everyone who would have to whirl near you."

Everyone around me smiled at Grandfather's clear favoritism, though I did not. I had received an immense amount of pressure from him growing up, being told not to bring shame to my status as the third prince's daughter and that my skills would need to be fit for a princess for when I returned to royalty.

"You have come of age and secured an engagement to Prince Anastasius," he continued. "Your parents are no doubt sighing with relief from where they rest in the distant heights of the gods, atop the towering stairway."

I had moved to Klassenberg as a pre-baptismal child following the assassination of my parents. On that fateful day, I had eaten dinner in the playroom at my wet nurse's instruction and then went into the dining hall where everyone else was eating to say goodnight, as was customary. I could

remember feeling terribly jealous of my older brother, who had been eating in the playroom with me only seasons prior, and yearned for nothing more than to be baptized just as he had.

Everyone was overjoyed at the sizable war having finally come to a close; my parents and the wet nurses wore bright expressions, and the air in the dining room had been especially peaceful. I said goodnight to my parents and elder siblings, as per usual... Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought that would be the last time I ever saw them. To me, tomorrow was nothing more than a continuation of today; I believed that similar days would continue unending and uninterrupted.

But my life had vanished in an instant. My older brother, who had been smiling at me so brightly, suddenly vomited and fell unconscious before me. Those gathered began to scream, and a clamor ran through the dining hall. My older sister was the next to collapse, then the attendants who had tested the food, and then my mother, who had been in the process of telling me to return to the playroom.

The wet nurse picked me up and fled from the dining hall, repeating in a quavering voice that everything would be okay... but I never saw my family again.

The terrifying games of hide-and-seek continued throughout the night. Eventually, I was made to live in a place I knew nothing about with people whom I had never met. I hadn’t understood anything that was going on, and it was only much later that I would learn why I could not greet my father and mother as I usually would, or why my older brother and sister no longer visited the playroom for tea parties.

No matter how proudly Grandfather declared that he had avenged my family’s deaths and defeated our foes, I saw only more and more deaths. I took not a shred of joy in his actions; regardless of whether one was victorious, all that was accomplished through war was the construction of a mountain of corpses. It was burned in my heart that such conflict was to be avoided, no matter the cost.

“You truly are like your mother,” Grandfather said in a pleased tone. “She,

too, had a prince desperate for her hand."

It seemed I wasn't the only one reminiscing about the past. In all fairness, even I thought that I resembled my mother; to an outside onlooker, we might have even been mistaken for twins.

Grandfather had requested a portrait of my parents to celebrate my mother marrying into royalty. My older sister likewise had a portrait, since she had become old enough for marriage talks to begin. It was incomplete, but it had been brought to Klassenberg, where it remained to this day.

My older brother, however, had no portrait.

His face is already a blur to me... Although he must share my blonde hair, as I recall Father patting our heads and saying that our hair came from our mother.

I had always been treated in Klassenberg as a princess who would one day return to royalty through marriage. Everyone treated me well, but compared to other archduke candidates, I felt more like a guest than anything. It was impossible to deny that I didn't quite fit in with everyone else.

That, too, is because of Grandfather's favoritism.

One could not say that the current archducal couple and I were particularly close to one another. They treated me courteously, as a future queen, but they did not interact with me as family like they did with the other archduke candidates. And now, following Anastasius's strong words that he wished to avoid war with Prince Sigiswald through marrying me, our relationship had become even more uncomfortable than before. Grandfather cared only about my return to royalty, while the aub believed that, without my becoming queen, Klassenberg would soon be outpaced by Drewanchel.

I supposed that it could not be helped, as I was the adopted daughter of the previous rather than the current aub, but upon seeing the close relationship between Lord Wilfried and the adopted Lady Rozemyne of Ehrenfest, I had felt a tinge of envy.

"So, is the archduke candidate from Ehrenfest who made that hairpin which suits you so well absent once again?" the aub asked, which drew all eyes to my hairpin. It was truly beautiful, with an astounding appearance formed through

slender, delicately woven threads. Anastasius had gifted it to me in the Royal Academy, and so both Grandfather and Uncle had first seen it on the morning of the Interduchy Tournament.

Lady Rozemyne was receiving much attention in Klassenberg—not only as the Ehrenfest girl producing new trends, but as the one who had changed Anastasius such that he could actually acquire me. The archducal couple had attempted to meet her earlier, but to no avail.

Professor Primevere looked at them and sighed. “Her sickness is such that she missed even the Interduchy Tournament. She must still be unwell.”

“Hmm. We knew ahead of time that she came first-in-class among the first-years, and so we thought she would have pushed herself to attend the Interduchy Tournament nonetheless. But it seems this was not the case.”

If one was going to force themselves to attend anything despite sickness, it would be the announcement of grades, where all the archducal couples gathered and the king offered his direct praise.

“Lady Rozemyne fell unconscious even during a meeting that Prince Anastasius summoned her to. She was asleep for three days after that, so I imagine she will only now be waking up.”

“Three days?” came dubious voices.

I could not blame them for being suspicious—it would normally be unthinkable for one to continue socializing after falling unconscious for three whole days. The proper procedure was to return to one’s duchy at once, where their personal doctor awaited them. And indeed, Lady Rozemyne had returned to Ehrenfest sooner than planned due to her illness.

“She was sickly to begin with, but sleeping in a jureve for two years could not have done her much good,” I explained. “It seems that it was planned from the start for her to finish her classes quickly and return home. I imagine this plan was to ensure she could attend the Interduchy Tournament despite her poor health. Her collapsing at the tea party was no doubt an unexpected tragedy for Ehrenfest.”

This was just my deduction, but it seemed to me that Lady Rozemyne’s

guardians had planned around minimizing the burden on her, only to fail to predict the extent that Ehrenfest's trends would spread. The load had surely become too much for them to bear.

"I agree with Lady Eglantine," Professor Primevere said. "If it were normal for her to collapse so abruptly, someone would have expressed concerns about her venturing into the Farthest Hall to acquire her schtappe. However, we received no such warnings from Lady Rozemyne's retainers or her dorm supervisor, Hirschur, so we had no qualms beforehand. I believe this is a temporary and unusual problem."

Grandfather exchanged thoughtful glances with the others. "Ehrenfest was swarmed with far more people than usual yesterday, no?" he asked. "This Lady Rozemyne is earning that much attention. I would have liked to meet her sooner rather than later, but I suppose nothing can be done about that."

"As Father says, it would be best to form a connection before other duchies do, but they could not meet her either. It is not that Klassenberg is falling behind; in fact, considering Eglantine's relationship with Lady Rozemyne, we are actually ahead of the other duchies," the aub agreed. He then looked our way for emphasis. "Primevere, Eglantine—I'm told Lady Rozemyne did not socialize much with those from her grade due to her finishing her classes so promptly and returning home, but did that change upon her return? Is Ehrenfest's other archduke candidate socializing with any other duchy in particular?"

Professor Primevere nodded. "That is all we can say about Lady Rozemyne. Lord Wilfried is socializing with various other duchies, but it gives the impression of width without depth—he has met with each duchy several times, without forming any deeper relationships. If you asked me to put one above the rest, I would perhaps say that he has met with those from Dunkelfelger the most. Aside from that, I have heard from their dormitory supervisor that there was a tea party between cousins attended by Ehrenfest, Ahrensbach, and Frenbeltag."

"Ahrensbach and Frenbeltag, hm?" the aub repeated. "Blood relationships make deeper bonds easier to form. We should keep an eye on them."

"Lady Rozemyne was absent at the time, and it seems Lord Wilfried

responded to all questions about hairpins and rinsham that he was not involved with them. Professor Fraularm mentioned that nothing of value was learned there," Professor Primevere said.

If she was correct, then I was undoubtedly the archduke candidate with the deepest relationship with Lady Rozemyne. However, I recalled that there was another archduke candidate with whom she had wanted to socialize.

"Speaking of which, Lady Rozemyne said at the tea party that she wishes to be friends with Lady Hannelore of Dunkelfelger. Although she collapsed moments later, and the tea party came to an immediate end, so I do not know what became of this request."

"Dunkelfelger, you say...? I suppose they do have a female first-year archduke candidate. We don't want all the products that received so much attention at this Interduchy Tournament to flow to them rather than us."

"It is unfortunate that Lady Eglantine, the one closest to her, is already graduating. Are there any other female archduke candidates about to begin attending the Academy?" the aub's wife asked, thinking seriously alongside her husband about future relationships, but Grandfather just shook his head.

"This Lady Rozemyne is still a first-year, so we don't need to hurry; time will tell just how significant she truly is. The more we know about hairpins and rinsham, the better, but we don't need to worry about interduchy relations shifting a little."

A map would show that Klassenberg and Ehrenfest border one another, but maps do not tell all. In truth, the border was buried in snow, and only briefly in the summer could it be traveled through. The result was that the border gate between our duchies remained closed for almost the entire year.

That end of Klassenberg had once been part of a duchy known as Eisenreich, and in the region known as Eisen to this day, there had once been much traffic due to the ore-filled mountains there. But once the ore veins were depleted, the land had nothing of value, and so it became mostly abandoned. The distance between cities was significant, and since it was a location where strong feybeasts appeared easily, even traveling merchants largely avoided it.

"That place is hard to deal with, since it's so far from our Noble's Quarter on

top of everything...” Grandfather mused aloud.

“But we want to form diplomatic ties with Ehrenfest and make these hairpins within Klassenberg as well, no? Son, what say we probe Lady Rozemyne about getting engaged to you?” the aub asked, turning his attention to his son and future successor.

My cousin and his wife fell into thought with serious expressions. It was inevitable that he would marry a second wife, but still, such an abrupt question warranted some consideration.

“Considering her age and the rank of her duchy, she might be suitable as my second wife—if her mana matches my own, that is,” the future aub eventually said with a meaningful smile.

Everyone nodded knowingly. It was highly unlikely that the archduke candidate of the thirteenth-ranked duchy would ever have enough mana to match an archduke candidate from Klassenberg the First.

“True, it’ll depend on her future growth, but she beat out Drewanchel’s archduke candidate to come first-in-class. I imagine she’ll manage. For now, I’ll probe Ehrenfest at this year’s Archduke Conference,” the aub said.

With Klassenberg’s plans settled, the meal ended, and I received permission to stand. I needed to hurry and prepare for the graduation ceremony this afternoon.

“Please do wait with leisure,” I said as I went to leave.

“Do your best out there—both as a Klassenberg archduke candidate and as the future wife of royalty.”

“I will strive to meet your expectations, Grandfather.”

The moment I was back in my room after leaving the dining hall, I let out a tired sigh. Perhaps due to how enjoyable my recent tea parties with Anastasius had been, that had felt nothing like a celebratory lunch for my graduation; the discussion had been exceedingly dull.

I adjusted my hair and makeup, which had become slightly disheveled from my whirling performance, and changed into my newly made red dress.

Grandfather had demanded adjustments to the embroidery several times, and amid the Klassenberg designs were minor flairs that my father, the prince, had used. It seemed to me that having the designs of royalty on my clothes was somewhat disrespectful—I had been baptized as a Klassenberg archduke candidate and thus was not royalty myself—but Grandfather had insisted.

"The hairpin looks wonderful on you, Lady Eglantine. Ehrenfest's craftsmen are certainly something else. It suits your outfit so well that it almost seems as if they were made together," my attendants said, praising my appearance.

I looked at myself in the mirror. Because of my makeup and the fact that I was wearing my hair up, I felt much more adult than usual. I could also tell just how well the red koralies suited my dress.

We moved to the tea party room, where I sat on a morbin chair warmed ahead of time by my attendants. Morbin was a stone that excelled at retaining heat, such that sitting upon it filled one with a tingling warmth. I quite liked them; it felt as though my tension melted away as I sat atop them.

"Lady Eglantine, Prince Anastasius is here," one of my attendants announced.

"Aah, my Goddess of Light truly is beautiful. Your silken hair shines beneath the light like the sun, and with each passing moment, my heart battles with the growing urge to caress each strand. The koralies serve to accentuate your beauty even more. As your God of Darkness, I—"

"That will do, Prince Anastasius. Shall we move to the hall?"

"I believe that even endless praise would not do your fairness justice, but I suppose it is time to go." Anastasius took my hand with a small grin. His gray eyes were so filled with kindness as he looked upon me that I was struck with both an unusual restlessness and a desire to never leave his side.

We exited the tea party room and stepped into the hall, where we found graduating students lined up with their partners according to their rank. Since Anastasius was going to be entering first as royalty, we walked to the front of the line with all eyes on us.

"With the blessings of the gods, the adults graduating the Royal Academy shall now enter. Anastasius Sohn Zent Trauerqual, and subsequently, Eglantine

Tochter Adotie Klassenberg.”

We entered when our names were called. Before us was a tall, tall stairway dotted with ivory statues of the gods that seemed to continue all the way to the ceiling. Perhaps due to the window by the top level of the stairway, the sunlight streaming in made the feystones and metal divine instruments shine as if they were emitting light. At the bottom of the stairway were offerings to the gods—flowers, fruit, incense, and the like. I didn’t know the meaning of each type, but I could imagine that Lady Rozemyne did.

The Sovereign High Bishop stood in front of the stairway with his bible in hand. His white robes stood out among the blue robes of the surrounding priests. They had my sympathy; we would proceed to line up on the stage before them for the ceremony, but they had to stand before the shrine to the gods for the entire day.

The grand hall was filled with people, and they clapped to greet us graduating students. I lowered my eyes bashfully before looking up at Anastasius. No doubt his heart was filled with a storm of emotions as well. He gazed across the hall with an expression of reminiscence and relief and then looked down at me.

He gave a small nod, and so I stepped forward. We advanced slowly, when suddenly a golden light started to fall before our eyes without warning.

“What?!” Anastasius pulled me to him at once and took out his schtappe. I looked up at the ceiling in search of the falling light’s origin, but unlike those at the top of the staircase shrine, the windows of the hall were along the walls, and there was no place for light to come down from above. I had no idea what was going on; it looked entirely as though it were raining from the ivory ceiling itself.

The light rained for only a matter of moments, but it was more than enough time to steal the eyes and words of all those present in the hall. The cheers and applause that had been celebrating our graduation stopped, and the air was filled with a deafening silence as everyone looked around for the source of the strange occurrence.

“What in the world...? What happened?”

“It looked like the light of a blessing to me.”

Murmurs began to fill the hall. I hadn't seen the light very well myself, since it had been raining down on me, but it seemed to look like a large-scale blessing from an outside perspective—the sort one gave when greeting another.

"A blessing...?" Anastasius muttered to himself, confused. He lowered his schtappe but continued to scan the area with hard eyes while keeping my body pressed against his.

"If that was a blessing then did the High Bishop do something?" came a voice from somewhere.

The High Bishop of the Sovereign Temple stroked his chin thoughtfully at the accusation. I had seen him from the front, however, and so I knew what few others did—he had been more surprised by the light than any other and had looked across the hall for its source just as everyone else did.

I wonder whether he'll steal this glory.

As I pondered the situation, the Sovereign High Bishop spoke with the surrounding blue priests and then raised his hands high into the air. It was a signal to be quiet, and so the hall steadily fell silent once again. The Sovereign High Bishop spoke once stillness ruled. His heavy, ponderous voice echoed throughout the hall.

"That was no blessing of mine. Nay, the light was a blessing from the gods! I believe that the gods were blessing Lady Eglantine's coming-of-age and marriage."

"Me...? Not Prince Anastasius?" I asked. It was a bold proclamation to make, and not one that I immediately understood. What in the world was the Sovereign High Bishop saying? It was outright irresponsible in that it would almost certainly change how royalty would treat us, despite our deliberate efforts to distance ourselves from the throne.

Despite myself, I looked to where the royals were sitting. I couldn't make out their expressions from where we were, but I could imagine Prince Sigiswald was extremely disturbed. I clutched Anastasius's cape before me, unable to hide my anxiety. He, too, looked as though he was deep in thought about something. He must have been as concerned for our future as I was.

Or so I thought. Out of nowhere, he shook his head and muttered, “Did Rozemyne do this...?”

“Lady Rozemyne...? What does she have to do with this?” I asked.

Anastasius hugged me closer and whispered into my ear. “I just recalled that Solange and even Rozemyne herself said she became the master of the library’s magic tools through an abrupt blessing. Could it be...?”

These things seemed so disconnected that I initially couldn’t understand what he was saying at all. It seemed that Lady Rozemyne had told him that she had performed such a blessing at some point in the past.

“She is supposed to be bedridden, but if she has spoken of such blessings before, I suppose it is a more likely explanation than it being a blessing from the gods, as the Sovereign High Bishop wishes us to believe...” I replied.

I had previously considered entering the temple to avoid marriage, so I had read documents related to the temple in the castle’s book room. Klassenberg was a rather old duchy, so one might naturally assume it had an enormous quantity of documents related to the temple... but in reality, there were almost none. They were all apparently in the temple.

Still, the few documents that could be found in the castle said that the divine light of blessings would fall following holy ceremonies. I had thought it was little more than a metaphor, but perhaps blessings such as these had been normal in the past.

“I see that creature causes chaos even when not present herself,” Anastasius said. “Aub Ehrenfest has my sympathy; I can only imagine how he felt receiving reports of this manner while unable to interfere with Academy affairs.”

One did not learn to perform such large-scale blessings during Royal Academy lectures. Perhaps Ehrenfest continued to pass on these ancient ceremonies in the same way that it maintained the ancient custom of archduke candidates entering the temple. If so, it would be plausible for Aub Ehrenfest to know these things.

The audience did not believe the Sovereign High Bishop’s words wholesale, but the air shifted for the graduation ceremony to continue as everyone

concluded it likely was a blessing from the gods—that is, everyone except Aub Ehrenfest, who caught my eye with how he alone was crossing his arms with a difficult frown.

"I knew it—you're a royal princess with the blessing of the gods themselves, Eglantine. Excellent. I am proud to have protected you to the end," Grandfather said, chugging wine and speaking in proud terms of the blessing when I returned to the dormitory.

"Grandfather, what are you saying?!"

"We all saw it," he replied. "The blessing clearly favored you."

It was as though ice-cold water had been poured over my head. I had thought the Sovereign High Bishop was just irresponsibly causing conflict with his words, but if even those in the audience had thought the blessing was for me and shared Grandfather's conclusions, then the circumstances would change yet again.

"There is no denying that the blessing favored you," the aub said. "It seemed quite clear that Prince Anastasius was only blessed on the side as the one you chose."

I was suddenly struck by a wave of dizziness. I had thought I had successfully forestalled a war over the throne after Anastasius announced that he would relinquish the kingship to Prince Sigiswald, but at this rate, things would likely regress to a state even worse than before.

Although, no matter what Grandfather says now, neither the king nor Prince Sigiswald can overturn what Anastasius declared...

There was no doubt that Klassenberg was an enormous power as a greater duchy supporting the king, but we were still placed below royalty. If my grandfather seemed at all disloyal in his attempts to prop me up, then Dunkelfelger, the birthplace of the king's third wife, and Drewanchel, the greater duchy planning to marry Lady Adolphine to Prince Sigiswald, would surely push back.

And Yurgenschmidt has no need for any further wars.

Just how many nobles had been lost in the civil war just a few years prior? Surely no one was oblivious to how much it had weakened our country.

“Grandfather, I am not a royal princess. I am a Klassenberg archduke candidate.”

“You would say that after the gods themselves have made their support of you clear? You are unmistakably a princess. Are you not the late third prince’s daughter? I am glad beyond words that you’ll be regaining your royal status through marriage.”

No matter how many times he called me a royal princess, I had moved to Klassenberg before my baptism and was educated not as royalty but as an archduke candidate. I recalled feeling confused in the distant past when I had moved to Klassenberg from the villa, and suddenly my life and education were entirely unlike what I had been used to. Royalty and archduke candidates were simply raised differently.

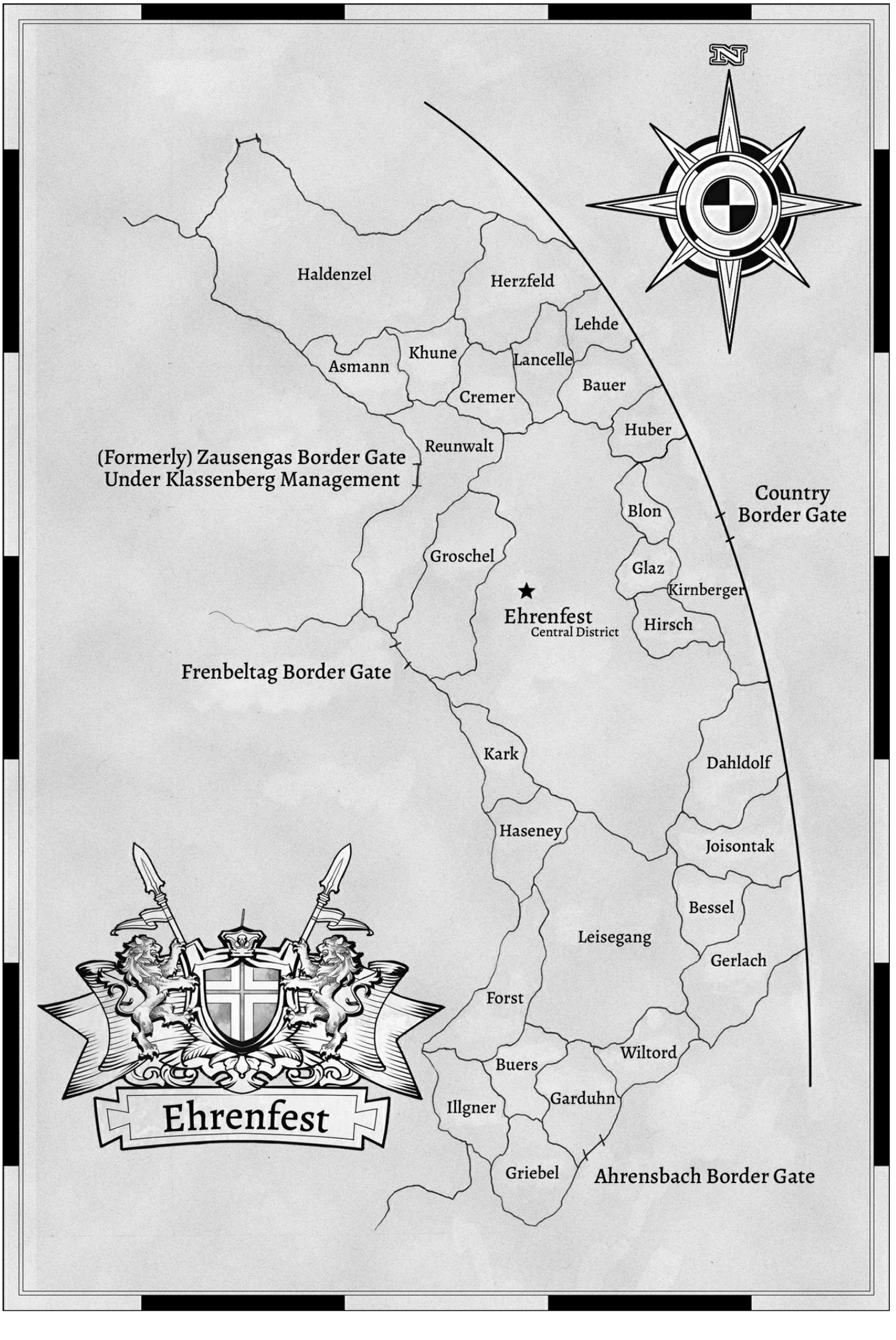
I would likely receive some royal education due to my marriage to a prince, but nothing good would come from expecting natural royalty from someone raised as an archduke candidate such as myself. I was not on the level of Prince Sigiswald or Anastasius, who were raised as royalty from birth.

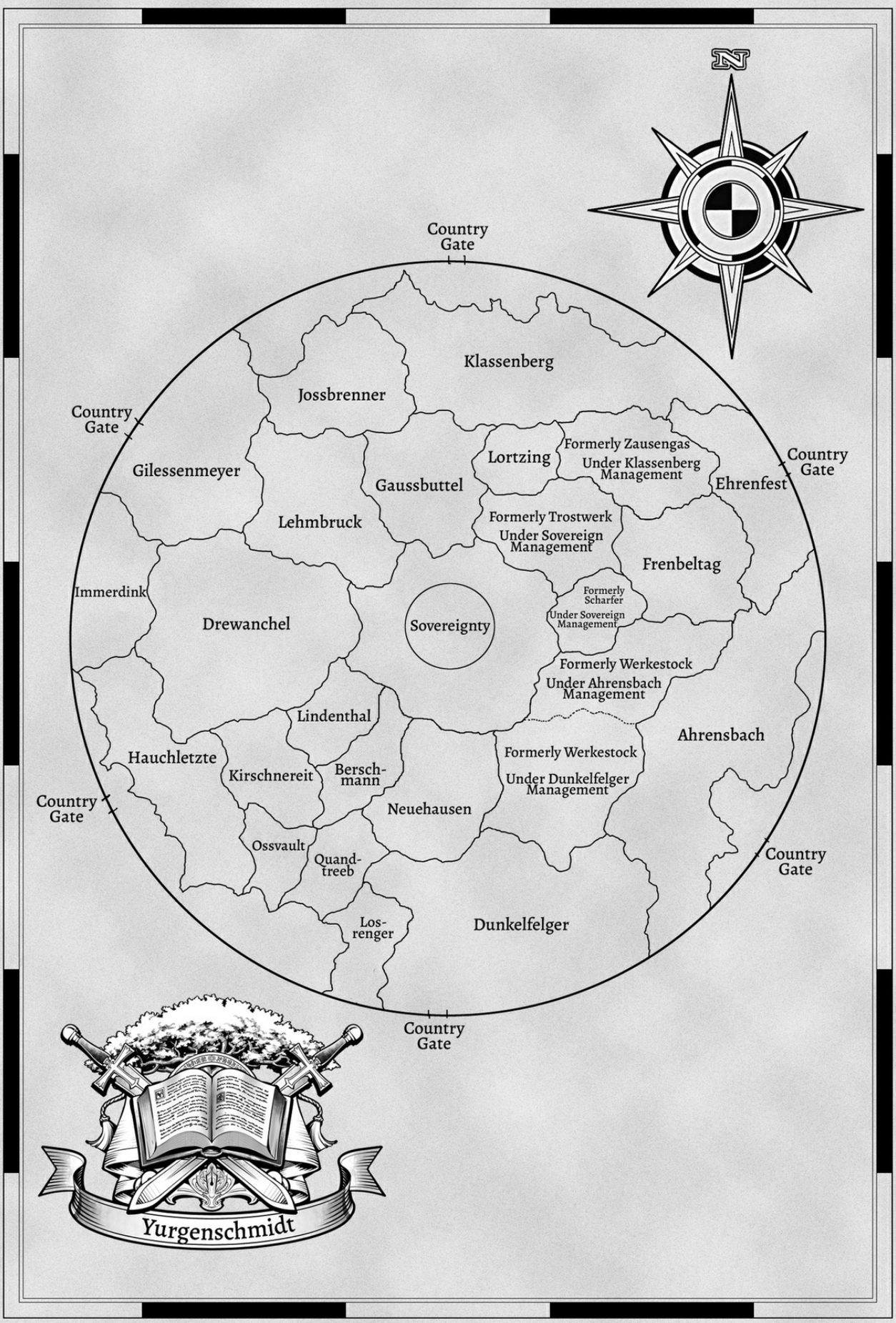
However, the Sovereign High Bishop declared outright that the blessing was from the gods... This could be problematic.

It would be best for Anastasius and me to get married out of the spotlight, while Prince Sigiswald ascended to the throne after marrying Lady Adolphine with the support of a greater duchy... but I had the terrible feeling that the blessing today would prevent things from going so smoothly. Perhaps it would even be a catalyst of great discord.

And I wonder if Lady Rozemyne won’t be at the center of that discord...

Anastasius’s suspicion that Lady Rozemyne was the source of the blessing was not guaranteed to be correct. However, even without evidence, I was certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was.


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 3*.

Rozemyne has been spending so much time in the Royal Academy that it's been quite some time since a volume started with daily life in the temple. Brigitte used to accompany her there, but now Angelica has taken up that position, and that's not the only change.

Despite Angelica being a noble, she does nothing more than guard the door while all the other retainers do paperwork. There isn't a shred of nobility to that, but thanks to her easygoing personality, the attendants there view her in quite a positive light.

One may have thought that socializing in the Royal Academy would calm down with Rozemyne's return, but Ehrenfest continues to receive invitation after invitation to tea parties from girls who want to know more about the duchy's trends. Wilfried ends up in quite a pickle, since he isn't able to refuse duchies of a higher rank. In the end, Rozemyne has to return to the Royal Academy to hold a tea party for all the duchies.

Although Rozemyne doesn't end up attending herself, the Royal Academy's graduation ceremony takes place. Angelica graduates without issue—something her parents are no doubt extremely relieved about. Eglantine's and Angelica's performances are featured in the color illustration. Please behold their beauty.

In the midst of all this, Rozemyne's connection to the lower city becomes weaker and weaker. The contracts between Myne and Lutz are nullified, and the hidden room is sealed off to them. But even so, thanks to Lutz scolding her, and thanks to his assertion that they can maintain their connection by working toward all their promises to one another, Rozemyne manages to face forward without collapsing entirely.

This volume's short stories are told from Lutz's and Eglantine's perspectives.

For Lutz's story, I wrote about how he handled the abrupt goodbye from Rozemyne, and how he dealt with the emotions swirling about within himself. It was a moment where his friendship with Gil deepened further, even outside of when he went on trips as a Gutenberg. I hope you could also feel how her lower city family is changing through Tuuli's reaction to the situation.

For Eglantine's story, I wrote about what the dormitories of other duchies are like and her experience when the blessing fell during the graduation ceremony. Here you can see a dorm supervisor actually being present in the dormitory, serving the archducal family when they visit, and gathering information across the Royal Academy for the benefit of their home duchy. Please keep in mind that this is normal; Ehrenfest is a strange exception.

One thing I focused on more than I had initially expected was the description of Eglantine's past. It's the source of her trauma and what instilled in her a dislike of war so strong that she would even enter the temple to avoid it.

This volume finally has an illustration of Hannelore, which web novel readers have been waiting ever so long for. There's also Philine's younger brother, Konrad, and the cross-dressing Justus-slash-Gudrun, a character who boasts immense popularity among a certain subset of readers. Also included is Zahm, the temple attendant. You might notice that Eglantine's and Angelica's hairstyles have changed now that they've come of age, although they haven't changed at all on the inside. (Haha.)

Moving on—somehow, there are four *Bookworm* releases being published in a row: Part 4 Volume 4 in September, *Royal Academy Stories: First Year* in October, the third fanbook in November, and Part 4 Volume 5 in December! Considering that the seventh volume of the manga adaptation is going to be released in August, that's five straight months of *Bookworm*-related material. Wowzers!

Royal Academy Stories: First Year exists for the Wilfried and Hannelore short stories that are currently on the short story dumping ground of my Narou page, but since there aren't enough to fill a whole volume, about two-thirds of the volume will be original content. This book is going to show the lives of retainers and nobles from other duchies one generally wouldn't get to see from Rozemyne's perspective. Expect to see stories told from the perspectives of

Judithe and Angelica, as well as a whole bunch from the perspectives of characters I've never had as narrators before.

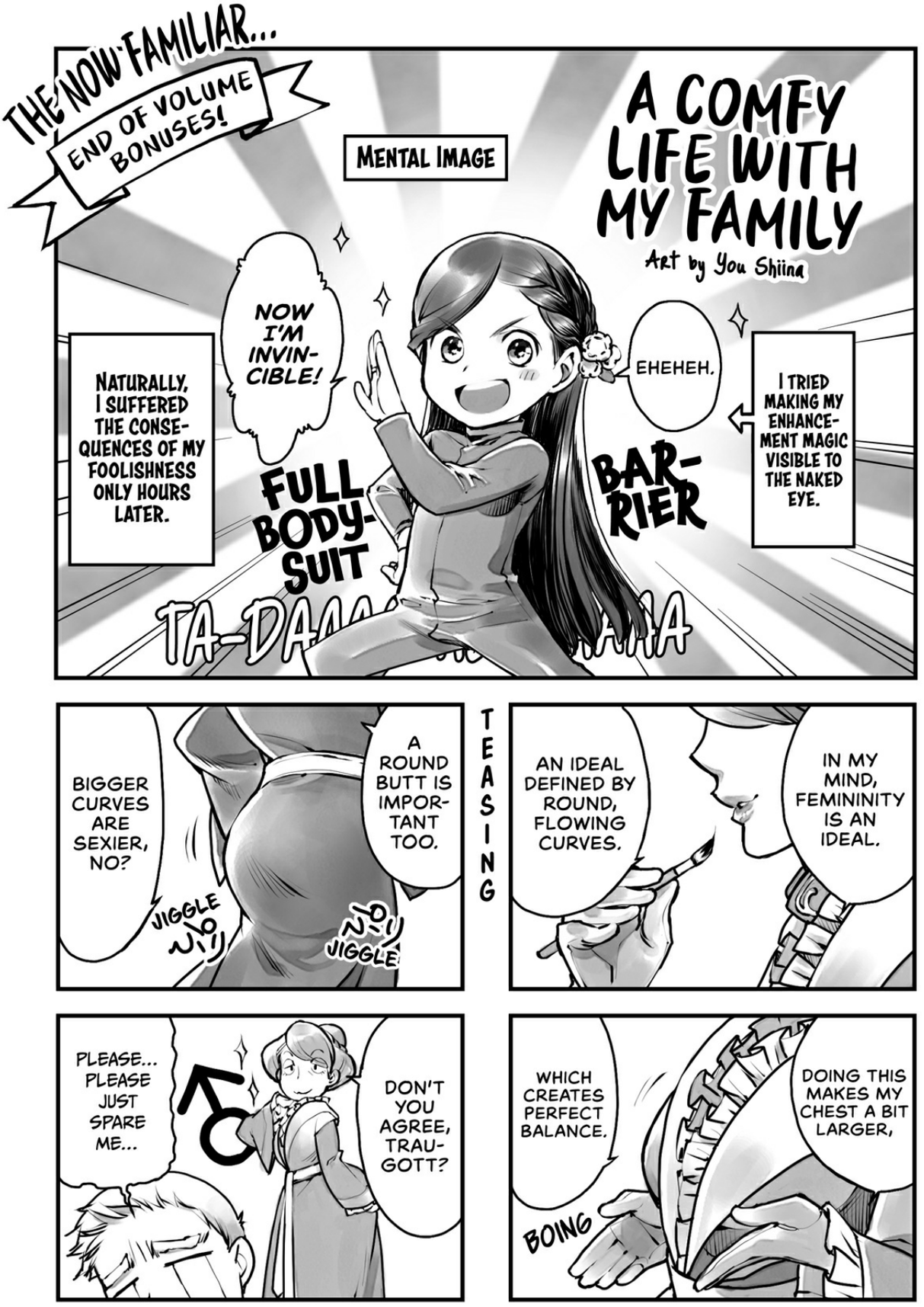
Well, that's the plan, at least, but at the moment of my writing this afterword, I haven't actually finished the script. I'm working my brain at full capacity to think up the stories while the deadline approaches all too quickly.

The third fanbook is going to be similar in style to the first one and will be packed with illustrations from Shiina You-sama. Also inside are a new short story from me, as well as another Q&A. We're also planning to include original manga from Suzuka-san and Namino-san, plus a map that was handed out at a printing museum last year. Please look forward to it.

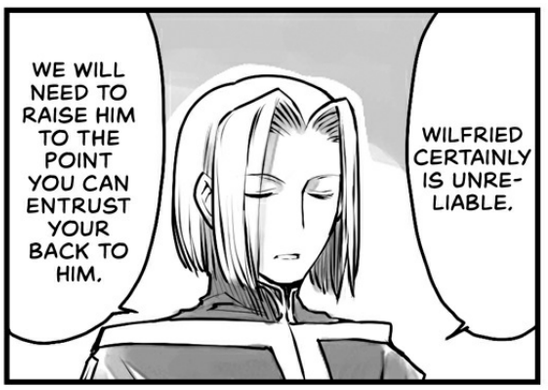
This volume's cover art focuses on the lower city characters. Rozemyne's expression really tugs on my heartstrings. In contrast, the color illustration focuses on the nobles. There's the apprentice scholars, Eglantine and Angelica's graduation ceremony, the tea party attendees, and even *that* scene with Ferdinand and Rozemyne! Shiina You-sama, thank you so much.

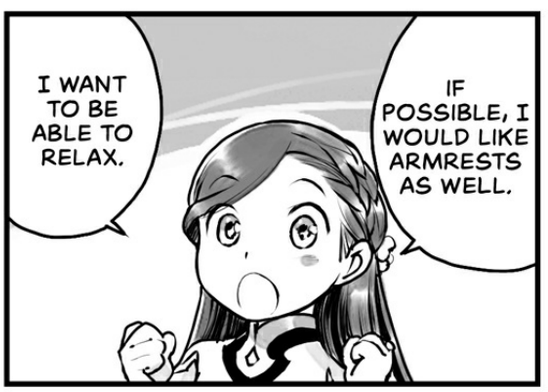
And finally, I offer up my highest thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 4 Volume 4.

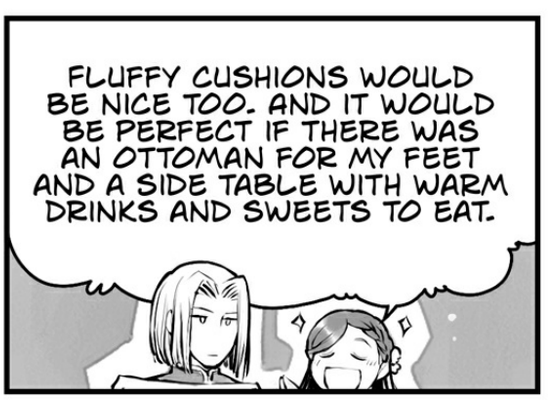
April 2018, Miya Kazuki


THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME BONUSES!
MENTAL IMAGE
A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY
Art by You Shiina
NOW I'M INVINCIBLE!
EHEHEH.
I TRIED MAKING MY ENHANCEMENT MAGIC VISIBLE TO THE NAKED EYE.
NATURALLY, I SUFFERED THE CONSEQUENCES OF MY FOOLISHNESS ONLY HOURS LATER.
FULL BODY-SUIT
BARRIER
TA-DAAA
A ROUND BUTT IS IMPORTANT TOO.
BIGGER CURVES ARE SEXIER, NO?
JIGGLE
JIGGLE
TEASING
IN MY MIND, FEMININITY IS AN IDEAL.
AN IDEAL DEFINED BY ROUND, FLOWING CURVES.
DOING THIS MAKES MY CHEST A BIT LARGER,
WHICH CREATES PERFECT BALANCE.
BOING
DON'T YOU AGREE, TRAUGOTT?
PLEASE... PLEASE JUST SPARE ME...

HIGH STANDARDS

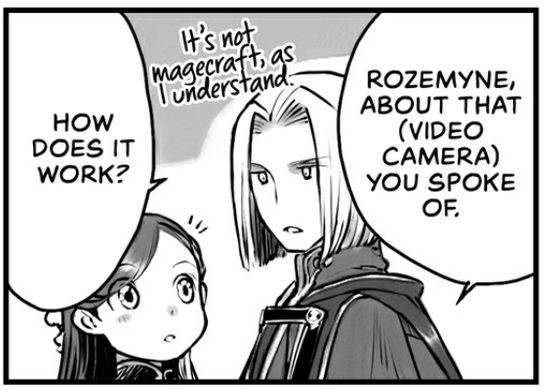


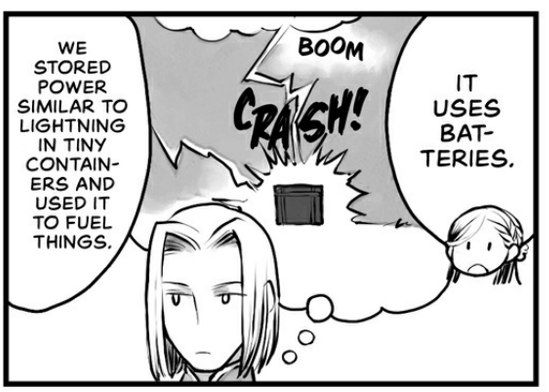


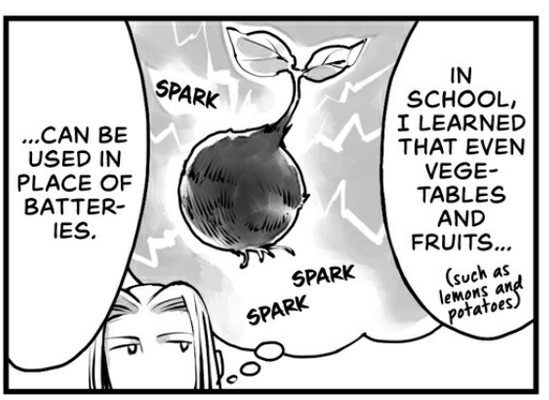


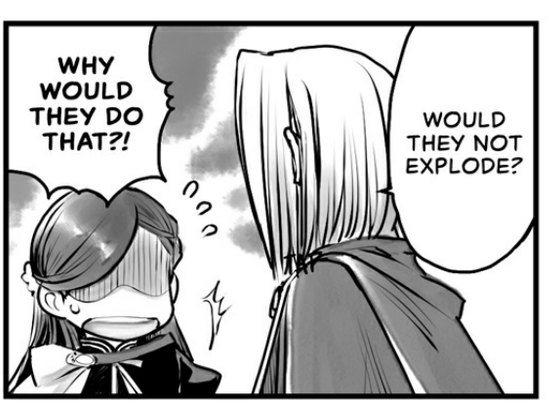


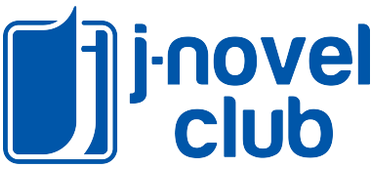
MY COMMON SENSE ISN'T COMMON AT ALL











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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 4 Founder of the Royal Academy's So-Called Library Committee Volume 3

by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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