
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. 4
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.

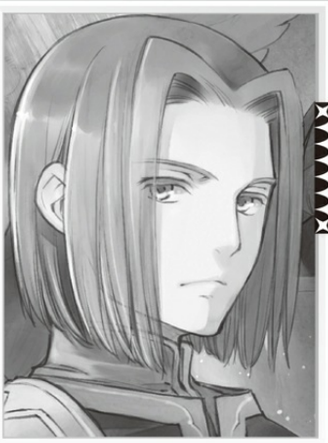
Ehrenfest's Archduke Candidates



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 medknight.



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



Leonore
A fourth-year apprentice archknight.

Rozemyne's Retainers



Judithe
A second-year apprentice medknight.



Damuel
A layknight.

Ottilie
Hartmut's mother and an archattendant.

Rozemyne's Personnel

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



Hirschur
Ehrenfest's dorm supervisor. Previously taught Ferdinand.

Royal Academy Professors

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.

Other Royal Academy Figures

- **Schwartz** — A library magic tool.
- **Weiss** — A library magic tool.

Temple Attendants

- **Fran** — In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.
- **Zahm** — In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.
- **Nicola** — A cook who helps in 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.

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.
- **Oswald** — Wilfried's head attendant.
- **Claudio** — Giebe Haldenzel. Elvira's older brother.
- **Ernesta** — Charlotte's guard knight and a mednoble.
- **Veronica** — Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.
- **Anastasius** — The Sovereignty's second prince.
- **Eglantine** — A member of the Klassenberg archducal family.
- **Gieselfried** — Aub Ahrensbach.
- **Georgine** — Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.

Gutenbergs

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

Lower City Family

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

Lower City Merchants

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

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.
- **Konrad** — Philine's little brother, now in the orphanage.

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Prologue

They say there are many points in one's life when fate diverges dramatically. It was after finishing his first year in the Royal Academy and upon returning to Ehrenfest that Wilfried experienced one such point for himself.

There were only three people in the archduke's office: Wilfried, Karstedt, and the archduke himself. The tension in the room was so thick that one could have cut through it with a knife; it was extremely rare for Sylvester to dismiss their retainers and speak to his son not as the aub, but as a father. The purpose of their discussion, Sylvester revealed, was to gauge what Wilfried thought about being engaged to his adopted younger sister, Rozemyne.

"I've arranged this talk so I can hear your opinion away from anyone who might try to sway you," Sylvester said. "So, what do you think about this?"

Wilfried hadn't the slightest idea why an engagement was being proposed with Rozemyne, of all people. He knew that many other duchies had taken an interest in meeting with and even marrying her, considering the trends she had started in the Royal Academy—he had even replied to many such potential suitors by alluding to the possibility that her marriage prospects would be settled at the upcoming Archduke Conference. Not once, however, had it occurred to him that *he* might be the one engaged to her.

"Considering that she's an archduke candidate who came first-in-class and already has powerful friends, I had assumed she was going to marry someone from a high-ranking duchy," Wilfried replied cautiously.

"You're right. And if she were a normal archduke candidate, that's what I would have done. But we can't risk sending Rozemyne to another duchy."

A normal archduke candidate...? The peculiar response gave Wilfried pause; Sylvester clearly knew something that he didn't.

Everyone in the Royal Academy had been talking about how abnormal it was for Rozemyne to have placed first-in-class even after spending two years in a

jureve, but this felt like more than that. It was as though Sylvester was referring to something even more abnormal, even more significant... But those concerns faded away as Sylvester started listing off more standard reasons they couldn't allow her to go.

"As you know, I adopted Rozemyne to spread throughout the duchy the industries she started in the temple. Nobody knows more about them than she does, so we suffered a lot during the two years she was asleep. The new industries haven't yet taken root in Ehrenfest; in fact, my guess is that we'll need at least another ten years before they do."

Perhaps it should have come across as odd to Wilfried that a supposed child was developing industries for personal gain before she had even been baptized or that she knew the most about these industries when Ferdinand was in the temple as her guardian. But he had seen her fount of knowledge and crippling obsession with books firsthand, and so he accepted Sylvester's words without any particular doubts.

"It does make sense that keeping Rozemyne unmarried for ten years isn't an option when other duchies are already expressing interest in her..." Wilfried mused. It was one thing to have a man remain unwed, but unmarried women were considered past their prime after entering their twenties. If they intended to marry her to another duchy, it would need to be within the next six or seven years; ten simply wasn't an option.

"Right. Not to mention, if we were to marry Rozemyne off to a higher-ranking duchy, we can assume it would soon start its own thriving printing industry," Sylvester said. "And that wouldn't exactly be good for Ehrenfest."

Rozemyne's obsession with books was no laughing matter—anyone could see that she would start spreading printing wherever she went, and if she were married to a prosperous duchy with excessive wealth and manpower, their progress in the industry would surpass Ehrenfest's in the blink of an eye.

Wilfried immediately came to realize that, as the archduke, his father was making the right decision in stopping Rozemyne from marrying into another duchy.

"Plus, there's way too much uncertainty with her," Sylvester continued. "We

don’t know if she’s too sickly to bear children, and while Ferdinand says she’s been getting healthier by the day since waking up from the jureve, we’ve got no proof she’ll stay healthy forever.”

Prior to the poisoning incident, Rozemyne had been so weak that running around or getting hit with a snowball was enough to make her collapse. She was showing gradual improvement, but would she recover enough to be fully healthy? Those who married into other duchies as first wives would often find their hold on their position become extremely precarious if they were unable to have children.

“And that’s not all. Rozemyne’s obsession with books makes her painfully shortsighted, and she speaks and acts in ways that are completely inappropriate for a noble. Sure, she’s achieving top grades, but her poor behavior makes her a problem child. She’s caused you a lot of problems in the Royal Academy, right? Imagine the damage she might do if she moved to another duchy.”

Rozemyne’s... a problem child...?

Sylvester had spoken with a wry smile, as though he expected nothing but agreement... but in truth, Wilfried was shocked beyond words. Despite having only recently been baptized herself, Rozemyne had identified the serious gaps in his education and then composed for him a learning schedule centered around resources she had made herself. She had completed her studies as a member of the archducal family while at the same time performing her duties in the temple, somehow managing to learn in a matter of days that which had taken Wilfried an entire month. But most shocking of all, despite having slept for two years after protecting Charlotte, she had still managed to come first-in-class in the Royal Academy, achieving better grades than literally all of her peers.

And yet, Sylvester was calling her a problem child. Wilfried felt a wave of disappointment wash over him; the girl who had set the bar to a seemingly unattainable height was now no better than he was. It was as though something he had considered a paragon of perfection had suddenly been revealed to have been heavily flawed all along.

But, thinking about it, Father is right...

Rozemyne was selfish when it came to books and the library—she never showed restraint, nor did she allow her opinion to be swayed. Furthermore, she was causing major problems during socializing by forming so many bonds with royalty and nobles from the higher-ranking duchies. Things had gotten so bad, in fact, that Sylvester had ordered her to sit out the Interduchy Tournament and the award ceremony. Wilfried now understood that this was because his father had determined that not taking such actions would have caused great harm to the duchy.

I see... She is *a problem child.*

No longer was Rozemyne the perfect archduke candidate, well above anyone's reach. She had become a major cause for concern, one who couldn't risk being married to another duchy.

As Wilfried nodded along in agreement, Sylvester's expression clouded a little. "Not to mention, Rozemyne will probably want to stay in Ehrenfest forever," he said. "At the very least, I want to grant her that."

Rozemyne apparently had some reason for wanting to stay in Ehrenfest. Wilfried wasn't sure what that reason was, but he wasn't particularly curious either. If she had instead wanted to marry into another duchy but was being made to stay in Ehrenfest for political reasons, perhaps he would have been more interested... but he was curious about something else.

"I understand why we can't send Rozemyne to another duchy... but why engage her to me?"

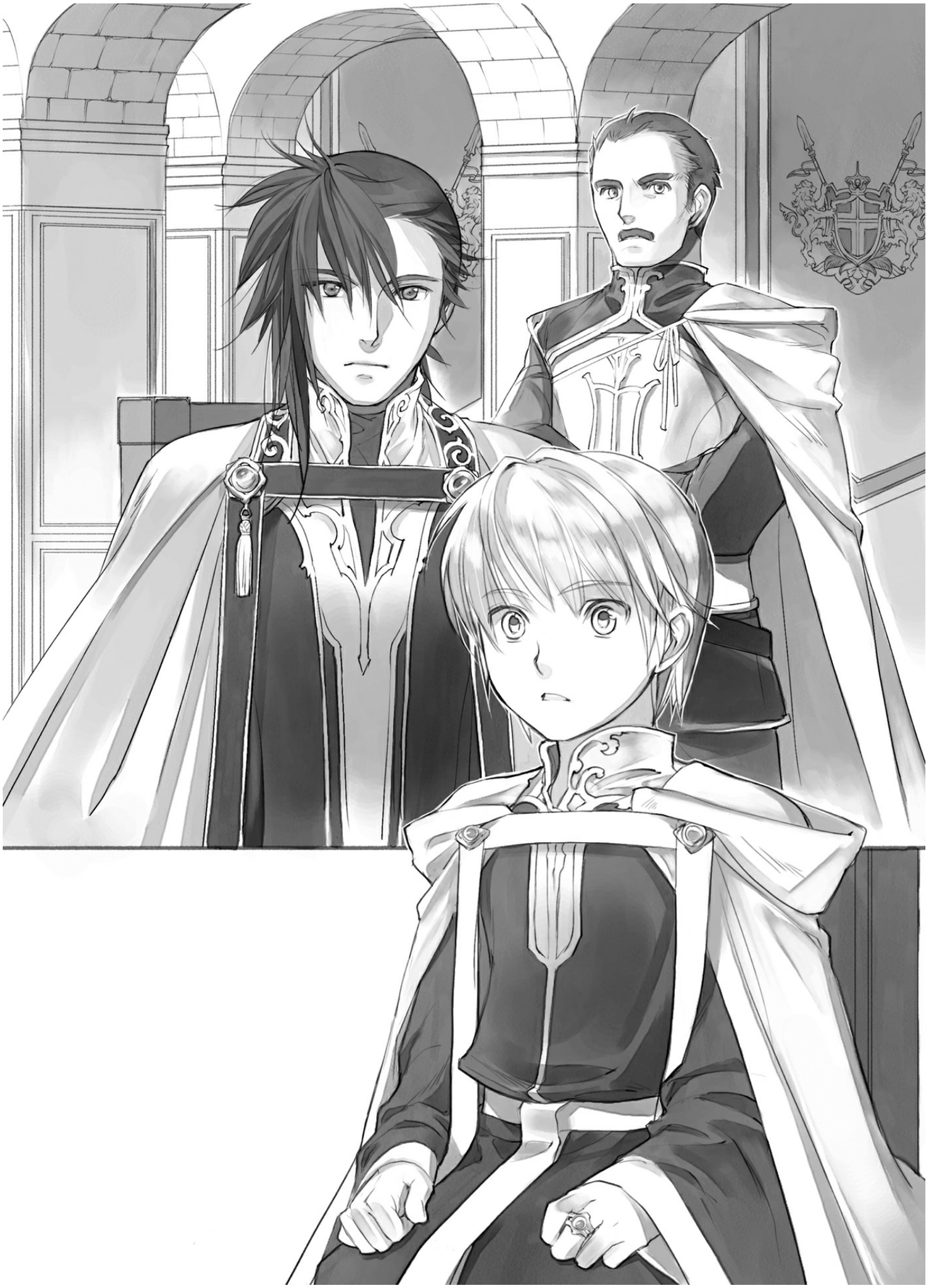
"Because you're the best man for the job. The only members of the archducal family she can marry are you, Ferdinand, and Melchior."

Plus Lord Bonifatius and Father himself, but I see the problems there.

"Melchior's not an option, since he hasn't been baptized and therefore won't receive the king's approval during the Archduke Conference in spring. Ferdinand isn't an option right now either, since the Leisegangs want him to be the next archduke."

"For what reason?" Wilfried asked. "Does Uncle have some history or problem stopping him from becoming the archduke?"

As far as Wilfried was concerned, Ferdinand was a skilled member of the archducal family and not someone he could compete with after he came of age. It was his understanding that his grandmother, Veronica, had only hated Ferdinand and taken such extreme precautions to prevent him from becoming the archduke because he wasn't her blood relative, but there didn't seem to be any bad blood between Sylvester and Ferdinand. In fact, surely Ferdinand would make a good archduke.



“It wouldn’t be good for Ferdinand to become the next archduke. First of all, it’s a known fact that he entered the temple before, and even if it was to evade Mother’s constant attacks, it’s still a political scandal. It’ll no doubt come up every single time we feud with another duchy.” Sylvester then grimaced. “He’d probably handle that on his own somehow, but we don’t need him struggling even more than he already is.”

Again, Wilfried nodded his understanding. He had been unaware that entering the temple was enough to tarnish a noble’s reputation.

“Secondly, Ferdinand becoming the archduke would weaken your and your siblings’ positions. There’s no avoiding that people get treated differently based on how close they are to the ruling aub. Charlotte’s going to be married to another duchy, and her marriage prospects will change dramatically depending on whether the next archduke is her blood-related brother or my half-brother.”

Wilfried swallowed hard; he hadn’t thought about his younger siblings’ futures. Of all the archduke candidates from other duchies he had met at the Royal Academy, it was true that few were on good terms with their half-siblings. It was something he had largely forgotten about—after all, he and Rozemyne got along well, as did Sylvester and Ferdinand—but half-siblings were generally treated as being from separate families.

“Thirdly, Florencia’s and my blood relations to Frenbeltag’s archducal couple means our two duchies are tightly knit. There’d be no avoiding our diplomatic relationship crumbling if my half-brother and adopted daughter took our place, and we can’t afford to make enemies of the west when we’re already on bad terms with Ahrensbach to the south.”

Wilfried paled as he recalled their duchy’s position on the map. Ferdinand marrying Rozemyne and becoming the next archduke would satisfy the Leisegangs but gravely damage interduchy relations. The same strong blood relations that were currently helping Ehrenfest would serve to hinder it.

“And lastly... This is a personal reason, but it’s also the most important reason for me. To Florencia, Ferdinand becoming the archduke would be a slap in the face after all the years she’s struggled and endured here. I couldn’t do that to her.”

Florencia had married into Ehrenfest as Sylvester's first wife and given him three children after his passionate propositions won her over. To have his half-brother and adopted daughter become the next archducal couple would lead to rampant speculation among the other duchies that Florencia and her children were in some way terribly defective.

It'd be a slap in Mother's face...?

Veronica had scorned Florencia to no end, even going as far as to snatch her dear son away the moment he was born. Her actions had torn Florencia apart, and it was only after learning this that Wilfried realized just how much his mother loved him. He agreed with Sylvester with all his heart—he couldn't make her any sadder than he had already.

"I thought about marrying Rozemyne down in status to an archnoble, but then we wouldn't be able to replenish the foundation's mana properly," Sylvester explained. "The Leisegangs would kick up a fuss too. All in all, it'd be a huge loss for Ehrenfest."

"I guess that really does just leave me..." Wilfried said. It spoke volumes to how few options Ehrenfest had that they would choose someone whose reputation was stained from having entered the Ivory Tower.

Sylvester's expression twisted ever so slightly. "She's not a bad match for you, y'know? You're in a tough spot, since you were raised by my mother and involved in the Ivory Tower incident. It's not rare for people in situations like yours to get a second chance of sorts through marriage and end up improving their position. Marrying Rozemyne will serve to prop you up in the same way it would have propped up Ferdinand."

Even nobles outside of the archducal family often married for the sake of greater protection, mana, manpower, wealth, and connections. Marriage was just one tool in the arsenal—a single bargaining chip to be placed on the table.

"No matter how hard you work now, nobles are going to judge you harshly. If you marry Rozemyne, however, you'll secure and publicly establish your position as the next archduke. The Leisegangs will have no choice but to support you as her husband," Sylvester said. "Speaking long-term, this should even repair the divide between the Leisegangs and the former Veronica faction.

It’ll also grant the former’s longstanding wish to have an archduke who carries their blood, so that should make them easier to deal with.”

But no matter how understandable Sylvester’s reasons and predictions were, Wilfried couldn’t imagine a future where he was married to Rozemyne. It just didn’t feel right, somehow.

“What does Rozemyne think?” Wilfried asked after a moment, avoiding a direct answer to Sylvester’s initial question.

Sylvester winced slightly as though he had just bitten into something nasty. “We warned her about the likelihood of a political marriage back when her adoption first went through. According to her, she doesn’t care who we marry her to as long as she gets full access to the book rooms in the castle and the temple. And if we marry her to another duchy, her only concern is how many books they have.”

In other words, Wilfried was going to be less important to her than the book rooms. It was exactly the response one would expect from Rozemyne, but that didn’t make it any more pleasant to hear. It wasn’t the kind of reason he wanted a girl to have for marrying him.

“Er, Father... What will happen if I refuse to marry Rozemyne?” Wilfried asked. He had been called here to voice his opinion, not accept an archducal order, which meant there was bound to be some other option available.

Sylvester grimaced again, this time making no effort to hide his bitterness. “Then, Rozemyne will become my second wife,” he answered.

“What?!” Wilfried exclaimed, screwing up his face in disbelief. He hadn’t expected that response in the slightest—especially not from Sylvester, who had refused to take a second wife and declared publicly that he needed only Florencia.

“Bonifatius isn’t an option since he and Rozemyne are blood relatives, but she and I share no such connection. I can stop other duchies from taking her by marrying her myself... but the other duchies won’t be happy about that at all, and I still only want Florencia as my wife. It would end up being a purely political marriage, and not one that would make anyone happy.”

Sylvester wasn't wrong about that. The very idea that he might take Rozemyne—a girl who was more or less the same age as his son—as his second wife made Wilfried sick to his stomach. Charlotte would no doubt lose her mind as well.

"Can I talk to Oswald and the others about this?" Wilfried asked. "It's all just so sudden, I..."

"I was hoping that you'd decide here, but alright. I want to announce Rozemyne's engagement to the nobles at the spring celebration feast, so try to get back to me as soon as you can."

Upon returning to his room, Wilfried discussed with his retainers whether it was a good idea for him to get engaged to Rozemyne. The Ivory Tower incident had made it clear to him that their futures were directly connected to his own, and so he thought it only logical that he should ask their opinions.

"Where's this coming from?" was the response he received. "Neither of you are old enough to be talking about marriage, are you?"

Nobody could blame his retainers for being so surprised—it was of the utmost importance to ensure that one's partner had a mana quantity that was compatible with one's own, and nobles only began to sense those with a similar mana quantity to themselves when they hit puberty. Setting up an engagement at too young an age was a risky move, as there was always a chance the two due to get married wouldn't be compatible after all. Under such circumstances, the engagement would either be canceled, or it would continue anyway at the cost of them never having children.

"We can't send Rozemyne to another duchy before the new industries take root, but other duchies are already probing about whether she's available. Father wants an engagement that can earn the king's approval and ward off other hopeful suitors at the upcoming Archduke Conference."

"Aah. She did make quite a stir at the Royal Academy..." His apprentice retainers nodded, having seen her shenanigans firsthand.

"Despite it being quite rare for women to take the position, the Ivory Tower incident means that Charlotte is the strongest candidate among the nobility to

become the next aub," Oswald said. "However, if you marry Lady Rozemyne, will you not become the next archduke instead?"

"Father said the same thing. According to him, whoever marries her is all but guaranteed to become the next archduke," Wilfried replied with an affirming nod. His retainers blinked in surprise a few times and then exchanged looks.

"But did Lady Rozemyne not say she intends to be Lady Charlotte's ally?"

"Either way, she can't refuse the engagement if the archduke orders it."

"In regard to bringing the former Veronica faction into the future, you would do a much better job than Lord Melchior. It really is in the best interests of the duchy for you to become the next archduke."

Wilfried slowly looked around as his retainers spoke their thoughts. They were all wearing delighted expressions, no doubt celebrating the idea that he might be engaged to Rozemyne.

"If you get engaged to Lady Rozemyne, Lady Charlotte will end up being removed from the race entirely. This is the perfect opportunity for you, Lord Wilfried." These words of support came from Ignaz, one of the apprentice scholars, and the other retainers all nodded along in agreement.

Wilfried felt a pang of guilt knowing that he would be getting ahead of Charlotte through a simple engagement, but he shook his head and rejected those feelings.

Father said it's normal to use marriage to improve one's situation. This isn't cowardly or unfair in the least.

"You don't seem happy about this, Lord Wilfried, but does this being an option at all not prove that the aub has recognized your efforts and growth?" Lamprecht asked. "We as your retainers have even been allowed to learn the mana compression method, which is nothing short of a significant development."

"Lamprecht is correct. Your perseverance in continuing to work hard despite the Ivory Tower incident is being rewarded," Oswald added.

Wilfried was overjoyed to receive this praise; his efforts really were being

appreciated. He was filled with an indescribable sense of satisfaction, as if everything was finally starting to bear fruit. It put him more in the mood to view his engagement with Rozemyne optimistically.

“Is it a good idea for me to get engaged to Rozemyne...? I mean, I understand that it means we’ll get married in the future, but I don’t even know what marriage really is...”

“As you and Lady Rozemyne are not yet of an age where mana can be sensed, it will only be at a later date that you both truly understand. Considering your position now, however, this is a very good opportunity for you.”

“Couples are family in the same way that siblings are, so while you would be building a new relationship, it would not be too different from what you have now.”

“There are many political marriages that absolutely have to happen despite the two involved not seeming compatible at all, so at the very least, this isn’t as bad as it could be.”

“Fear not; I believe you will grow to be a happy couple, in the same way that your parents are.”

His adult retainers maintained that, even though he didn’t understand now, he would surely come to understand in time. Wilfried couldn’t intuitively understand marriage, considering that he had been raised by his grandmother, but he at least recognized that his parents were on really good terms. Perhaps he and Rozemyne would be the same way.

Hm. That’s not bad at all.

Wilfried nodded to himself, imagining the kindness he had seen Florencia give Sylvester on a regular basis. Rozemyne always treated him harshly despite being so sweet with Charlotte, but if this engagement made her start being nice to him as well, it might not be all that bad.

“Following this engagement, Lady Rozemyne will certainly contain the Leisegangs, as they are her family. That will make future politics much easier for you.”

“Right. I can just leave the Leisegangs to Rozemyne.”

It was an especially alluring prospect, considering that, as it stood, the majority of the nobles voicing complaints were those affiliated with the Leisegangs. The more Wilfried listened to his retainers, the more motivated he became to accept the engagement. This optimism reassured him that discussing things with them had been the right decision after all.

“Hm... I understand all of your perspectives. I’ll accept the engagement with Rozemyne,” Wilfried said with resolve, earning cheers from his retainers.

The Feast Celebrating Spring

The feast marking the end of winter socializing and celebrating spring was due to be held a few days after I said my goodbyes to Lutz and returned to the castle. Following its conclusion, the giebes would return to their home provinces and spring would officially begin.

“Would this outfit not suit you perfectly, milady?” Rihyarda asked.

“Given that this is the spring feast, I believe this green one is much more preferable,” Brunhilde replied.

Rihyarda and Brunhilde had chased me down the moment I returned to my castle chambers, each with an outfit in hand. I looked between the clothes and their intense expressions, but I had no idea which was the right call.

And honestly, I don’t care which one I wear.

I couldn’t help but falter in the face of such ferocity, buying time for Lieseleta to slide between us and hold out a hairpin. It was the one I had gotten most recently—the one I had purchased from Tuuli when ordering the one for Eglantine.

“Lady Rozemyne, will this hairpin do for the feast?” Lieseleta asked.

“Indeed. I will use this new one,” I replied with a nod.

Lieseleta turned to smile at Rihyarda and Brunhilde. “I believe the outfit Ottilie selected to begin with will best suit this hairpin. Shall I bring it for you?”

“Please do.”

Once my outfit was selected, my attendants proceeded to seek permission for each accessory I was going to wear, down to my shoes. It didn’t require much effort on my part; I merely granted permission as they lined them up before me one by one.

“Lady Rozemyne, what was decided during the meeting with the merchants at the temple? We have finished making the documents necessary for us to

prepare our entry into the printing industry," Hartmut said, showing me the papers. I had just said goodbye to Lutz and the others, so remembering what had happened in the temple made my heart ache. I looked over the documents to distract myself.

"You are quite a skilled scholar, Hartmut. These documents will do just fine. Philine, could you add these to the box we are going to be delivering to Mother?" I asked as I signed the documents and passed them to Philine. I then took out some other documents from a box we had brought with us from the temple and held them out to Hartmut. "These are Justus's records of the meeting with the Plantin Company and my opinion piece on the subject. His reports are quite well put together, such that you may wish to follow his example—although I would recommend that you not attempt to learn the one unusual talent he displayed in the Royal Academy."

"I am not sure his unusual talent should be so easily dismissed; it seems quite useful to me."

The curiosity in his voice sent a wave of panic through me. "It's not for you to learn, Hartmut. Not now, not ever."

"But whyever not? Surely you understand the value of information as well, Lady Rozemyne."

"It just doesn't suit you. Nothing feels off about Justus cross-dressing because he has an androgynous face and is a bit on the shorter side, but you are more tall than not, Hartmut. You also have broad shoulders, and you are still in your growing period, are you not?"

Hartmut had grown a bit over the winter and that would probably continue. It wouldn't be long before he just wasn't built for dressing as a girl.

"Furthermore, it's not easy to cross-dress in a way that draws no suspicion. Justus mastered the adoption of vocalization, language, and behaviors after years of grueling work and research in order to satisfy his obsessions, but without such experience, such attempts would only end in disaster."

Ferdinand might have seen no issue with having a cross-dresser in his service, but I certainly didn't want one. Hartmut was giving me a hard enough time already, what with his attempts to spread the Legend of the Saint and his desire

to make researching me his life's work.

"If you cross-dress, I will have you relieved of your retainer duties at once," I said, finalizing my thoughts on the matter.

"Now, that wouldn't do. I suppose I'll need to give up on cross-dressing after all..." Hartmut murmured, his shoulders slumped in disappointment. I let out a relieved sigh, and I saw that Ottilie and Rihyarda were making equally relieved expressions.

Everyone was busy with their own work, so I started making progress on what I needed to do as well. I was going to fulfill my promise to Lutz by making more books, and to that end, I needed to prepare more manuscripts to be printed. I began editing the textbook transcriptions from the Royal Academy and adding to the romance story I had stopped partway through until, soon enough, Lieseleta called out to me.

"Lady Rozemyne, Lady Charlotte has invited you to a tea party. It is a little sudden, but she has suggested tomorrow afternoon."

"So long as it won't cause any problems among my attendants, I am more than happy to accept," I replied. As far as I was concerned, my schedule was free until the feast.

"Lady Charlotte will surely be overjoyed; she has been waiting for your return this entire time," Lieseleta said with a gentle smile. "I will pass on your response at once."

Wilfried was also invited, which meant it was going to be a tea party between us three siblings. Thinking about it, this was the first time we were having such a tea party. It began peacefully, with me having brought sweets of my own for us to share.

"My apologies for the sudden invitation," Charlotte said. "I wanted us to distribute the Spring Prayer workload now rather than later, so that we'll each know what preparations we'll need to make."

Spring Prayer was our first topic of discussion. Wilfried and Charlotte were apparently going to help out this year as well, so we spread out a map of the duchy and started going over who would cover which areas.

As the blue priests would deliver chalices to the giebe-ruled provinces, we only needed to travel around the Central District. If we included Ferdinand, we had four people at hand, which really cut down the area each of us needed to cover. Perhaps Spring Prayer would be over before we knew it this year.

"I am scheduled to take the Gutenbergs and leave for Haldenzel's Spring Prayer once our duties in the Central District are complete. I would also like to check up on Hasse, and so it would be convenient for me to handle the east side of the district, where the city is located."

"The people of Hasse certainly think highly of you, Sister. I see no issue in entrusting the east to you. I'm sure those in the monastery will be relieved to see you once again," Charlotte said.

"Yeah." Wilfried nodded in agreement. "Rozemyne for the east side, then."

We ultimately decided that Charlotte would cover the south, Wilfried the west, and Ferdinand the north. All we needed now was for Ferdinand to give his approval.

"Still, do you two truly not mind assisting with Spring Prayer?" I asked. "Will you not find the necessary preparations hard to manage?"

"I have already had my outfit made, so you don't need to worry," Charlotte replied. She was now too tall to wear clothes my size, as she had done last year, and so she had arranged to have her own made after resolving to continue helping me.

"And I had mine made two years ago when Uncle told me to help with the Harvest Festival. I couldn't use your clothes, since they're all covered in embroidery," Wilfried explained. My blue ceremonial robes from my days as a shrine maiden were decorated with patterns depicting flowers and flowing water, so regardless of the actual fit, they weren't something a boy would feel comfortable wearing. It was one thing for him to have worn them during his first Spring Prayer, considering how abruptly the situation had developed, but he didn't want to keep wearing them after that.

"Traveling is no easy matter. Are you going to be okay?"

"The worst part of it all is that potion. It recovers my mana and stamina, sure,

but it tastes absolutely putrid," Wilfried said with a grimace. Charlotte nodded in agreement, wearing a conflicted expression that conveyed a sense of disgust beyond words.

"Indeed. Your temple attendants said that you also stomached those potions while traveling for Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival. To think you would endure so much for our duchy's sake, giving up your mana and drinking scores of those nasty things despite your ill health... I remember thinking at the time that you were more than a saint—that you were, in truth, a goddess. To make matters worse, the taste lingers for so long that it even taints meals eaten days later. After drinking one for the first time, I truly believed that Uncle was just antagonizing us."

Charlotte gave a heavy sigh while shaking her head, although I couldn't quite understand why; it was my understanding that Fran had accompanied her on both occasions, and the potions he had brought with him were the better-tasting ones. The thought crossed my mind that it might be amusing to have them continue believing the potions were a deliberate provocation nonetheless, but I soon decided to tell them the truth.

"You may trust that Ferdinand was not trying to antagonize you," I said. "In fact, the potions you drank can be considered the very crystallization of his kindness and consideration. They taste positively divine compared to the original ones."

"That foul concoction is brimming with... kindness? Consideration?" Both Wilfried and Charlotte recoiled at the mere thought. I informed them that the original tasted unbelievably worse—with the one positive being that it was much more effective—which earned me looks of clear admiration.

We continued to talk for a while until Charlotte suddenly pressed her lips together and lowered her indigo eyes, as if driven into a metaphorical corner. There was a pause before she raised her head and looked at me head-on.

"Sister, is it true that you will soon be engaged to Wilfried...? I could not believe my ears when Father told me at dinner the other day."

I nodded. "Aub Ehrenfest would not joke about such a matter. As I understand it, this is a critical move for the sake of our duchy." It was the best

possible way to organize the political factions, secure me the book rooms, and cement our ability to make books in Ehrenfest.

Not to mention, marrying into another duchy would mean saying goodbye to everyone in the lower city forever...

Charlotte picked up her tea with a somewhat clouded expression. “It came as quite the surprise for me. I had thought you were going to be my ally, Sister.”

“I’ll always be your ally, Charlotte. You can count on me. I’m your big sister, after all.”

As I puffed out my chest, however, a wave of realization washed over Charlotte. She regarded me with conflicted eyes, as if wanting to point out I was misunderstanding something, but in the end, she just gave a defeated sigh. She glanced over at Wilfried and then looked back at me.

“I find myself worried to death about you, Sister.”

Waaait, what? I just said that she can count on me. Why is she the one suddenly worrying?

“Is this engagement an attempt by Father and Wilfried to deceive you? You must not fall for their ploys, even if you are being offered books in return!” Charlotte exclaimed. Given her concerns, I could hardly admit to her that I was being promised not just a few books but two entire book rooms.

I smiled reflexively, trying to buy time to think of an excuse... but before I could, Wilfried shot Charlotte an annoyed look. “I’m not tricking Rozemyne, alright? I only learned about this engagement the other day. I was just as surprised as you are, since I also thought Rozemyne was on your side. I never thought for a moment that she’d ever agree to get engaged to me.”

Hearing their discussion allowed me to deduce what they were actually referring to when they talked about me “allying” with someone—in this context, it apparently meant supporting someone in their attempt to become the next aub.

“Wilfried... did you end up agreeing to be engaged to me?” I asked.

“Yeah. Everyone said that married couples are family in the same way that

siblings are, so it shouldn't be too different from what we have now. Also... having you on my side will change a lot," Wilfried said, shooting Charlotte a somewhat guilty look.

I knew from Ferdinand that nobles were centralizing around the Leisegangs to prop me up as the next aub. The archnobles in Ehrenfest that owned the largest swathes of land had started to mobilize, and it only made sense that those serving Wilfried would recognize this. In other words, this enthusiasm for our marriage to succeed was coming not from Wilfried, but from his retainers, who wanted to clear their charge's name and organize Ehrenfest beneath his banner before the schism broke the duchy apart.

But that doesn't matter if Wilfried doesn't want to go through with it.

I was fated to have a political marriage no matter what happened, so I asked only that I receive full access to the castle and temple book rooms. Wilfried, on the other hand, was in a different position entirely. He had also been raised differently.

"If you have thought hard about this and come to a conclusion yourself—that is to say, without simply following the opinions of those around you—then I am fine with this decision, Wilfried."

"You are?"

"Yes, of course."

The feast celebrating spring was held the day after our tea party. It marked the end of winter socializing and so it was usually attended by all the nobles in Ehrenfest.

Ferdinand had instructed me to arrive as late as reasonably possible, so I waited with Wilfried and Charlotte for a while in the room closest to the grand hall. The three of us would enter on Rihyarda's signal... although it was a bit more complicated than that, since we each had our retainers with us. Our group was actually pretty sizable.

One's position in the grand hall largely depended on status, with archnobles sitting at the front closest to the stage while laynobles gathered at the back

near the entrance. We marched toward the very front amid the sizable crowd of nobles.

Now that she was serving as one of my retainers, Philine, a laynoble, was going to be positioned at the front among the archnobles for the first time. She was doing her very best to appear calm and keep her head held high, but her expression was stiff, and I could see her legs trembling.

Damuel, who was also a laynoble, allowed a smile to play on his lips as he saw Philine's nervousness. He moved to one side, his new position making it a bit harder for the surrounding nobles to see her. I seemed to recall Brigitte having done the same for him in the past so that he wouldn't have to endure so many eyes being on him.

"I've been in your position before, so I know how you feel right now," Damuel said. "It takes some time, but you just have to get used to it."

"...I'll do my best," Philine replied. She nervously glanced in his direction, and then a calm smile crept onto her face, suggesting that she was feeling at least a little better.

Yup, that's what I like to see! All my retainers on good terms with one another.

Nobles started to approach us, no doubt wanting to greet the archducal children, but the archducal couple arrived before they could. A relieved sigh escaped me. Just as Ferdinand had said, we had managed to get through this without being surrounded.

Sylvester stood on the stage and looked sagely across the grand hall. "Flutrane the Goddess of Water's pure streams have washed away Ewigeliebe the God of Life and rescued Geduldh the Goddess of Earth. Blessed be the melting of the snow!" he declared.

And thus began the feast celebrating spring.

"First, I'll announce our honor students," Sylvester continued. "Five students—an incredible number—achieved high enough grades to be recognized as honor students."

Cheers of approval and eager applause filled the hall. I was the only one to have come first-in-class—there were separate first-in-class achievements for

the knights, attendants, scholars, and archduke candidates once those courses began—but Wilfried, Leonore, Cornelius, and Hartmut were also following me onto the stage as honor students.

"Excellently done, Rozemyne," Sylvester said with a smile. "Here is a gift to commemorate your success. May it prove useful to you."

He presented to me a relatively large feystone. I was impressed with how big it was, and as I looked it over, I noticed others had received stones of their own.

"It is a joyous occasion for there to be so many skilled students among those who will one day support Ehrenfest. All students should hone themselves and work to achieve even higher grades. As was pointed out during the awards ceremony at the Royal Academy, consider it your duty to focus on finishing not just quickly, but with high grades as well."

Thus ended the moment of recognition for the honor students. It seemed the Ehrenfest students had received a warning from the Royal Academy, since so many had been on the very cusp of failing. Our duty next year would be to fix that.

As I returned to my seat, I looked over the honor students and gave a satisfied sigh. "My retainers truly are talented," I declared.

"We have no choice but to be," Cornelius replied with an exasperated expression.

I could understand where he was coming from; I had finished my classes in the Royal Academy as soon as possible and then immediately started visiting the library. My guard knights and scholars had needed to take turns accompanying me, usually sending whoever was free at the time, and since I was going there every single day, my retainers had been forced to desperately finish their classes as fast as possible to keep up with me.

"Furthermore, it would not do for society to observe that you are an honor student while your attendants lag behind," Hartmut added. He then gave me a proud smile. "I am putting in the utmost effort to prove I am worthy of serving as your retainer."

Leonore smiled as well. "It certainly is important for retainers to match their

lord or lady. And I appreciate that, thanks to the Better Grades Committee, there is more cooperation among the courses. Students now find it easier to ask each other questions."

"Speaking of which... Are we all in agreement that the knight course won the competition?" I asked.

I had promised to give the pound cake recipe to the team that passed their tests the quickest and the team with the most honor students. The first-years had without a doubt finished their classes before anyone else *and* ended up with the most honor students, but since the latter achievement was due in part to my own accomplishments, that reward would instead go to those from the knight course, who had come in second.

"I believe so. But the scholars will win next year," Hartmut said with breezy confidence that stirred my competitive spirit. "We are already preparing the textbooks to help with studying."

I looked up at him with pursed lips. "We first-years have finished preparing for our second year as well. Don't assume you'll win so easily."

"Indeed," Brunhilde added. "We did not plan enough this year, but next year, the attendants will achieve victory. After all, making perfect preparations is a part of our job description." There hadn't been any honor students from the attendant course this year, so she was overflowing with motivation. Their written grades hadn't been bad, so they were presumably planning to go all-out on the practical lessons.

"I hate to crush your enthusiasm, but the knights will win again next year," Cornelius said, victory written on his face. "The apprentice guard knights serving Wilfried have started using the mana compression method, and Grandfather is training them personally. Not to mention, Angelica has now graduated, which is a huge advantage for us in itself."

Hartmut nodded and then muttered, "Angelica graduating really hurts our chances..." with a deadly serious expression. Now that I thought about it, he was the one who had suggested taking Stenluke away from her as a handicap.

"I look forward to next year," I said with a laugh.

In any case, it was decided that the pound cake recipe was going to be distributed to the first-years and the students of the knight course as a reward from the Better Grades Committee.

After the honor students were announced, the average grades of all the duchies were announced. It seemed that we had come in eleventh place in the ditter section of the Interduchy Tournament, which, considering our history of coming in fourteenth, went to show how much we had improved.

“Bonifatius will take charge of training the apprentice knights starting this spring to secure even better ditter grades. Do your best, everyone.”

From there, Sylvester went on to discuss the attention Ehrenfest had received during the publishing of scholarly research. Hirschur, our dorm supervisor, had taken the lead and drawn much attention with her presentations on my drivable highbeasts, what she had learned from the royalty’s magic tools, and crest-attached schtappes. Our attendants, meanwhile, had received a middling but respectable appraisal for their hosting at the Interduchy Tournament. Sylvester said they would likely do better next year, considering the situation.

As well as our duchy’s grades having increased across the board, Sylvester went on to explain that rinsham, hairpins, and pound cake had become trendy all throughout the Royal Academy. Archdukes from other duchies would soon be coming to negotiate business agreements for them, and Ehrenfest’s overall ranking was likewise going to be addressed during the next Archduke Conference.

“This year, Ehrenfest started several new trends,” Sylvester said to the nobles. “From this point, we intend to spread printed books as well. I ask for your assistance in this endeavor.”

Last of all, the new adults who had graduated from the Royal Academy were going to be premiered. It would be announced who they were going to work under not as apprentices, but as proper adults. Angelica was among them, meaning she would no longer be serving me as an apprentice, but as a full-fledged guard knight. This meant she could accompany me on guard duty even outside of the Noble’s Quarter.

The air relaxed as everyone assumed the feast was coming to an end, and it

was then that Sylvester raised his voice and continued. “I now have an important announcement regarding the future of Ehrenfest,” he stated, cutting his hand through the air to signal Wilfried and me as a stir ran through the gathered nobles.

“Here we go, Rozemyne.”

I gracefully climbed the steps with Wilfried escorting me, and all eyes in the grand hall fell on us. From atop the stage, I gazed across the gathered nobles. Bonifatius was exuding a fearsome aura as he watched with gritted teeth. Elvira seemed to be more alive than ever; there was a sparkle in her eyes, and the look on her face gave me reason to believe she was writing a romance novel starring Wilfried and me in her head. Ferdinand was keeping an eye on his surroundings with his usual blank expression, as were Eckhart and Justus.

Ferdinand was focusing primarily on Count Leisegang, whose eyes were beginning to widen in disbelief, while Justus was looking at Viscountess Dahldolf. Eckhart was on guard against some other man who appeared to be the giebe of some province, at least judging by his outfit.

I wonder who that is...

As I squinted my eyes in an attempt to get a better look, Sylvester’s booming voice resounded throughout the grand hall. “The mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, the gods of Dark and Light, have guided Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time to weave two threads together, here and now. May the meeting of Rozemyne and my son Wilfried be blessed, and may they be graced with divine protection,” he declared.

It was the standard form for announcing an engagement, but most nobles were looking on with a complete lack of understanding. It was safe to say that nobody had expected this. A solid few moments passed in absolute silence, and then, all of a sudden, the crowd exploded into a frenzy. Everyone exchanged uncertain looks, taking the occasional pause from their rushed conversation to shoot Wilfried and me startled glances as we stood next to each other.

From where I was on the stage, I could see their shocked expressions very clearly. From what I could tell, there were barely any people cheering or expressing approval; some had even gone as far as to shout out “Why?!” or

“How?!”

Count Leisegang was frozen in wide-eyed disbelief, while Viscountess Dahldolf was attempting to cover her agape mouth with her hand. Of all those in the shocked crowd, only the man that Eckhart was watching seemed to be largely unfazed. That, for some reason, made him stand out all the more. I even felt as though our eyes met for a brief moment.

“I will acquire the king’s permission for this engagement at the Archduke Conference,” Sylvester concluded. “That is all.”

And so, the feast celebrating spring came to an end—a feast which had created huge ripples among the nobles.

Meeting the Scholars

The announcement of my engagement had caused such a buzz among the nobles that it was as though someone had kicked the proverbial hornets' nest. It was an understandable response—for the Leisegangs who were striving to have me become the next archduke, they might as well have wasted an entire winter influencing others and gathering what was now completely useless intelligence. They would need to restart from the ground up, figuring out how and where this development would change things.

The former Veronica faction would similarly need to discuss how to move forward. It was clear enough that they didn't think very highly of me at all, and now it was guaranteed that I would serve as a central pillar in the Ehrenfest political sphere moving forward.

By the time I finished breakfast, I was flooded with letters requesting emergency meetings with me, causing a bit of a panic among my retainers. How many requests there were and the importance of the people making them were irrelevant; my guardians had specifically told me not to involve myself with anyone.

"Reject each request," I said. "I will need to speak to the aub before I do anything."

"Milady, not all of these nobles can be so easily refused," Rihyarda said. She then began listing out names, several of which belonged to my extended family—namely those who were forming what Ferdinand called "the fledgling Rozemyne faction." In which case, it was all the more important to discuss things before the meeting.

"Milady, will you truly meet with the scholars while refusing all requests for meetings one after another?" Rihyarda asked. Nobles returned to their provinces in order following the completion of the feast, and I needed to meet with the scholars and government officials selected by the giebes to participate in the printing industry before then. But I wasn't the one who had scheduled all

this for the day after the feast.

“Please consult Ferdinand and Mother about that,” I replied, “not me.”

I decided to send an ordonnanz to Ferdinand asking what I should do, thereby placing the matter in his capable hands. His response was that we were going to return to the temple after the scholars had been introduced to me. The temple performed the commoners’ coming-of-age ceremony in the winter and baptisms for everyone in the spring. In other words, there was much work for me to do as the High Bishop now that I was awake again.

No, of course I don’t think it’s fortunate that I now have an excuse to escape this mess. I’m simply dedicated to my duties as High Bishop, that’s all. I have no choice but to return to the temple. Teehee!

“As Ferdinand has instructed, I will return to the temple following the introduction to the scholars. Unfortunately, I will not have any time for meetings. It pains my heart, but this is how it must be...”

“Milady. If you are going to lie, at least try to act the part,” Rihyarda said with a bemused smile before asking Brunhilde and Ottilie to start writing up all the necessary rejection letters. Nobles found such rejections easier to accept when they came from higher-status individuals or family members. “Lieseleta, come help me dress Lady Rozemyne. I am going to be accompanying her for now, but eventually, I will entrust attending her during the printing meetings to you.”

“Me, specifically?” Lieseleta asked.

“Indeed. I am told that the scholars involved with the printing and paper-making industries will be primarily laynobles and mednobles. Their bosses are one thing, but with an archnoble attendant around, they will all be too nervous to work properly.”

Lieseleta nodded in agreement and then began dressing me with a somewhat tense expression. Incidentally, I was going to be participating in this meeting as an apprentice scholar. One could not become a scholar without first gaining work experience as an apprentice, and one could not become a librarian without first being a scholar. The chain of unlocks here made this extremely important.

To tell the truth, I had asked Ferdinand whether I could gain the necessary experience by working in the castle book room, but he had called me a fool for even suggesting it. He had tapped his forehead and said the following: “You do remember you are responsible for spreading the printing industry, yes? Your experience will be earned there and in the paper-making industry.”

I made my promise to Lutz! I’m gonna put my all into developing the printing and paper-making industries!

“Let us do our best, Philine.”

“Yes, Lady Rozemyne.”

I smiled at Philine, who was likewise going to be working as a scholar for the first time in this environment, and she nodded anxiously in turn. I was starting to feel that we had grown a little closer than before, since we had been interacting more following her move to the castle.

“Hartmut, you did work in other fields before becoming my retainer, correct? I would hope that you can instruct me as well,” I said.

“My knowledge is yours. However, there is not likely to be much I can teach you with regard to the printing and paper-making industries. Rather, I will most likely be the one begging you for your teachings,” he replied with a smile as I got all excited about working as a scholar.

And so, I headed for the meeting with Hartmut and Philine as my scholars; Rihyarda and Lieseleta as my attendants; and Damuel, Angelica, and Judithe as my guard knights. I had entrusted Cornelius, Leonore, and Brunhilde with gathering intelligence elsewhere during the meeting. They were all Leisegangs, and so I could imagine other Leisegangs would actively approach them to talk.

I moved to the main castle building in Lessy, and after entering the room where the meeting was due to take place, I discovered that Elvira had already arrived. She wasn’t wearing one of her usual gaudy outfits; instead, she was dressed in a tight scholar uniform designed for work with sleeves that barely hung. I could see her concentrated profile and the sharpness in her eyes as she looked over the documents. She exuded the aura of a competent working woman, and I couldn’t help but let out a breath of awe.

“Mother,” I said.

“You must call me ‘Elvira’ here, Lady Rozemyne.”

“Excuse me. Elvira. Have there been any changes of plan so far?”

Today’s meeting had several goals: we would be introduced to the scholars, explain our plans, and then discuss when the Gutenbergs and gray priests would be available to teach for the paper-making industry.

“There have been no changes as of yet.”

The scholars of the Noble’s Quarter would be discussing not only the printing industry, but the lower city cleanup with the guildmaster and the Plantin Company. The scholars sent from the various giebes needed to prepare for the Gutenbergs, and the only certainty here was that both groups of scholars would be exceptionally busy moving forward.

“We can say with absolute certainty that the meeting with the commoners is going to be held at the temple, correct?” Elvira asked.

“I do not believe we have to make that a hard rule, as there will be times when it would be more convenient to meet in the castle. However, the temple is indeed more approachable to commoners, and I believe the scholars will find it more agreeable to go there than into the lower city itself.”

“It should take only a single visit for them to learn the temple is not such a bad place, although I can imagine it being a struggle trying to make that visit happen. Nobles do not have a very good impression of the place...” Elvira muttered. She then took out a sheet of paper. “Incidentally, Lady Rozemyne—what is all this about a legal deposit law?”

“As the document says, it will implement a system wherein the Printing Guild must deliver copies of everything they print to the book rooms in Ehrenfest. I have already received the archduke’s permission.”

The legal deposit law would gather together all printed material in the duchy. In other words, it was the single most important part of the growing printing industry.

“Books which have an enormous impact on culture and the people’s lives are

treasures to be preserved. Indeed, they are treasures being produced in Ehrenfest. Is it not my duty as the archduke's daughter to collect, organize, and preserve these books?" I asked.

My retainers were blinking at me in disbelief as my rant grew more and more passionate, but I continued nonetheless. Stopping wasn't an option. The last thing I wanted was Elvira rejecting this law or attempting to dismantle it.

"At some point, I plan to establish a national (bibliography). This will provide the groundwork necessary to establish a (copyright) system without much difficulty, and while I never plan to do this myself, it would even allow for the censoring of some materials. The legal deposit law is absolutely critical for forming a comprehensive record of printed material!" I declared while confidently pushing out my chest.

Elvira rested a hand on her cheek, sighed, and then used her other hand to point at one section of the document. "I understand that much; the practicality of such a law is clear. What I do not understand is why it includes a clause that says copies must be delivered not only to the book rooms in Ehrenfest, but also to the Saint of Ehrenfest herself."

Well, that's to reduce the burden on Lutz.

Lutz had promised to deliver a copy of every single book that was printed to me, but that would be impossible once the giebes started introducing printing workshops in their own duchies. Even if somehow he did manage to go to these workshops whenever a new book was printed, people would start asking questions about why he was going through so much effort in the first place. And then there was the fact that buying every single book would be insanely expensive, especially considering how much each one cost.

To solve these problems, rather than having Lutz go to the books, I simply needed to have the books come to Lutz. By establishing the legal deposit law, books would naturally gather in the Plantin Company, where the head of the Printing Guild was. Lutz would then deliver the gathered books to me, I would accept them, and then I would read them at my leisure.

Perfect, right?

"At the current moment, all the printing is being done in my workshops and in

Haldenzel, and copies of every book printed are being gifted to the castle. As the industry truly begins to spread, however, I imagine some provinces will not be so generous. I began developing the printing industry specifically so that I would have books to read. As such, is it not normal that the books made using the technologies I developed should end up being sent back to me?"

"Is it?" Elvira asked. She was looking at me doubtfully, but I just smiled and nodded; it was only right that all books made from this point onward belonged to me. I would use my authority to its fullest extent to make my dreams a reality in their most superior form. I was not afraid of using force to get my way.

"I can assure you, it is quite normal. That is why I decided to introduce the legal deposit law to the Printing Guild, such that books will automatically find their way to me. The key is to strike while the iron is hot. If we attempt to implement it later into the development of the book-making industry, it would seem like tyranny... but if we establish it from the very start, everyone will accept it as normal, even as printing spreads to other provinces."

"I now deeply sympathize with Lord Ferdinand, who expressed in agonized terms that the world would be so much better if you simply used your talents for good rather than books."

As my conversation with Elvira continued, Wilfried and Charlotte entered the room as well with their retainers in tow.

"So, what are you discussing?" Wilfried asked.

"The legal deposit law and where we intend to meet with the commoner merchants for meetings. It seems that most discussions will take place in the temple," I answered. Wilfried and Charlotte gave brisk nods in response, but their scholars grimaced for a brief moment.

"Going to the lower city would be a little unreasonable, but the temple should do just fine," Charlotte said.

"Yeah, I'm fine with the temple," Wilfried agreed. "It doesn't stink like the lower city, and there are tasty sweets served there."

It was clear to see they had gotten rather familiar with the temple after passing through it so many times for Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival. It

was actually a little amusing that regular nobles were wincing about a place the archducal family was so heavily involved with.

“Now then—Lord Wilfried, Lady Charlotte, I shall explain your duties to you,” Elvira said. In short, the layscholars were going to compile lists of requests and problems to be fixed in the lower city, which Charlotte and her retainers would then check and pass along to the archduke whenever his permission was required. Wilfried and his retainers would wait to receive word that the printing and paper-making preparations were all complete before going to the location in question to look things over.

“...Why is Wilfried doing the final checks?” I asked.

“Because he has obtained his highbeast, and we do not have the time to travel there slowly on foot,” Elvira replied. “Furthermore, the workers will take their duties more seriously if a member of the archducal family is performing the final checks.”

Once we had confirmation from Wilfried and his retainers that there weren’t any problems, I would bring the Gutenbergs over in Lessy.

“At present, you have the only highbeast that can transport luggage and several people at once. Thus, we will entrust the moving of the Gutenbergs to you.”

“Elvira, are you telling Rozemyne to carry commoners in her highbeast?!” Wilfried exclaimed. Charlotte’s and his retainers looked equally shocked.

“Indeed. I was as surprised as you are, but Lady Rozemyne has apparently been doing this already. Considering the practicality, it is best that she continue this practice. She will only be carrying them around until printing has spread throughout Ehrenfest, after all.”

Once printing spread far enough, the plan was for provinces to start sending their own teachers to nearby provinces. The Gutenbergs would only be flying around the duchy during the early setup stages.

Third bell chimed, and three scholars from the Noble’s Quarter entered the room. Gustav had recommended them all, and they had been selected based on their ability to communicate at least somewhat with commoners. The only

one I immediately recognized was Damuel's older brother, Henrik, but they all came across as fairly warm and affable people.

Those who came in next were the scholars sent by the giebes invested in the printing and paper-making industries. They all did a double take upon seeing me, Wilfried, Charlotte, and our retainers; we must have been a surprising cast for nobles used to working with commoners in the peaceful countryside.

"You may sit," Elvira said as she gestured to the available seats. Once everyone was seated, she then announced the start of the meet and greet for those who would henceforth be involved in the printing and paper-making industries.

We began by introducing ourselves, which was my opportunity to write down everyone's names, affiliations, and any notable visual identifiers they might have. I was particularly trying to memorize the faces of the government officials from Haldenzel, since I would be seeing them again during Spring Prayer.

The documents that Hartmut had written up were distributed to the officials, while Elvira explained what preparations would be made for inviting the Gutenbergs. She explained from a noble's perspective that negotiating with commoners was going to be a regular occurrence, what minor spats had flared up in Haldenzel and how best to make progress. It was something that I certainly couldn't have done myself.

"Lady Rozemyne's Gutenbergs have their own work within Ehrenfest as well. Take care that your preparations are thorough, such that their time is not wasted," Elvira said, finishing her explanation with the officials. She then moved on to advising the layscholars about contacting those in the lower city. "Meetings with commoners will for the most part be held in the temple," she began.

The scholars looked surprised to hear this, but they hid their revulsion as much as possible—presumably because Ferdinand and I lived there as members of the archducal family and because Wilfried and Charlotte went there to help with religious ceremonies.

"Following the Archduke Conference, merchants from other duchies will be visiting the city of Ehrenfest," Elvira continued. "We must clean up the lower

city so that we do not earn their condescension. We will generally entrust this to Gustav, the guildmaster of the Merchant's Guild, but keep in mind that any perceivable faults in the lower city will also reflect poorly on our nobles and make us seem unprepared. Officials who have finished their preparations, contact Lady Charlotte by ordonnanz. She will arrange which of the provinces is visited first and when, while Lord Wilfried will visit and examine the area in question. Once he can confirm there are no issues, Lady Rozemyne will bring the Gutenbergs via her highbeast."

The scholars were naturally surprised to hear that a child of the archduke was transporting commoners in her highbeast, but I had no intention of stopping.

"I imagine many of you will find the idea of carrying commoners unpleasant, but expanding the paper-making and printing industries is so important for Ehrenfest that we must depend on the efficiency that highbeasts provide," I explained. "I would like you all to understand well that you are dealing with industries of such importance that grave actions of this nature must be undertaken."

The meeting came to an end once we had successfully lit a fire under the scholars, at which point I started making my way to the northern building with Wilfried, Charlotte, and all of our retainers.

"Rozemyne, I'm guessing you've been getting a mountain of invitations too?" Wilfried asked, having apparently gone through the same thing I had this morning. "Have you decided on whom you're going to meet with?"

"I have, but I must return to the temple posthaste for the winter coming-of-age ceremony and the spring baptisms. I will trust dealing with the nobles here to Ferdinand and Sylvester... and, of course, to you, my betrothed."

"Rozemyne?"

"My hopes for you are ever so high, my betrothed."

I was tossing all the responsibility onto Wilfried, and upon seeing that, Charlotte put a hand over her mouth and started to giggle, apparently unable to help herself. "We would not want to interfere with your temple duties, Sister. And Brother... stay strong. I do not mind helping if at any point you find yourself overwhelmed," she said with a mischievous smile.

“I can handle it myself,” Wilfried replied with a frown.

Upon arriving at my room, I immediately began preparing for my return to the temple. Ottilie and Brunhilde had already organized my luggage, on top of sending word to my personal chef and musician.

“I expect to return in around ten days and shall entrust my room to you in my absence,” I said. “You may contact me via ordonnanz if something happens.”

“I shall accompany you to the temple, Lady Rozemyne. You give blessings during the ceremonies, correct? I would love to see them,” Hartmut said. His orange eyes were sparking in anticipation, but unfortunately for him, being allowed to accompany me to the temple didn’t mean he was allowed to enter the chapel.

“Only those affiliated with the temple may be present for ceremonies, Hartmut. Not even my guard knights are allowed into the chapel or the ritual hall, so I’m afraid you will not be permitted to attend.”

“This can’t be... What am I to do, then?”

“Your job, I would assume.”

To help Hartmut get over his shock, I intended to leave him a mountain of work to do; there was truly no denying the consideration with which I treated my retainers. I explained that I was going to entrust him with training Philine and that I would be handing him reports for Elvira, a new higher-up in the printing industry, sent from the guildmaster and the Plantin Company.

“Philine, I ask that you organize reports on the profit the printing and paper-making industries have produced up to this point,” I said.

“Erm, I am still not entirely sure how to write such documents...”

“Do not worry—Hartmut will teach you. Right, Hartmut?”

“That won’t be a problem,” Hartmut replied with a half-smile. One had to admire the fact that, even when getting buried under an obnoxious amount of work, he didn’t utter so much as a single complaint.

After distributing work to my scholars, I looked over the rest of my retainers. “To those of you who will not be coming to the temple, pick up all the

information you can from the nobles who remain here in the castle. I expect that adults, children, men, women, attendants, scholars, and knights all know different things about various matters."

"Understood."

Not too long after, Ferdinand sent me an ordonnanz asking whether I had completed my preparations. I replied that I had and then returned to the temple with Damuel, Angelica, Hugo, Ella, and Rosina in tow.

"Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne."

Fran and Monika greeted me upon my return. The castle wasn't a whirlpool of constant plotting by any means, but the atmosphere was certainly sharp. On the whole, I found the temple a much more relaxing place to be.

"Ferdinand, I was hoping to print this novel that I've written, but could I ask you to check it for any problems first?" I asked.

I had written a romance novel that copied Elvira's *Royal Academy Stories* on a surface level but was actually based on an Earth story. Given that even my rendition of Cinderella had previously been rejected, however, I needed Ferdinand to read through the story to ensure it wouldn't clash with the culture of this world.

"I will certainly give it a look over."

I was planning to start printing textbooks in spring too, but since I wasn't looking to sell those, I needed another book that we could actually make some money from. After seeing how popular Elvira's romance novel was among noblewomen, I had concluded that I might as well ride on the waves of her success.

I handed the manuscript to Ferdinand and then made my way to my room, where I received reports from my attendants.

"Regarding Hugo and Ella..." Zahm began. "As expected, we are unable to create a room for a married couple within the temple."

"I see. In that case, they will need to either live separately in the temple or

rent a room in the lower city and commute to work," I replied. After praising Zahm for his efforts, I went on to discuss the finer points of how the marriage would be handled—that is, until Fran walked over in a hurry.

"Lady Rozemyne, the High Priest is here. He wishes to discuss the manuscript that you just delivered to him," he said.

I granted permission for Ferdinand to enter, at which point he strode briskly into the room with an exceedingly sour expression. He wordlessly tossed the manuscript onto my desk and set down a sound-blocking magic tool beside it.

Something tells me he didn't like it...

I gripped the tool, although I could tell before Ferdinand even said anything that the manuscript had been rejected. His bringing out the sound-blocking magic tool was a clear indicator that he was in the mood to explain quite thoroughly every single mistake I had made.

Ferdinand sat in a chair prepared for him by Fran and then looked me right in the eyes. "Rozemyne, I have never read something so shameless in my life. It would be unthinkable to publish this under your name!" he declared.

"Sh-Shameless?! Which parts?! Where?!"

My eyes flitted from Ferdinand to the manuscript. I had written a romance story based on one from Elvira's book, wherein two nobles find themselves at odds due to a difference in status, before eventually finding union in one another. It was a pretty standard tale for girls in my eyes—the heroine's heart would race when she made eye contact with the love interest, her cheeks would flush as her hand brushed his, her chest would ache when she saw her crush speaking to another girl... But it would all culminate in a scene where their feelings reach one another, and they finally kiss.

And yet, to Ferdinand, something about the manuscript was shameless. I couldn't understand it at all; I had avoided using explicit language and symbolism entirely, well aware that it was a story for rich girls to read.

"Every single scene where the two main characters touch! Every! Single! One! It boggles the mind that you would write something so perverted. Did you truly base this on Elvira's book?"

“Yes. It’s based on *Royal Academy Stories*,” I replied, thrusting a copy of the book forward as a makeshift shield. Incidentally—and thankfully—it was the version that didn’t contain illustrations drawn in his image.

Ferdinand thumbed through Elvira’s book, paused on one particular page, and then thrust it back to me. “This is what you need to learn from,” he said, pointing at a three-page poem sequence replete with praise for the gods—one that I had admittedly skimmed over, since the allusions and symbolism didn’t mean too much to me. “Learn from this if you are to write about the touching of two people.”

Ferdinand went on to explain with a deep frown that every single scene in my manuscript involving some heart-throbbing exchange was no good, and that the enormous poem in Elvira’s novel was supposed to be a love scene.

What is this, a Bollywood movie?!

My mind was immediately drawn to those well-known scenes from Indian romance movies. The man and woman would stare at one another intently, only for a group of people to appear out of nowhere and pull everyone into an extravagant song and dance routine. Sure, the choreography was impressive, and it was fun to watch, but the story always ended up completely lost on me.

“What I mean to say is that your language is too direct and much too lewd. It would be beyond scandalous for an archduke candidate to publish a shameless work such as this,” Ferdinand concluded. As it turned out, my attempt to write a love story for girls had resulted in what people here considered pornography. I had no idea what to say, really. What a place this was.

“I understand that there remains a sizable gap between the culture of noble society and my own. That is why I have now decided not to write romance stories myself. It seems it would be better for me to train a novelist to write in my place.”

“That would be wise. Be sure to burn this manuscript before anyone else can stumble upon it.”

There was no way I could write a romance story in which the principal love scene involved the characters abruptly reciting poetry extolling the virtues of the gods. I needed to train a novelist, and fast.

That said, if this is how they react to a love scene in a novel for girls, I wonder how they would react to an actual erotic novel...?

Life in the Temple

In the end, Ferdinand made it exceedingly clear that I was to show him anything I wrote going forward, since my common sense was apparently “anything but common.” I agreed, of course, and put my oh-so shameless novel in a sealed box after he left. He had ordered me to burn it, but perhaps one day it would see the light of day.

“Fran, summon Ella and Hugo from the kitchen,” I said. “I wish to speak to them about what was just decided.”

“Lady Rozemyne, I would rather you communicate with the chefs through an attendant...”

“My apologies, Fran, but I think it’s best that I speak to them directly. You and the other attendants know very little about marriage, no?”

Fran went to the kitchen, unable to protest further. He and the others could speak for me in matters of work, but their lack of knowledge about life in the lower city put them at a loss when it came to marriage.

“Excuse us,” Ella and Hugo said respectfully as they entered, very clearly tense. Fran explained that I would be speaking to them directly and then stepped down. Since Ella and Hugo were commoners, my two guard knights were standing close behind me.

“You have both served me well in the Royal Academy,” I said. “I imagine that making so much food every day has been quite the challenge. The students were all overjoyed to eat it. You will most likely continue to accompany me whenever I return to the Royal Academy, and I look forward to your continued good service. Now, as for your marriage...”

Upon hearing this, their faces stiffened and they swallowed audibly.

“There is no problem with the marriage itself,” I continued, smiling in an attempt to ease their concerns. “If you are to be wed this summer, you have my blessing.”

“Thank you very much!”

“That said, we must discuss your living arrangements. There are married servants in the castle, so I will request quarters there for your use, but I cannot create a room for a married couple here in the temple. You will either have to stay in separate rooms as you have been or rent a room in the lower city and commute from there, as arduous as that may be. I should note that if you do choose the latter, you will not lose your rooms in the temple, so you may still rest here during busy periods.”

I glanced at Fran, signaling him to bring over the money we had prepared for them. Hugo inhaled with wide eyes when he saw the bag and heard the clinking of the coins inside.

“This is your pay for having worked so hard all throughout winter in the Royal Academy, and a gift from me to celebrate your marriage. May it help pay for your wedding.”

“...You’re giving us this much?” Hugo asked.

“Naturally. Since you are going to be accompanying me during Spring Prayer as usual, Hugo, you shall get time off work from tomorrow until then. Ella will have time off during Spring Prayer. It is not an especially long vacation, but use it to prepare for your wedding. I would have liked to give you time off together; however, that was not an option. My apologies.”

“No, thank you. Your consideration is more than we could ever ask for.”

Preparing for marriage was really quite something. Ella and Hugo needed to rent and furnish a room, as well as prepare for the upcoming winter. The Starbind Ceremony was deliberately held in the summer to give newlyweds time to ready themselves—one could sleep without needing a blanket during the warmer months, and food was in enough of an abundance that wages could be used to stock up on firewood.

Ella and Hugo already had rooms in the castle and the temple, so if they focused on preparing their bedroom in the lower city and nothing else, they would most likely be able to manage in time. Newlyweds needed cloth for their sheets, comforters, and mattresses, so the fiancées would normally weave it themselves as the start of their winter handiwork—hence why being good at

sewing was necessary for one to be considered a beauty.

“Because you were working at the Royal Academy, I assume you did not have time to prepare any cloth. Is that correct, Ella? Are you going to be okay?” I asked.

“My mother said she would weave some for me.”

Ella’s mother had evidently decided to help out of concern for how focused her daughter was on her work. If what she ended up making didn’t suffice, Ella would make do with secondhand cloth. Hugo had made a point of noting that it didn’t matter to him either way, since he wasn’t marrying a “generic sewing beauty.” Their abrupt lovey-doveyness was amusing to watch, but it was also heartwarming to see them working to prepare for their new life together.

I wonder whether I should gift Ella a hairpin the divine color of summer? She’d probably be happier to receive new cooking implements...

Ella had spent her coming-of-age ceremony in the Noble’s Quarter, so she hadn’t attended the one in the temple. She would be wearing her fancy outfit for the first time this coming Starbind Ceremony, something her mother was no doubt looking forward to. Since Ella was a member of my personnel, the very least I could do was gift her a not-so-expensive hairpin.

Once our conversation was over, Ella and Hugo left. Next on my agenda was a pre-meeting with Fran, Zahm, and the others on the upcoming ceremonies. There was a week between the winter coming-of-age ceremony and the spring baptisms, and I was pretty sure I could use that time to relax in the temple.

“How is the orphanage? Has Konrad adjusted to living there?” I asked Monika. She was normally the one sent to discuss things with Wilma, so she visited the orphanage more than any of my other attendants.

After meeting my eyes, Monika stepped forward and began her report. “According to Wilma, for the first few days, simply hearing footsteps was enough to send him into a panic. Despite having been raised as a noble, he does not seem to have any attachment to power and authority as many blue priests do; rather, he seems relieved to have come to the orphanage.”

The abuse he had suffered in his previous home truly must have been terrible.

I sighed, recalling Jonsara and the way Konrad had recoiled upon seeing a schtappe.

"I could ask for nothing more than for Konrad to live even a bit more peacefully than before. Monika, I would like to see the orphanage and workshop myself. Can you inform Wilma and Gil that I will be visiting tomorrow afternoon?"

"As you wish." Monika nodded and then disappeared to do just that. Meanwhile, I took out my notes, scanned over what I needed to do here, and then passed a page containing notes on Spring Prayer to Zahm.

"I have discussed the splitting of the Central District with Wilfried and Charlotte. Please convey the results to the High Priest; the sooner we know of any potential problems with our schedule, the better. The two of them need time to prepare as well."

"As you wish. I will also take this opportunity to discuss who will accompany Lady Charlotte for Spring Prayer. As you are here this year, Lady Rozemyne, Fran will not be available for her."

"Yes, please do."

Once Zahm had gone, I started looking over the letters that had accumulated on my desk. There were some from the Plantin and Gilberta Companies, and even one from Gustav of the Merchant's Guild. The latter detailed his results after gathering thoughts from traveling merchants about the state of the lower city, as well as notes on his struggles as he attempted to beautify the place.

"I should also report this to Ferdinand and send a reply as soon as possible. Perhaps I will set aside time for that while assisting with his paperwork tomorrow. Fran, I am going to be writing letters to the Plantin Company, the Gilberta Company, and the Merchant's Guild. Could you ask Gil to deliver them for me?"

Fran, who was standing beside my desk, paused for a moment in thought. He then shook his head. "Lady Rozemyne, should you not spend today resting? You do not look well at the moment. If you are looking for something to keep you busy, perhaps you could try exercising without your magic tools?"

I had thought I was doing fine, so Fran's statement took me by surprise. I placed a contemplative hand on my face, wondering how Ferdinand would respond to me falling sick despite having returned to the temple and ending up unable to give blessings at the coming-of-age ceremony. In the end, I decided to obediently accept Fran's proposal.

"Very well. I will spend today resting quietly. Please bring me all the new books that were printed over the winter," I said, requesting new material to read. Fran sighed and then obeyed, although he made sure to reiterate that I needed to rest.

The next day marked my return to normal temple life after quite some time. Following my breakfast, I practiced dedication whirling and the harspiel until third bell.

"Lady Rozemyne," Fran said, "it is time for us to go to the High Priest's chambers."

Leaving the harspiel cleanup to Rosina, I departed with Fran, Zahm, and Monika. Angelica and Damuel also accompanied me as guards; the former guarded the door with her life, as per usual, while the latter busily took care of all the jobs he was given. It seemed that Ferdinand was buried in a mountain of work after having been away from the temple for so long.

"Ferdinand, I am sorry to give you yet more work, but I received this letter from the Merchant's Guild," I noted, handing him the letter in question. "I believe a prompt response is in order."

The contents of the letter explained that duchies other than Ehrenfest had something resembling a sewer system, using the wriggly slime things found in the toilets in the Noble's Quarter. Said sewer system had been invented decades ago, and its growing popularity had resulted in an Extreme Makeover using the same near-instantaneous method used to construct Hasse's monastery. It seemed that the wisest option was to modify the lower city in a similar manner, assuming that doing so wouldn't be too disruptive, but such construction magic could only be used by the archduke; it wasn't a decision the commoners could make on their own.

“Considering that this system is already being used in the Noble’s Quarter, it seems that only our lower city is decades behind the other duchies,” I observed.

“So it would seem... I will pass on the suggestion to the castle,” Ferdinand replied. He then wrote out a list of questions—asking when the Noble’s Quarter had initially been remodeled, whether the blueprints were still available, how much mana it would require to repeat this process with the lower city, and whether they even had enough power to spare—which he handed to me along with an ordonnanz feystone. “Send this to Elvira and Charlotte. Elvira is the one responsible for these matters; I can do nothing more than support you as your guardian.”

I accepted the feystone and sent the ordonnanz, as instructed. Charlotte and her retainers would presumably do their best investigating the questions.

Tch. I wish I was being asked to research things in a book room...

I returned to my room at fourth bell, had my lunch, and then started writing my response letters. Monika informed me when it was time for divine gifts to be sent to the orphanage and all the necessary preparations were complete, at which point I headed over there with her, Gil, and my guard knights.

Monika and Gil opened the wide set of doors which led to the dining hall, where gray shrine maidens were kneeling in wait.

“Wilma, I request a report on what has happened over the winter,” I instructed. “Everyone else may return to their duties.”

I was informed that not much had happened prior to Konrad arriving in the orphanage. Some of the children had caught minor colds, but they had recovered soon after without suffering any worse symptoms.

“How is Konrad doing?” I asked.

“The other gray shrine maidens and I feared he would not fare well in the orphanage after being raised as a noble, but there have been no problems worth mentioning. He was stiff as a board on his first day, but thanks in part to Dirk sticking with him and teaching him about life here, he now smiles quite regularly.”

Dirk had only ever really interacted with babies who were barely able to stand

or apprentices who were already baptized and working in the workshop, so he had gladly welcomed Konrad, a boy who was actually his age. By this point, they were running all over the place like two peas in a pod. Delia was apparently having quite a hard time keeping up with them.

“I would like to check up on Konrad,” I said. “Could you summon him and Dirk for me?”

“As you wish.” Wilma looked at a nearby gray shrine maiden, who then left to speak to the children reading picture books in the corner.

Dirk stood up, his reddish-brown hair bouncing as he grabbed Konrad by the arm and rushed over. Delia followed after them.



“You called, Lady Rozemyne?” Delia said.

“Yes, I came to see Konrad.” I turned to the young boy. “How is the orphanage? Is the food tasty? Are you sleeping well?”

Konrad smiled, looked around, and then nodded. There was a glimmer in his eyes, which were the same grass-green color as Philine’s. It was obvious from a glance when he first arrived that he had suffered abuse, but now his fear of all those around him had lessened.

“Yes. The food is very tasty,” Konrad replied. “Also, it’s really fun here. There are lots of toys and picture books.”

Dirk was standing beside him. His auburn hair made him look a lot like Delia, who was respectfully kneeling behind them, and there was a naughty light in his scorched brown eyes. It very much reminded me of all the smug expressions Delia had used to wear; she and Dirk must have resembled each other so closely because they were raised as siblings.

“You’ve been helping Konrad out, haven’t you, Dirk?” I asked. “Thank you. I am relieved to see the two of you becoming fast friends.”

Dirk and Konrad exchanged a grin, at which point I turned my attention to Delia. Just like Tuuli, she was no longer a child and was instead a proper young woman.

“Delia, I cannot imagine it has been easy, but please continue to do your best at keeping Dirk and Konrad in order.”

“You may count on me,” Delia replied, accepting my request with a smile. Thus concluded my business in the orphanage, and so I moved to the workshop, relieved to know that things were going well.

“Gil, summon Fritz. He and I need to discuss matters involving the construction of paper-making workshops in other provinces.”

Once Fritz arrived, I informed him that paper-making workshops were due to be concurrently established in several provinces within Ehrenfest and that I wanted him to select those who would be traveling between them one after another.

“So they’re going to be visiting several provinces in one trip?” Fritz asked.

“Yes. We hope to have as many workshops producing paper as possible, so rather than spending a year developing wholly unique types of paper as we did in Illgner, we plan to teach them only how to make already existing types,” I replied. “To this end, Illgner is going to be sending craftspeople of their own.”

I went on to explain that when we called the three gray priests back from Hasse during Spring Prayer, he could request specific priests. We would then establish two four-person groups, each of which would include at least one priest who had experience in Illgner.

“These groups will be sent to provinces when they are ready for them, meaning those who prepare quickest will be prioritized. We will travel via my highbeast, and members of the Plantin Company will accompany us to establish branches of the Plant Paper and Printing Guilds, so it will not interfere with their lives that much.”

“How long will they spend in each province?”

“One to two months under our current schedule. The plan is for the groups to teach each province how to make volrin paper, the most basic of all plant papers, and then move on to the next province. Oh, and that reminds me—please add Achim and Egon to the groups. I would like to advance Operation Grimm alongside the paper-making industry.”

Operation Grimm had stalled during my long sleep, since the gray priests couldn’t be sent to other locations in my absence. I wanted them to gather stories while spreading paper-making and printing.

“I will pass word to the Plantin Company and discuss extra payment as a reward,” I said.

“We certainly do want as many stories as possible to make new books...” Fritz said with a small smile, agreeing with my plot to mix Operation Grimm into the Gutenbergs’ trips. Gil, however, gave me a worried look.

“I hope the High Priest doesn’t get mad about this...” he muttered.

“Shh, Gil! You must not invite misfortune!”

The winter coming-of-age ceremony was the next day, and preparations began early in the morning. I put on my ceremonial High Bishop garb, donned my hairpin that was the divine color of winter, and then headed to the chapel.

“Guard knights, stand there.” I pointed at the wall where Eckhart was standing.

Angelica’s blue eyes hardened. “I want to follow you inside as well. I don’t think we can say the chapel is free of danger, and it’s not good to be separated from your guard knights,” she said, seemingly unsatisfied now that she had learned there were some blue priests we needed to be on guard against. But rules were rules. One could dismiss them as pointless traditions if one wanted to, but I couldn’t just up and change them on a whim.

“I will consult the High Priest and see if these rules could potentially be changed in the future,” I replied. “For now, however, I am afraid you will have to give up.”

“Okay...” Angelica conceded with a reluctant nod before going to stand at attention next to Damuel and Eckhart.

Fran took me to the door, where I waited for Ferdinand to announce my entrance. He soon intoned, “The High Bishop shall now enter,” at which point two gray priests opened the doors for me. Inside on the right were the blue priests, lined up by the shrine, while on the left were the new adults.

I entered the chapel, the bible Fran had given me in my arms, and advanced toward the altar. The atmosphere was alive with the sounds of ringing bells and the surprised, muted stirring of the crowd. The blue priests were using magic tools that quieted voices, so no matter how loud the new adults were, their voices were no more than whispers to me. Even so, I heard many similar comments among them.

“Hey, look. It’s the tiny High Bishop.”

“The High Bishop who can actually give blessings is back. She really is tiny.”

Stop calling me tiny! It’s the jureve’s fault, not mine! I’ll get bigger soon!

Despite my silent protests, I maintained a flat expression as though I had heard nothing at all. But not all their murmurs were about my size.

“Wow, nobles really do wear the Gilberta Company’s hairpins.”

“Though that one’s way fancier than the ones we use.”

I heard some of the women whispering about my hairpin. I was struck with the sudden urge to look around and see how popular hairpins were now, but I contained myself; I was better off waiting until after I had climbed up to the shrine, since that would give me a much better vantage point.

I continued up the stairs, taking care not to step on the hem of my robes and trip, and eventually reached the altar. Once I set down the bible and spread it open, Ferdinand began to read aloud in his resounding voice. I majestically looked over the chapel while listening to him.

People wore white during their baptisms to indicate that they had just been born as people, but for the coming-of-age ceremony, those in attendance wore clothes matching the season’s divine colors. Since it was winter, they could wear either red or white. Most had chosen red, perhaps because white looked somewhat cold, and almost all of the women were wearing hairpins. Some were decorated with a collection of small flowers, like the first one I had made for Tuuli, while others were more elaborate with large flowers.

Flowers didn’t bloom during the winter months, so those with winter ceremonies couldn’t simply go to the forest to pick any to wear as ornaments. I thought back on how overjoyed Freida had been about getting to wear flowers to her baptism. Not many people had worn hairpins at the time, but they had apparently really caught on while I was asleep.

The Gilberta Company sure is working hard, huh?

I sighed at the thought of just how many days and months had passed, and then it became my turn. It was time to give the new adults a blessing.

“Now, let us offer our prayers to the gods. Praise be to the gods!”

The blue priests struck the praying pose, standing on one leg and raising both arms, as did the new adults. I gazed across them all and then poured mana into my ring to give the blessing.

“O Geduldh, Goddess of Earth; O Ewigeliebe, God of Life; hear my prayers. May you grace those who have newly come of age with your blessing. May

those who offer their prayers and gratitude be blessed with your divine protection.”

Once the red and white lights of my blessing had settled, the door leading outside opened. Ferdinand intoned that those who had received my blessing were sure to have bright futures ahead, and with that, the new adults began filtering out.

I wonder if they’re here...

I turned my gaze toward the door, hopeful, and saw Dad and Mom looking my way with tearful eyes. They had visibly aged a little over the past two years. I smiled, trying to tell them I was doing okay, and Dad replied with a big nod.

Wait... Mom and Dad are here, but I don’t see Tuuli or Kamil. Are they sick or something?

I was really worried, but there was nobody here I could ask for answers. And so, the winter coming-of-age ceremony came to an end with my resolving to indirectly ask Lutz or Tuuli the next time I saw them.

Schwartz's and Weiss's Outfits

The week between the coming-of-age ceremony and the spring baptisms was going to be business as usual in the temple. I had more work to do here than in the castle, but I didn't mind; the lack of tension and scheming made me feel a lot more comfortable.

I was helping out in the High Priest's chambers, eagerly awaiting fourth bell. I had decided that I was going to spend the rest of the day reading... but then Ferdinand called out to me.

"Rozemyne, do you have plans for this afternoon?"

"Yes. I plan to read."

"I see. Good, then. As you have no plans, I have just the thing for you."

Nah, nah, nah, nah! Hold on a second. I just *told him that I've got plans, right?!*

"I do have plans!" I protested. "Plans to read! Please listen when I speak to you."

"Reading does not count. Discussing the clothes for the library's magic tools takes much greater priority."

Don't decide my priorities for me!

Or so I wanted to shout, but when it came to Schwartz's and Weiss's outfits, I was the one asking Ferdinand for help; I would suffer the most if my adamance to read pushed him to retract his gesture of goodwill. I hung my head, wallowing in my feelings of defeat and regret.

"Good," Ferdinand muttered, seemingly having interpreted my display of sadness as a nod. "Your workshop shall serve as your workplace. Keep the door open, as I will be bringing in materials and documents."

"...Fiiine."

Fourth bell chimed, and after finishing lunch, I opened the door to my hidden

room as Ferdinand had instructed so that anyone could enter. I gazed longingly at the books on my shelf—the ones I had planned to read—and sighed to myself.

“Perhaps you will be able to read tomorrow. And you have a meeting with the Gilberta Company scheduled for the day after,” Fran said, consoling me with a half-smile. His words did cheer me up a little; I had summoned Tuuli for the day after tomorrow to order a new hairpin.

“By the way, are you going to order anything other than the hairpin?” Monika asked curiously, knowing that I had to discuss my outfits with my attendants in the castle.

I puffed out my chest. “I am also going to order a hairpin to celebrate Ella’s marriage, plus some Library Committee armbands.”

“What exactly are these armbands...?”

“These.” I spread out a full-sized sketch of an armband that I had drawn to show Tuuli. Incidentally, the part which said “Library Committee Member” was written in kanji. Nobody in this world would be able to understand it except me, but I wanted it nonetheless. As far as I was concerned, it was integral to really feeling like a member of the Library Committee. And above all else, it made me happy.

I planned to ask Tuuli to make four differently colored armbands—one for me, one each for Schwartz and Weiss, and one for my new friend, Hannelore, who I absolutely wanted to recruit into the Library Committee as a fellow bookworm. I wouldn’t pressure her if she didn’t want to join, but the thought of seeing her, Schwartz, and Weiss working together while wearing matching armbands filled me with joy.

“I’m going to work as a Library Committee member with a friend once I become a second-year,” I explained. “Ahahaha, I can’t wait... Oh?”

As I spoke, a white bird slipped through the wall, spun circles around the room, and then settled down on the desk in front of me. “Lady Rozemyne, this is Elvira. Lady Charlotte has organized answers to your questions. I am sending them over now,” it said thrice.

Immediately after, another bird flew into the room and then turned into a letter, which dropped down onto my desk. It was less from Charlotte herself and more from the scholars among her retainers, answering my questions about the proposed Extreme Makeover to the lower city.

I started reading through the letter. It seemed that Drewanchel had published research on the slimes during the Interduchy Tournament—including schematics on how to use them in sewer systems and the like—around eighty years ago. The duchy's aub at the time had promptly introduced the slimes to his capital; then, during the Archduke Conference, he had reported their success in eradicating the city's filth and its lingering stench. He concluded that they had made things easier to manage on the whole and asked the king to introduce them to their Royal Academy dormitory.

The king granted his permission, and so a slime-based sewer system was introduced to the Drewanchel Dormitory. In the past, it had been standard to dispose of any waste in the surrounding area. This technology removed the need for that, however, and the area around the duchy's dorm became a considerably more attractive and comfortable space as a result.

After confirming the efficacy of the new slime system, the Sovereignty purchased the rights to the technology and used it to beautify both the Royal Academy and the royal capital, a development that brought great honor to Drewanchel.

From there, it became a trend for duchies to undergo similar dramatic renovations. Archdukes would request and purchase the technology during the Archduke Conference, after which it would take a span of years for them to be granted permission, resulting in significant gaps between when different duchies properly embraced the sewer system.

Naturally, trends trickled down from top to bottom. Ehrenfest had been within five spaces of the lowermost rank at the time, among the lesser duchies, and so it had taken us quite some time to earn permission. It ultimately wasn't until over a decade after Drewanchel first displayed the power of using slimes that our own dramatic renovations started to take shape.

Incidentally, things did not progress so simply. Ehrenfest had ended up

receiving permission at the most inopportune time, right after Gabriele of Ahrensbach had married into the family. Her husband had been the archduke candidate planned to become the next archduke, so to forestall him causing chaos, he had ended up being granted land from the Central District and installed as the first Count Groschel. He, his wife, and his children who had been raised as archduke candidates all left the city of Ehrenfest at once, causing a massive drop in the total mana quantity of the archducal family.

But even with less mana, it was important to keep up appearances in noble society. Ehrenfest first dramatically renovated their dormitory at the Royal Academy, since it was the place most seen by other duchies. They renovated the archduke's castle several years later, and then the Noble's Quarter several years after that. The lower city was set aside, with renovations planned for whenever the archducal family had enough capacity to spare, but that time ultimately never came to pass.

By this point, it was entirely forgotten why the lower city hadn't been renovated; in fact, more and more people from the generation who knew these circumstances to begin with were passing away, such that Charlotte concluded her letter by saying that she had decided it necessary to tell Sylvester about all this.

"Up until now, we had so few exports and merchants from other duchies coming here that it was fine to set the lower city aside," I said. "But now that things have changed, we have to do something."

But we still didn't have any mana to spare, as far as I knew. The blueprints for the renovations made to the castle and the Noble's Quarter involved creation magic that could only be used by the archduke, so they were apparently in his document storage room. Sylvester's scholars had checked and confirmed that they were still there.

That explains why I don't know about them despite having made a catalog of everything in the book room. I wish I could get permission to go in that storage room too.

"Lady Rozemyne, the High Priest is here."

"Right."

I put away Charlotte's letter and requested that Ferdinand come to my hidden room, which he promptly did. His attendants entered soon after, carried three boxes into my workshop, and then exited, leaving only six of us in the workshop: Ferdinand, Justus, Eckhart, Angelica, Damuel, and me. Our retainers were here with us because my engagement made it somewhat problematic for me to meet Ferdinand without guards or attendants since he was unmarried.

"It feels a bit cramped in here with so many people," I observed.

"My workshop is smaller, and under normal circumstances, the mana restriction would prevent anyone but you from entering. Furthermore, this is the bare minimum. There are going to be even more people in the room when several scholars and attendants gather in the castle to brew this on a larger scale," Ferdinand said with a hint of annoyance. He spread out a cloth, on which was a magic circle similar to the one I had seen when he was making the jureve, and then haphazardly took out a series of mysterious ingredients. Justus took them all and plopped them into a box one after another.

Eckhart pulled out various documents from one of the boxes and spread them on the work table, having already received his instructions. These papers apparently covered the results of Ferdinand and Hirschur's research.

"Eckhart, may I look at them?" I asked.

"You will see more than your fill of them later. Now move your head. You're in the way," Eckhart said, his voice several degrees colder than usual due to him being in the middle of following Ferdinand's orders. He shooed me away and then returned to spreading out yet more documents.

"Lady Rozemyne, you shouldn't get in the way when people are busy. At times like this, it's best to step back and not say anything. That way, everything will end up ready on its own," Angelica said, imparting to me the wisdom she had received from her parents: *"The best way for you to help is to do nothing at all."*

In retrospect, I did seem to recall Angelica stepping back and watching over us with a smile whenever we started talking about things unrelated to brute force. It was evidently a method for broadcasting one's lack of involvement. Thanks to this situation, I had learned yet another piece of weird trivia about Angelica.

“Ferdinand, do call me when everything is ready,” I said. I had nothing to do there myself and was just going to be treated like I was in the way, so I decided to leave and read as planned. Angelica was surprised to hear this, but she was the last person I wanted to hear criticisms from, considering that she was standing in a corner of the workshop and focusing inward to stealthily train her enhancement magic.

“First, look at this,” Ferdinand said, pointing at the documents sprawled atop the work desk.

After announcing that I knew it was improper behavior, I climbed up onto a chair and got on my knees so that I could peer over the table. There were ten sheets of paper with complexly drawn magic circles on them and one larger sheet that showed the resulting magic circle when they were all layered on top of one another. I had no idea what the magic circles meant, but Angelica’s eyes started to sparkle when she saw them.

“Lord Ferdinand, can I embroider this circle onto my cape too?!” she exclaimed. It seemed that she needed the permission of whomever had initially modified and therefore invented the magic circle.

Angelica’s sudden request made Ferdinand blink with surprise. “Are... Are you capable of embroidery, when you cannot even use a calculator?” he asked.

“I am. I can do it. This magic circle is amazing. Please give me permission to embroider it onto my cape,” Angelica said, her eyes positively radiating sparkles. Her begging was at full power, and she looked entirely like a beautiful young princess with a particular fondness for sewing.

“I will grant you permission if you prove useful in making these outfits. Now, assist with the embroidery of this section.”

“You may count on me.”

I thought Angelica was crippled by her lack of brain cells, but she actually has a ton of girl power. She beats me, even...

As I slumped my shoulders in despair over losing to Angelica so soundly, Ferdinand continued. “The library’s magic tools have protective magic circles

woven deftly into their outfits. You know this already, from what I understand."

"I do."

"Hirschur and I managed to improve their designs through our research, and we will now be making new outfits for them. We must prepare the ingredients, brew them, and then create the necessary materials," he said, then going on to mutter, "I would rather continue researching Schwartz and Weiss, as Hirschur is, but these outfits are the highest priority."

I agreed with that; the last thing I wanted was for him to finish his research and then completely lose interest in helping me make these outfits. He could research Schwartz and Weiss to his heart's content *after* our work here was done.

"Will we need to go on another journey to collect the ingredients?" I asked.

"No, I have all the ingredients we need," he said. "We would not make it in time for the next term of the Royal Academy if we took the time to go gathering. As master of the tools, we need your mana to create threads for the magic circles and feystones for storing mana."

"Won't supplying all these ingredients burden you, Ferdinand...?"

"I will consider it an acceptable trade so long as I am given the clothes they used to wear in return. I wish to research their cloth and thread, and this should not be an issue, since the new outfits are going to have just as many feystones as the old ones," Ferdinand said with a smile that conveyed his true intentions. That was precisely why he hadn't brought their old outfits here with him. No doubt he would retrieve the leftover materials after the new outfits were made and start dissecting the old clothes to investigate the magecraft of the prior owner.

"Can we not use the existing feystones for their buttons, at least?" I asked. If we just moved the buttons over, we wouldn't need to use as many ingredients nor brew as many materials. I thought it would save us time and mana, but Ferdinand shook his head at my suggestion.

"They would not be unusable, but in terms of mana efficiency, it is far better for you to replace them with feystones of your own. Librarians may be able to

go to the library whenever they please, but you cannot. That is why you will want the feystones to be as effective as possible. You would not want the two magic tools to run out of mana and become immobile midway through their work, would you?”

I shook my head. I certainly intended to exploit the need to refill their mana to visit the Royal Academy’s library on several occasions between spring and autumn, but I didn’t want Schwartz and Weiss to end up immobile if something waylaid me. Solange would probably be shocked and saddened if they suddenly stopped working again.

“As for fashioning the outfit, we will begin with making the thread for embroidering the magic circles,” Ferdinand explained. “You will need to do the embroidery yourself, as the tools’ master, which I imagine will take some time.”

“Excuse me?! I have to do *all* the embroidery?!” I exclaimed, paling at the very suggestion. Hirschur had said that all those in Ehrenfest would need to band together for this, so I had planned to ask a noble daughter with an immense amount of girl power and impressively graceful sewing skills to handle it for me.

“Others can do the embroidery which disguises the magic circle in this area. As their master, you will only need to do the magic circles themselves.”

“‘Only’?! But there are so many!” I balked. He had pointed to all ten of the individually drawn magic circles, which were so complex and detailed that the thought of embroidering even one made me feel queasy. And I had to finish them all before next winter? No way. I didn’t have the time for that.

“Despite how grueling it may seem, I fused some of the magic circles while improving them, so there are fewer than there used to be. And the magic tools need charms of this strength to be protected. This is your job as their master. Do it well.”

“Can we not just draw the magic circles on?! If we use a mana dye of sorts, they’ll work just as well, won’t they?” I asked. Drawing the magic circles would still end up being a pain, but not as much of a pain as embroidering them.

Ferdinand considered my request for a moment before shaking his head. “Embroidering secures the circles to the cloth more reliably than anything. Dyes

cannot handle precise lines and instead spreads through the cloth. Since you would need ink of a great enough mana quantity, it would end up being more wasteful than simply making thread."

"Then what about using (paste) to stop the dye from spreading, as per the (Yuzen) process?"

"Yuzen...?" Ferdinand repeated. "What is this paste you are referring to?"

"A resisting agent...?" I said, trailing off. I had described it as the Yuzen process, but I had actually been thinking of rice paste. And on second thought, we probably couldn't make rice paste here; we would want something to use in its place.

If we can't use rice paste, what can we use...? Hold on. Is the Yuzen process just impossible here?! Um... What ingredients can I get right away? Oh! Resist-dyeing using wax might work!

"Wax is going to be the easiest to understand and prepare," I said with a smile, hiding the panic that I was feeling on the inside.

"Wax, as in the wax used in the candles that light the temple?" Ferdinand asked.

In the castle with its many attendants, large rooms like the grand hall were lit with a combination of candles and light-amplifying magic tools, while individual rooms simply used magic tools, which were the most common light source. I was used to candles from living in the lower city, but to Ferdinand, they were for the most part localized within the temple.

"Yes. We draw lines with heated, melted wax. Wax hardens when it cools, does it not? That will stop the dye from seeping into the lines."

"Ooh, you can use wax like that?" Justus interjected. His voice was bright, and he wore an excited grin at having learned what he thought was lower city knowledge. At this rate, he would no doubt start lurking there in search of other ways to use wax.

Oh no! I need to teach this to the Gilberta Company ASAP!

"I say we use dyeing instead. My embroidery skills are terribly lacking to the

point that I simply cannot see myself completing all the circles by winter," I said, conscious that my work in the temple and with the printing industry meant my time was scarce. "If we take the dyeing route, however, I can just recover my mana with potions."

"Consider learning to embroider your duty as a bride and give it your all," Ferdinand replied dryly.

"Then we shall cancel my engagement. If I don't get married, I don't have to practice sewing."

"Do not be foolish. You know by now that such a decision will not be permitted."

"I know, I know. I just said what came to mind."

"Doing so will allow others to exploit you. Take more care in what you say."

"Right," I replied while picking up one of the sheets with a magic circle on it. "This looks like it would be hard for me to reproduce even with a pen. I really don't think I can embroider these designs; they're just too detailed and complex for me. There are dyes we could use instead to imbue the cloth with mana, no?"

"Hmm... A dye that will properly dye something with mana... Perhaps we could use your blood," Ferdinand proposed, his tone dry and intimidating. I paled, thinking back to the time I had to use my blood to sign magic contracts in my commoner days.

"Absolutely not! That sounds painful and also extremely terrifying!"

"It was a joke. I expect Ehrenfest's reputation would suffer if we were to give the magic tools of royalty bloodstained clothes to wear."

"It doesn't sound at all like a joke when you say it, Ferdinand."

"Regardless, creating ink with enough mana to compare to blood would need enormous quantities of mana to brew."

"That's fine with me. Anything is better than embroidery."

"I wish I had enough mana to say such things..." Damuel said with a small groan, having far too little mana for such reckless spending even since

compressing his mana.

I scoffed, dismissing his envy with a sniff, and then returned to pleading for Ferdinand to accept ink as an alternative. I refused to budge on this. It was literally impossible for me to embroider all the magic circles.

“If you make me embroider these, you’ll bring shame to all of Ehrenfest!” I declared.

“Good grief... What terrible blackmail. Things truly do never go as planned with you,” Ferdinand grumbled. Even so, I triumphantly clenched my fist; as long as I didn’t have to embroider, I considered it my victory.

Magic Ink

Since we had decided that we were going to be making ink, Ferdinand began his lecture on brewing things.

“The ingredients one can acquire from fey creatures such as feyplants and feybeasts have elemental properties. Green is the color for Water, and the other elements likewise match the divine colors of the gods. You know all this already, I imagine?”

“Yes, it was taught during my first-year written classes,” I replied.

As Ferdinand had said, green was the color for Water. There was also blue for Fire, yellow for Wind, red for Earth, white for Life, black for Darkness, and gold for Light. First-years learned all this alongside the names of the gods, but I had known it even before then thanks to having read the bible. I imagined that most people knew it as a matter of course, considering its relation to the birth seasons.

“Correct,” Ferdinand said once I had given my full explanation. “Subsequently, the boons of the ingredients also connect to the gods.”

“This is second-year material, right?” I asked. “I learned it all while making textbooks.”

In regard to the elements, Water could provide healing, cleansing, and change; Fire could provide attack, amplification, and growth; Wind could provide defense, speed, and knowledge; and Earth could provide fortitude, resilience, and diffusion. The boons related to the specialties of their respective gods.

It had been written in textbooks that Earth could be mixed with any other element, so it was used to mix together elements that otherwise wouldn’t really merge well on their own. In contrast, Life generally backfired when mixed with any other element, so it was hard to use in combination.

As some additional trivia, in the same way that one person can contain

several elements within themselves, some ingredients had multiple elements. It was easier to combine elements that generally weren't compatible if one just used ingredients that contained both elements to begin with.

"Different ingredients have different mana capacities, which affects how much mana one can use while brewing with them. If you wish to acquire high-quality ingredients with many elements and a high mana capacity then you must gather from mana-rich fey creatures, as you know."

I nodded, thinking back to the powerful feybeasts we had fought when making the jureve. I knew that feystone quality differed greatly depending on the strength of the defeated creature.

"The ink we are about to make will require ingredients with the elements and capacities necessary to fully absorb your mana. Consequently, as all magic ink is subordinate to the Goddess of Wisdom, it will need to primarily contain Wind," Ferdinand said while rummaging through a box in search of something. Apparently, the brewing was going to be different from what was planned for the thread.

"We shall add an effect-amplifying blue ingredient to as mana-rich of a yellow ingredient as possible; then, we will add a red ingredient to raise its resistance..." Ferdinand continued in a mutter while lining up dried roots, powders, and liquids, none of which I recognized. I had no idea which elements each were nor what functions they served.

"Ferdinand, how can you tell which ingredient is which element?"

"Using this magic tool," Ferdinand replied. He brought over a disc that was radially split into the colors of the elements, at the center of which was a mysterious metallic plate about five centimeters in diameter that shone with all seven colors. It also had concentric circles drawn at three-centimeter intervals from the center, making it look fairly similar to a dartboard. "You need only rest the ingredients on this. Give it a try."

As instructed, I cut off a small part of the dried root and placed it on the disc-shaped magic tool. The instant the root touched the central plate, light started to fill the yellow part of the tool. At the same time, a small part of the blue portion shone as well.

“Eep! It started shining?! Um... So, does this mean the ingredient is strong with Wind and contains some Fire too?”

“Yes. One can also measure its mana capacity for each element based on how far the light travels,” Ferdinand explained. If the light stopped at the smallest circle, the ingredient didn’t have a sizable capacity for that element. But the farther the light stretched out beyond that point, the bigger its capacity was.

The fact that the yellow light had stretched almost to the very edge of the disc meant that the ingredient had an exceedingly large capacity for storing Wind mana.

“This is fun. So, what about this one?” I asked, reaching for some of the powder, but Ferdinand shot his hand out and grabbed my wrist to stop me.

“Wait, Rozemyne. The plate must be cleansed each time for the measurements to be accurate,” he said. “Take great, great care to remember this. You have a tendency to pay no heed to such details.”

Justus whipped out his schtappe and cleansed the central plate for us at once, and only then was it returned to the disc.

“Ferdinand, I wish to learn the cleansing spell,” I requested. “It seems convenient.”

“You already attempt to do too much on your own. You may entrust cleansing to your attendants; do not steal the work of those around you.”

“...Do you not do the cleansing yourself when you lock yourself up in your workshop experimenting?” I asked, puffing out my cheeks in protest. I seemed to recall Justus saying that even he hadn’t been able to get inside.

Ferdinand waved a hand, looking exceedingly annoyed. “All knights know the spell; have Damuel teach it to you later. We do not have time for it right now.”

“Erm, Lord Ferdinand. You want me to teach her?” Damuel asked, worried.

Ferdinand replied with a brisk nod. “She has only two guard knights with her now, and considering who the other is, it should be clear why it must be you.”

“Right. Damuel is amazing. He tutored me for my written classes,” Angelica said, her cheeks blushing with a hint of shyness as she praised him. At a glance,

she came across as a young maiden whose heart had begun to throb for her tutor, but that wasn't the case whatsoever; she was just doing her absolute best to avoid doing work she wasn't good at.

Damuel had learned not to be fooled by Angelica's picturesque expressions while tutoring her, and so he just sighed, saying not to worry and that he would take care of it.

"Ferdinand, what's this liquid? Is it oil?" I asked, shaking one of the jars a little and watching as the thick liquid inside slopped around. If my suspicions were correct and it was of a particularly high quality, it might have been worth supplying the ink workshop with some.

"Yes. It is oil from a kurhaize feyplant," Ferdinand replied.

"...Is kurhaize perhaps the evolved form of an eise plant?"

"It is, but how do you know of eises? As a first-year, you should have neither brewed nor gathered them, so why do you know of a feyplant that I cannot recall having taught you?"

Eise was one of the oils we had used back in my commoner days to make colored ink. Since kurhaize was its evolved form, it probably shared the same properties, if not also the same mana capacities.

"Eise is strong with Wind, isn't it?"

"...What of it?"

"That must mean linseed is Fire, mische is Water, and pedgen is Earth, right?"

"I do not understand what you are getting at here. If there is something that you wish to say, be more direct in saying it," Ferdinand insisted with a glare.

I went on to tell him about the colored ink the Gutenbergs had made in the ink workshop. The ingredients we had used hadn't ended up producing the colors we had expected, and it was only after much struggling that we had managed to get a grip on things.

"I see. Those problems were no doubt being caused by the elements. We use the term 'fey' when speaking of things that have large quantities of mana and can provide feystones, but all things that live atop land suffused with mana

contain mana, however slight the actual amount may be. Commoners are no exception, and this is exactly why contract magic uses blood, which contains the highest density of mana.”

“Oh, I see.”

In short, if we could give Heidi and the others a magic tool for investigating elements, their research would most likely progress much faster.

“Ferdinand, how much would this magic tool cost?” I asked.

“It is not for sale. If you want one, make it yourself.”

“Wait, so you made this one as well?! Then... make one for me too, please.”

“I refuse. It is exceedingly difficult to carefully match the quality of feystones, extract pure elements from them, and prepare for all the elements to react to such microscopic amounts of mana. I will teach you how to make one, but you must do it on your own,” Ferdinand said.

I decided to give up before I had even begun; anything complicated enough to warrant *Ferdinand* calling it ‘exceedingly difficult’ was almost guaranteed to be way beyond me. It would have been nice to have one, but ink research could still progress either way.

Sorry, Heidi. I don’t have it in me to make such a difficult magic tool.

“Still, regardless of how low-quality your ingredients were, it is impressive that commoners were able to perform successful research and produce such reliable results.”

“Eheheh. My Gutenbergs are something else,” I replied smugly.

“I am told that ink is to Heidi, the Gutenbergs’ ink craftsman, as books are to Lady Rozemyne,” Justus added with a small smile. “The Gutenbergs being raised by Lady Rozemyne are eccentrics who are all specialists in their respective fields.”

“I see...” Ferdinand murmured. “So there are many more Rozemynes, all with unique obsessions. Understood.”

...He just accepted that?!

“Enough chatter; let us begin making the ink. What we will be making now is a reproduction of the ink sold to commoner merchants for magic contracts,” Ferdinand said. It seemed that the ink Benno used for this purpose was made when a brewer moved their mana into a feystone and purified it of elements and colors, such that it would react even to the slight amount of mana in commoner blood.

“That seems surprisingly tedious,” I observed, and upon being told that we nobles didn’t need this ink since we could just write with magic tool pens, I suddenly realized something. “Can’t I just write on the cloth directly with a magic tool pen instead of using ink?”

“No. We want your mana to fill the cloth as much as possible to increase its effectiveness. The magic circle will not form if it is made with the same mana and ends up mixing together.”

The explanation didn’t make much sense to me, but it seemed that we needed to make highly viscous ink so that the mana wouldn’t mix together. At the same time, we needed the mana density of the ink to be higher than that of the cloth.

“I can’t say I really understand, so I’ll just follow your instructions.”

When it came to making magic ink, the fundamental process was the same as making a jureve—add the ingredients to the pot in a particular order and then stir thoroughly with a brewing stick. That said, unlike when we had made the jureve, I transformed my schtappe into a brewing utensil rather than using any brewing magic tools.

“Slice this into small pieces with a knife. You have learned to morph your schtappe, yes? I hope you have not already forgotten what you were taught in your lessons at the Royal Academy,” Ferdinand said with a sharp look.

“I remember them,” I replied, taking out my schtappe. “*Messer*.”

After morphing my schtappe into a knife, I started chopping the root into chunks as instructed. I had been a little nervous about trying to slice through such a dried-out root, but perhaps due to the fact I was actually cutting it with mana, there wasn’t much resistance. I started enthusiastically cutting away, only for Angelica to peer over with interest.

“You’re really good, considering this is your first time brewing.”

“Th-This is not my first time. I have helped Ferdinand before.”

“You help not just with the paperwork, but with brewing too? That’s amazing.”

I mean, I did *help make the jureve. But I learned how to chop ingredients from cooking back on Earth and in the lower city.*

I changed the subject with a laugh, but everyone who knew of my lower city origins collectively fixed me with a glare. Though he didn’t actually say it out loud, I was positive that Ferdinand was calling me a fool.

After chopping up the ingredients, I chanted “*rucken*” to cancel the transformation of my schtappe. From there, I began weighing the ingredients on a scale. Once they were all ready, we could start brewing.

“This brewing pot should do for today,” Ferdinand said, taking out a pot that looked similar to a small saucepan. “We will begin by putting in the highest-quality ingredients, which will serve as the base.”

“Right.”

I added the chopped-up root first of all; then, I chanted “*beimen*” to turn my schtappe into a mixing stick. Due to my previous experience brewing, I ended up making it even taller than myself, which prompted Ferdinand to rub his temples.

“You fool. A mixing stick that large would never work with a pot this small. Think of something shorter and easier to use.”

“Right...”

I recomposed myself and tried again, canceling the transformation with “*rucken*” and then morphing it into a mixing stick of an appropriate size for the small pot.

Stir, stir, stir, stir...

Stir, stir, stir, stir...

“I just need to put the next ingredient in when the first one melts, right?” I

asked.

“Yes. Put the ingredients into the pot in this order,” Ferdinand said as he lined them up on the work table. After the root that would serve as the base, I poured in the kurhaize oil and stirred it into the mix. From there, I would be adding the blue powder to amplify the mana in the ink, and then a bit of the red liquid to secure the ink to the cloth. Last was the golden powder obtained from overfilling feystones with mana, which was going to be used to increase the mana density.

Stir, stir, stir, stir...

Stir, stir, stir, stir...

Whether due to the quality of the ingredients or the increased efficiency of using a schtappe as a mixing stick, the chopped-up root dissolved pretty quickly. I poured in the kurhaize and resumed mixing.

Stir, stir, stir, stir...

Stir, stir, stir, stir...

I mixed in the blue powder, stirred even more, dumped in the liquid, and then continued on stirring. I could feel a surprising amount of my mana being drained.

Stir, stir, stir, stir...

Stir, stir, stir, stir...

“Ferdinand, I’m starting to get tired even with enhancement magic...”

“It is almost ready. You are the one who insisted on making ink, so see it through to the end,” Ferdinand replied. A beat later, the surface of the concoction flashed with light.

“Was that it?”

“No, there is one more step. This powder was made with your mana; it should do well to increase the mana density.”

I mixed in the golden dust as instructed and continued to stir until the surface of the liquid flashed again.

“Now it is done,” Ferdinand said. “Transfer the liquid into this jar. Take care not to spill any.”

As per his instructions, I started moving the finished ink, which had ended up just as blue as the kind Benno used for magic contracts. My excitement for my homemade ink was shooting up.

“Ferdinand, can I try writing with it?” I asked.

“Yes. We want to see just how much it bleeds.”

I momentarily exited my workshop to ask Fran whether he had any spare cloth we could use for experimental writing. There wasn’t any that we could freely waste, so to speak, but he brought some at once when I requested something that could also be used as a rag.

I returned to my workshop and spread the cloth over my work desk; then, I tried drawing a line with the newly made ink. It appeared just fine—in fact, it was shockingly clean. I observed it for a while, and not only did the ink not bleed at all, but it actually puffed up a little on the line. It was like a trail left by one of the especially wet markers I had used back in my Urano days.

“What in the world...?” Ferdinand remarked.

“It’s not bleeding in the slightest. Seems like we won’t need a resisting agent after all...” All the thoughts in my head of asking Lutz to prepare pliable wax for resist-dyeing, of making wax on my own, and of possibly developing my own rice paste all vanished into the mist at once.

“It is too early to say that. We will only know for sure once we have tried it on cloth infused with your mana,” Ferdinand said, his brows knit in a hard frown as he stared at the line.

“Why do you look so dissatisfied...?”

“I am not dissatisfied; I am simply confused, as we seem to have created something other than what I expected.”

I would have considered my newly made ink a success as long as the puffy line didn’t break off over time, but Ferdinand didn’t seem the slightest bit convinced.

“Rozemyne, dye this cloth with your mana. I wish to see whether the ink will function similarly with mana-dyed cloth.”

“I used up quite a bit of my mana making the ink, so I am rather tired,” I replied. As far as I was concerned, we had achieved what we needed to and it was time for us to move on. This must have been clear on my face because Ferdinand gave me a look tinged with concern. It was only momentary, however, and vanished as he raised an eyebrow at me.

“Then drink this potion. Your mana will recover speedily.”

“On second thought, I can do it. I’m doing it!” I declared. Pushing myself a little harder was vastly superior to suffering another dose of that ultra-nasty potion.

Stir, stir, stir, stir...

Stir, stir, stir, stir...

I continued to stir while Ferdinand threw one ingredient after another into the pot. He eventually added the red liquid, which made the surface of the concoction flash, and then took out and cut in half an experimental piece of cloth. He dipped one of the halves into the pot, and it sucked up the liquid inside in an instant.

“Eek?!”

But despite having sucked up the liquid, the cloth didn’t change color, nor did it appear at all wet. It looked exactly the same as the cloth we had just drawn a line on.

“It doesn’t seem any different... Is it really dyed with my mana now?”

“Yes. A touch should clear your doubts.”

I gripped the cloth and then let out a “Wow!” No sooner had I touched it than it had started to shine faintly.

“It reacts to your mana the most because that is what it is dyed with. Of course, it will react to the mana of others as well. Dyeing cloth in such a fashion makes it easier for one’s mana to flow through the embroidery, which in turn makes it more effective.”

“Neat.”

It seemed that dyeing cloth with mana wasn’t too hard in itself. Both Angelica and Damuel had apparently done it with their capes at one point.

“Now, see if that ink still works,” Ferdinand said.

At his instruction, I drew the same line as before. The ink swelled up over time, much like it had done before, and drawing on it felt exactly like drawing on ordinary cloth.

“...Seems like it’s fine.”

“But why?” Ferdinand asked, taking the pen from me in sheer confusion and drawing a line with his own mana. His line seemed to break apart at the edges, and the ink didn’t swell very much.

“It seems like the ink bleeds when you draw with it, Ferdinand. I wonder why?”

“I do not know. Here, Eckhart. You try.”

“Yes, sir!” Eckhart said. He drew a similar line, but his bled far more and didn’t swell at all. He then handed the pen to Justus, who was eager to try it for himself, but Justus’s line bled as well. In fact, it seemed to bleed more than Eckhart’s had.

By this point, Ferdinand had progressed from a furrowed brow to a full-on frown. “Angelica, Damuel. I want the both of you to try as well.”

“Yes, sir.”

My two guard knights were the next ones to try, and their lines continued the trend by bleeding even more than anyone else’s thus far. The one that Damuel drew was the absolute worst—it looked as though he had just spilled ink over the cloth.

“Is it perhaps based on the quantity of the writer’s mana?” I suggested.

“Or perhaps its elements and qualities... I must do further research to be sure. Rozemyne, may I have this ink?” Ferdinand asked, his “mad scientist” switch now entirely in the “on” position. The ingredients had been his in the first place, and as long as it didn’t interfere with his life too much, I saw no reason to

oppose him locking himself away in his workshop for a while.

“You may, if you promise to research only after eating and to have left your workshop by third bell tomorrow,” I said. Ferdinand glared at me with annoyance, but I wasn’t about to spend every morning waiting to get called over to drag him out from his workshop. I would protect my reading time to the full extent of my abilities.

“Very well,” he conceded. “Justus, have the attendants prepare food. I will finish what work I can before then. And... Damuel. I will entrust cleaning up here to you.”

“Sir?!”

Leaving Damuel to his confusion, Ferdinand took the bottle of ink and promptly exited with Justus and Eckhart.

“But why me...?” Damuel asked, still dumbfounded.

“Probably because Angelica would end up breaking everything,” I suggested.

“Professor Hirschur did always yell at me about that, but why does Lord Ferdinand know that?” Angelica asked. I returned an awkward smile, not wanting to reveal that anyone could have guessed it simply by watching her for a day, and then looked at Damuel.

“He must want you to teach me cleansing magic now as well.”

“Ah, true. That is possible.”

And so, Damuel taught me the cleansing spell while we were in the workshop. It wasn’t complicated at all; I merely had to take out my schtappe and chant “*waschen*” while infusing it with mana.

“It takes an extraordinary amount of mana if you don’t have Water, but you need not even consider that manner of problem,” Damuel said with a headshake. It seemed that he had struggled to cleanse things at all in the past, although his increased mana quantity meant he now found it much less troublesome.

“I suppose I will clean all these implements at once,” I said, eyeing the work table while infusing my schtappe with mana. I then shouted, “*Waschen*!” and in

an instant, the entire workshop was flooded with water. The sudden currents swept me up from the floor and spun me around such that I could no longer tell up from down. My eyes opened wide, and while I was quite literally drowning in my confusion, the water suddenly vanished.



Gravity suddenly dragged my once floating body back down to the floor, where Damuel was conveniently placed to break my fall. He had also been sucked into the torrents and ended up lying on his back.

“Guh!” Damuel grunted as I slammed down onto his stomach. The fact that he still mustered a polite “Are you hurt?” between violent coughs was yet another reminder that he was a paragon of virtuous guard knights.

“Cough, cough!”

Angelica was also spluttering as she recovered from the sudden water attack, and she was blinking rapidly in surprise. The water had already gone, and we were all bone dry, but the sensation of having been drowning remained. I had experienced it myself not too long ago.

“Lady Rozemyne, why did you summon that much water?” Damuel asked. I averted my gaze as I rested my body against his, not wanting to meet his exhausted glare.

“Only now do I understand the extent to which the quantity of mana used will change the amount of water,” I said. “I will take more care in the future.”

May cleansing magic be feared...

“Rozemyne. Apologies, but if you have no plans this afternoon, would you mind my visiting your workshop?” Ferdinand asked when I went to assist him with paperwork the next day.

“What?”

It seemed he had spent the previous evening locked in his workshop, experimenting with using the ink on all sorts of papers, cloth, and wood, only to learn that all of the lines had disappeared when he later awoke from a nap. My appreciation for him having kept his promise by leaving his workshop at third bell faded rapidly. In actuality, he had been impatiently waiting to see what had happened with the line on the cloth we had left in my workshop.

“The ink disappears? I don’t mind you visiting my workshop, but... if it really is gone, won’t it be unusable?”

“If the ink *is* unusable, you need only cease your futile struggling and embroider the circles like everyone else. It will not be an issue in the least.”

But I made the ink specifically because I don’t *want to do that! How can you be so mean?!*

And so, I started making my way to my workshop with Ferdinand, my reading time having been stolen away from me once again. It was sad to lose it, although I had to admit, I was also quite curious about the ink.

We entered my workshop, which was clean from the incident the day before, and Damuel took out the box containing the cloth we had all drawn on. The cloth he took out, however, had absolutely nothing written on it—not my line, nor anybody else’s.

“It really did vanish...” Damuel observed.

Nooo! Now I have to embroider it... This is going to take forever...

Feeling defeated and depressed, I went to take the cloth. The very instant my fingers touched it, however, it started to shine. All the lines that everyone had drawn suddenly reappeared, bleeding and all.

“What in the world is going on? This is unbelievable,” Ferdinand muttered, narrowing his eyes and staring at the cloth. I spread it out for everyone to see and shrugged.

“If not even you can understand it, Ferdinand, then I certainly won’t be able to,” I said. Everyone else nodded in agreement.

“If not even Lord Ferdinand touching it brought any change, the lines must only appear in response to Lady Rozemyne’s mana,” Justus said, looking equally as intrigued as Ferdinand as he eyed the cloth. “Lady Rozemyne, may I borrow it for a moment?”

I gave the cloth to Justus, and the lines faded away. I touched it again, and they reappeared.

“Will they also respond to feystones filled with your mana, I wonder?” Ferdinand mused aloud. “If so, the ink is still usable. Although it will mean that only you can draw a usable magic circle with it. Still, how in the world does this

work...?”

“Ferdinand, might I suggest you perform any further experiments with ink made with your own mana? It would only slow you down to constantly ask for my help, would it not?”

It was Ferdinand who had prepared the brewing ingredients and measured their quantities in the first place; he could make his own ink and experiment as much as he wanted. If my ink could make functioning magic circles, I didn’t care about anything else.

“A good point. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

And with that, Ferdinand promptly exited my workshop.

Yeah, that’s right. Get outta here. I’m not gonna hang around a mad scientist forever.

I started reading as per my initial schedule. My plan was to tell the Gilberta Company about resist-dyeing, since I had gone out of my way to remember it. It wasn’t something that I expected to have much use for personally, but maybe it would help Mom, who was a dyer by trade.

Request for the Gilberta Company

Having now acquired something new to research, Ferdinand once again started holing up in his workshop. He would come out only when it was time for me to assist him with his work, and come fourth bell, when I was no longer helping him, he would immediately lock himself away again. Eckhart had started to worry, since it had reached a point where Ferdinand was only eating one meal a day, but I didn't think it was anything to fret about—that one meal a day ensured he would survive, at least.

"Still, I thought he would be long finished by now..." Eckhart murmured.

"We'll be moving back to the castle after the spring baptism ceremonies, so I say we let him continue his research until then. We aren't too backed up with temple work, and as long as he's not going entirely without food, no one loses from this. I consider it fine for us to let him have a week to himself," I said while cleaning up my slate board and pen. Far be it from me to deny him when I similarly wanted to spend my days reading in my room.

Eckhart returned a somewhat dissatisfied glare. "Rozemyne, you're being surprisingly soft on Ferdinand. Would you put his lust for research over your own brother's struggles having to accommodate it?"

"I'm not being soft on him; this is all for my own sake. Without his research, we will not be able to finish making our clothes for Schwartz and Weiss." I also had my own plans, so I abandoned Eckhart and returned to my room; the Gilberta Company were due to arrive this afternoon, so I needed to move to the orphanage director's chambers after lunch.

"Gil, Fritz. Have you prepared what I asked for?"

"Yes. Two kinds of wax, one viscous and rigid, the other runny and flexible; Heidi's colored ink; and an assortment of miscellaneous goods, such as a pot for hot water, brushes, pens, cloth with resist-dyeing liquid, and some long chopsticks."

I had ordered Gil and Fritz to prepare for the Gilberta Company visiting the workshop. An explanation alone was hardly going to suffice, so I was planning on showing them resist-dyeing firsthand.

“Thank you both. I will need to rely on you once again when the Gilberta Company arrives.”

“Understood.”

After a brief pre-meeting discussion, Gil went to meet the Gilberta Company at the gates, while Fritz returned to the workshop. Meanwhile, I sipped at the tea Fran had prepared and checked my room to make sure I hadn’t forgotten anything.

Not long after, Gil returned to the second floor with the Gilberta Company’s group. Five people in total were accompanying him: Otto, Corinna, Theo, Leon, and Tuuli.

The moment I made eye contact with Tuuli, she broke into a smile. That alone filled my heart with joy. She remained my angel, now and forever.

“We have come at your summons, Lady Rozemyne.”

Otto, Corinna, and Tuuli knelt in a row before me, with Theo and Leon kneeling behind them.

Theo was more or less Otto’s right-hand man—he supported Otto just as unilaterally as Mark did Benno. He and Otto had studied the etiquette necessary for visiting the castle together, so he fit right in here despite not having come very often.

Leon was a leherl in the Gilberta Company and knew me from my blue shrine maiden days. He had used to work with Lutz but stopped going to the workshop once the Plantin Company split from the Gilberta Company, so I hadn’t seen him in a long while. The last time I had, he had still looked a bit childish due to not having come of age, but now he looked fully like an adult.

After exchanging lengthy noble greetings, I suddenly remembered. After raising my hands to my chest, I smacked my right fist against my left palm. It was the spring greeting for merchants that Benno and Mark had taught me. Since we were here for business, I decided to give it a try.

“Blessed be the melting of the snow,” I said. “May the Goddess of Spring’s boundless magnanimity grace you all.”

Otto blinked in surprise before likewise smacking his fist against his hand. “Blessed be the melting of the snow. May the Goddess of Spring’s boundless magnanimity grace you.”

The other four repeated the same merchants’ greeting after Otto. It felt somewhat strange seeing Tuuli say it so smoothly.

“You may sit,” I said, gesturing to the Gilberta Company’s seats as Fran prepared more tea. “There are many orders to be made.”

Otto, Corinna, and Tuuli sat down, while Theo and Leon stood behind them. It wasn’t long before the warm aroma of tea started drifting through the air, and it was then that Monika brought in sweets. They were simple cookies for us to eat while discussing business. I demonstratively ate one of each so that the others could start eating as well.

Seeing Tuuli smiling happily at getting to eat sweet stuff satisfied me. Corinna, upon noticing that, smiled as well.

“Lady Rozemyne, what orders do you have for the Gilberta Company today?” Corinna asked brightly. “I am told you need more than just hairpins this time.”

“A personal chef of mine will be attending this summer’s Star Festival; I would like a hairpin for her to wear when the time comes. That said, despite being among my personnel, Ella is still a commoner. A hairpin that looks too expensive would stick out, and I assume it would not suit her outfit to begin with.”

“Indeed.”

“Furthermore, as I brought my personal chefs with me to the Noble’s Quarter, Ella was not able to attend her coming-of-age ceremony. This is going to be the first time her parents see her wearing formal clothes, and as I understand it, her husband’s parents will also see her during the festival. Tuuli, could you prepare a hairpin for a spring-born that would suit her?”

Tuuli knew Ella, since they had taught the orphans to cook together and participated in the pig-killing for the orphanage’s winter prep. She would

doubtless be able to make a hairpin that suited her.

“Certainly,” Tuuli replied. “I have met Ella and understand what will suit her.”

That settled that.

“As far as I could tell from the podium during the winter coming-of-age ceremony the other day, almost every woman was wearing a hairpin,” I said. “I was impressed to see how far the Gilberta Company’s efforts have spread them throughout the city.”

Tuuli gave a modest, proud smile. “I also see that the number of women wearing hairpins at ceremonies is increasing by the year. I research which hairpins are the most popular so that I may make even better ones myself... although I did not see the recent coming-of-age ceremony, since I had to stay with my little brother.”

“Did something happen to him?” I asked, recalling my concern after not seeing Tuuli and Kamil at the doors. I thought they could have been sick.

“No, it’s just that he turns four this spring. Taking a toddler to see a ceremony is one thing when you can carry them, but he’s now old enough that he might rush into the temple if we aren’t careful, so we decided to keep him home. Children aren’t allowed in the temple before their baptism,” Tuuli replied.

Oh yeah... I remember not being allowed to go when Tuuli was baptized.

It wasn’t something that I had really considered, since my family had always carried Kamil up to the doors, but children weren’t allowed to enter the temple before they were baptized. In short, I wouldn’t get to see him again until his own baptism.

This sucks...

“But my parents wanted to see it no matter what, so I volunteered to watch over him. We were lucky it was on an Earthday when I didn’t have to work. We would have been in trouble had it been the coming-of-age ceremony of any other season,” Tuuli continued with a troubled smile. She had no doubt watched over Kamil so that Mom and Dad could see that I really had gotten better.

It makes sense. They couldn't leave an almost four-year-old on his own.

It wouldn't be easy for my parents to visit the temple from now on, since they couldn't bring Kamil, which meant I would get even fewer chances to see them.

I don't get to talk to Lutz and the others in the hidden room, and now I don't get to watch Kamil grow up either. This is a little sad.

Tuuli opened and then closed her mouth, hesitant to speak, before finally steeling her resolve and giving me a comforting expression. "Um, Lady Rozemyne... My father mentioned that he has once again been hired to escort those going to Hasse. The soldiers were elated when they heard the news; it truly is one of their favorite assignments. I would like to thank you for your patronage as well."

Her words snapped me back to reality. We were hiring the soldiers to bring the gray priests back from Hasse, which meant I would get to see Dad at the monastery again. That cheered me up a little.

"The soldiers Gunther leads are kind even to my gray priests and shrine maidens, and it is thanks to their consideration that I can trust them with this work. Tell Gunther that I look forward to his good service once more."

"As you wish," Tuuli replied with a relieved smile. It was a sight that healed my aching heart, and after a moment spent basking in her radiance, I set the sheet of paper with the armband design on it down on the table.

"Moving on—I would like the Gilberta Company to make these," I said. Everyone leaned forward and peered down at the armband drawings with curious expressions.

"Lady Rozemyne, might I ask what this is?" Tuuli queried. She spoke with the utmost politeness, but the suspicion in her eyes made it clear that she was asking whether I was about to start something weird again. I personally didn't consider it strange in the slightest, but her general assumption was correct. Armbands were essential items for members of my Library Committee.

I wrapped the design sheet around my arm. "I would like armbands with these characters on them to demonstrate membership to an organization. All members of the Library Committee will be wearing them."

“They look a lot like the cloth bands people wear for funerals...” Tuuli said with a slight frown. I wasn’t sure what she was referring to; it must have been another custom from this world.

“Funerals, you say?”

“Yes. During funerals, those related to the deceased wrap black cloth around their arms. This armband reminds me of it.”

Oh, I see... I guess that’s a little concerning. Hopefully using a color other than black should avoid any further comparisons to funerals...

Giving up on the armbands entirely wasn’t an option. I wanted to be a Library Committee member, even if only in appearance. I wanted to have matching armbands with Schwartz, Weiss, and Hannelore.

“The armbands aren’t black, and there are going to be characters embroidered onto them, so I don’t believe they will feel much like funeral cloths,” I said. “Armbands have a pin, see, so they lock around the arm. Oh, I suppose I need to have Johann make (safety pins)...”

I set down the armband paper, took out my diptych, and then scribbled down *“order safety pins from Johann.”* I would need to speak to my Gutenbergs about it before leaving for Haldenzel at Spring Prayer.

As my thoughts drifted, Tuuli pointed at the kanji on the armband with an exasperated look. “Lady Rozemyne. Pardon me, Lady Rozemyne. What are these strange designs?”

“Oh, ah... Let’s say they are collectively the symbol for the Library Committee that I made up. The armband design you see here is already life-size, so just do the embroidery as you see it. You must not add or remove any lines whatsoever.”

We discussed the armbands further, during which I selected the color of the cloth and the embroidery thread that would be used. There were going to be four differently colored armbands in total. I wanted the variety so that Hannelore could select her preferred color and so that we could have ones that suited Schwartz’s and Weiss’s new outfits.

“Furthermore, I wish to order a new hairpin for this summer,” I continued.

“The hairpins are popular even in the Royal Academy. I shall entrust the design to you, Tuuli.”

“Understood. You may count on me,” Tuuli said, confidently accepting the work order. I generally entrusted her with designing and selecting the colors for the hairpins; I had complete faith that she would make one that suited me.

After finishing my order, I gazed across the others from the Gilberta Company, one by one. Otto and Tuuli tensed up a little, anticipating one last thing. They were sensitive to my more subtle mannerisms after having spent so long with me.

“And finally, although I have already expressed my gratitude by letter, please allow me to thank you directly. I am incredibly grateful that you accepted such urgent orders in the winter, and the prince was exceedingly satisfied with the hairpin you produced. The archduke candidate who wore it was truly a sight to behold, and she drew more attention than any other graduating student. I am sure you will be receiving more orders from this point on as well.”

“We are honored.”

They seemed to be suspecting that I was about to drag them around on some unreasonable journey again... and they weren’t entirely wrong.

I smiled. “As a reward for your continued efforts, I would like to present the Gilberta Company with a new technology.”

“Erm...”

Tuuli and Otto looked at me with surprise, having been caught off guard. Corinna tilted her head gracefully, but her eyes were narrowed into the sharp look of a merchant.

“I wished to express my thanks for you completing an order from royalty, a truly unreasonable demand, but perhaps you would rather not receive it? If so, I would ask to be introduced to the Dyeing Guild.”

“Not at all! We will gratefully accept it.”

I wasn’t lying when I said that I wanted to express my thanks to the Gilberta Company, but in truth, I just wanted to get resist-dyeing spread ASAP, and I

thought it would be quicker to work with the Gilberta Company than with guild members I had never met before.

"I will instruct you in a new manner of dyeing cloth, and I ask that you use it to prepare wearable clothes by next year's winter. I intend to spread this as a trend in the near future."

Tuuli widened her eyes a little, as if to say, *"She really is being unreasonable again."* At the same time, Leon, who was standing behind Corinna as her assistant, leaned closer and asked for permission to speak. There was a distinct sparkle in his eyes.

"You may speak, Leon."

"I thank you. Am I right to assume this new technology is not related to hairpins, but is instead a new way of making cloth?"

"That is correct," I replied. "Although it would be more accurate to say this new method is not for making cloth, but for dyeing it."

Upon hearing my explanation, Leon broke into a smile. I blinked, unsure why that made him so pleased, but Otto explained for me. Leon's family apparently owned a store that sold cloth to the Gilberta Company, and they had connections to every dyeing workshop in the city. His family would make quite a killing if cloth incorporating this new dyeing method garnered a lot of attention.

"Shall we go to the workshop, then?" I proposed. "I will show you the process firsthand to supplement the explanation. Fran, summon Gil."

Gil guided us to the workshop, and upon our arrival, everyone stopped working to greet us. I had everyone return to their duties, except Gil and Fritz, who were going to be performing the demonstration. Otto and Corinna looked around the workshop curiously, but Leon seemed more wistful. His eyes were on the tools used to swish paper, so I could guess he was remembering the past.

"Nostalgic, is it, Leon?"

"It is. I used to come here almost every day."

"You may help today, if you so wish. The dyeing workshops will need more

demonstrations like the one we are about to show," I noted with a refined chuckle, at the same time signaling to Gil with my eyes. He nodded in response and then began to address those gathered.

"What we are about to demonstrate is a method used to draw art directly on cloth. We are not well-informed on local cloth production methods, so it is possible that you are already familiar with it," Gil said preemptively before looking at me for confirmation.

I nodded and then gazed across those from the Gilberta Company. "There are many ways of weaving and embroidering cloth to make it more beautiful, but I have only ever seen cloth dyed a single color. Are there any technologies for drawing directly on cloth? Or perhaps certain ways in which cloth is folded and cinched with thread to create designs?"

"There was long ago..." Corinna said, placing a hand on her cheek. As it turned out, among the clothes left behind by the founder of the Gilberta Company had been some tie-dyed cloth. "This happened decades ago, but there was once an archduke candidate from Ahrensbach who wed into the duchy. She brought new cultural trends and technologies to Ehrenfest one after another, and these new trends in style required cloth of a solid color, which resulted in the technology for even dyeing being improved and embroidery growing in popularity. At the same time, it is said that the technology for dyeing subsequently degraded into what it is today."

Nobles were generally the only ones who purchased cloth in bulk, and if all of noble society considered single-color cloth to be of the highest quality, it was only natural that all the dyeing workshops would make it their top priority. Tie-dyeing and the irregular colors it produced had consequently been abandoned in the blink of an eye, and judging by modern trends, I could see how that had happened.

"An interesting history. In which case, will there be craftspeople ready to return to old forms once I attempt to spread the dyeing technique again?" I asked.

"No, I believe they are all gone."

The literacy rate among craftspeople was almost zero percent, which meant

most didn't leave behind records, and technologies were easily lost. This change of trends had happened long enough ago that pretty much all those who were alive back then had since passed away.

"Tie-dyeing is not especially difficult, so I imagine it will revive as soon as I start making orders. Individual workshops can perform any additional research at their leisure, although I would appreciate it if written records of any findings are made so as to not be lost again to the capricious tides of popularity. Perhaps I could ask the Dyeing Guild to handle that?"

"I will speak to the guild, as they may already have some records stashed away," Corinna said. Leon nodded in agreement and jotted down a reminder on his diptych.

"In addition to tie-dyeing, I wish to introduce a method known as resist-dyeing. It may have existed in the past, but if it has also been lost, please revive it." I pointed to two sheets of cloth, onto which Wilma had sketched flowers with soot pencils. As everyone looked at them with great interest, Gil and Fritz began tracing them with brushes tipped with melted wax, as we had discussed. "One need only put wax in the places one wishes to remain undyed and the places that one wishes to leave white."

"Do we not need dye for the wax part?" Leon asked. I nodded in response; the stiff wax that Fritz had applied had started to crack as it dried, while the wax that Gil had applied hadn't.

"This is the difference the type of wax makes," I explained. "If you're going to do resist-dyeing then please cooperate with a wax workshop to make wax with the right balance of ingredients."

Leon grimaced, having experienced firsthand the endless trial and error of the Myne Workshop. Absorbing new technologies was no easy matter, especially considering that I simply taught the process; it was the professionals who needed to hone it to perfection.

"Fritz, crack the wax a bit more, if you would."

Fritz struck the cloth to form more cracks. Then, he and Gil started smearing the colored ink that Heidi had invented over the wax. They used the rollers for mimeograph printing and were thus able to cover the handkerchief-sized cloths

with red in no time at all. The areas where the wax had been added, however, remained undyed.

“Once the cloth has been dyed, the next step is to melt the wax. Wax melts when heated, no? One needs only submerge the cloth in boiling water once the dyeing is complete.”



Gil gripped the two pieces of cloth with the chopsticks, dunked them into a pot, dexterously stirred them around, and then pulled them out again. All the gray priests in the Rozemyne Workshop could already use chopsticks, since they were necessary in the paper-making process when handling bark and wood.

Fritz washed the heated cloth with cool water, squeezed it dry, and then spread it flat on the table. On one piece was a sharp white flower, while on the other was a flower with unusual cracks running through it.

“I believe that both of these styles are usable; it all depends on the customer’s preference. One can use tie-dyeing and resist-dyeing in tandem, and since colors grow darker when dyed several times over, one could, as an example, wax the petals of an illustrated flower to distinguish the color of flowers, leaves, and a background. Of course, you can embroider on top of all this as well.”

“I see,” Otto said with a nod. Behind him, Theo was desperately noting all this down. Assistants sure had it rough.

“You can use pliable wax to draw fairly precise, detailed art; or you can use stiff, cracked wax to create more unique patterns. I believe both are worth experimenting with.”

“How would you like your own new cloth to be dyed, Lady Rozemyne?” Corinna asked, causing me to fall into thought. I certainly liked tie-dyed cloth, but resist-dyeing was hard to ignore.

“I wish to support as many new technologies as possible, so I will order one piece of tie-dyed and one piece of resist-dyed cloth from each style of cloth that a given dyeing workshop in Ehrenfest owns. I wish for the dyes to be red, the divine color of winter, and I will select which cloth to use from those that are presented to me.”

“That will certainly liven up that dyeing workshop...” Otto said, his voice tinged with awe.

“It is my pleasure,” I said with a smile. “I know more ways of dyeing than the two we have shown you today, so I am open to discussing business once more.”

Another Gathering of the Gutenbergs

After raising more questions about the new dyeing methods, Otto crossed his arms and went quiet; he had the eyes of a merchant trying to figure out how much they were going to be worth. I stared up at him, awaiting his response, until Corinna slid in between us.

“Lady Rozemyne, regarding the sale of new dyeing methods, I would advise you to do business directly with the Dyeing Guild soon after spreading these new ones you have demonstrated,” she said, maintaining a peaceful smile but looking at me with firm eyes. “Even if we were to buy the rights, the Gilberta Company and the workshops we collaborate with would not be able to monopolize them. Your influence is simply too large, Lady Rozemyne.”

Any trends I started would spread throughout almost all of the nobility’s women in an instant. Corinna was saying that the Gilberta Company and its small number of cooperative workshops would struggle to manage the vast waves of orders that would no doubt flood in.

It would take both time and money for the Gilberta Company to buy the rights, research the dyeing methods, and train their workers to be skilled enough to meet the standards of nobles. My spreading these trends now would put them in a position where they couldn’t keep up with all of the orders they would receive, which would in turn require them to publicize the methods to desperately train a bunch of workers all at once.

“If we end up in a situation where we have to rely on other stores and workshops to keep up with the trend, the Gilberta Company will earn the harsh reproach of nobles and other merchants alike,” Corinna concluded. In other words, she had decided it wasn’t profitable for their store to buy the new dyeing methods.

Benno always tried to secure my new technologies before anyone else so that he could extract as much money from them as possible, while Corinna focused entirely on whether they would benefit her area of expertise, sewing. They

shared the same blood and occupation, but they were entirely unalike when it came to business. That said, their sharp eyes when it came to deducing whether something was profitable for them looked extremely similar.

Corinna may look calm and peaceful, but she certainly is Benno's little sister.

I didn't have a strong grasp of the connections between merchants in this city and what went on with the buying and selling of rights, so if the Gilberta Company thought it would only bring them anguish, it was probably best that I give up on this transaction.

"So I should sell resist-dyeing to the Dyeing Guild directly?" I asked, confirming that I had understood.

Corinna shook her head. "That we will gratefully accept as a gift. We will sell the dyeing method and all its details at a low price to the Dyeing Guild. From there, we shall convey your order to the Dyeing Guild and request that all the available workshops start producing the many clothes you have requested."

Upon hearing this suggestion, Leon, whose family ran a store that sold cloth to the Gilberta Company, looked more excited than I had ever seen him before.

"I imagine each of the dyeing workshops will expend their best efforts to fulfill this order so that they might gain exclusive business with you, Lady Rozemyne," Corinna said.

"Yeah. The Gutenbergs are growing in fame as they accomplish big things even outside the city. There're a lot of craftsmen who want to become Gutenbergs themselves," Otto muttered before looking at me. "Lady Rozemyne, might I ask for you to decide on at least two workshops to give your exclusive business to, as you did with the two smithies? And might I suggest that you grant them the title of 'Gutenberg' also?"

"It might be worth ranking the delivered cloth and working with the Dyeing Guild to charge fees to dyeing workshops that want the methods."

Mm... I was trying to spread resist-dyeing throughout the lower city before Justus sniffed out my plans, but I feel like this is blowing up into something a lot bigger than I wanted.

I hadn't expected this result. I turned my attention to Tuuli as I pondered

what to do, only to see that she was already looking at me with a face that said, *“Don’t ask me. I don’t know what the heck to do here.”*

“Still, Lady Rozemyne—how did you learn of such old methods?” Leon asked, curious.

I smiled. “Through books, of course.”

“I see. Leaving records truly is important, I agree.”

Okay, he bought it. I did *read about them in books, but I know how to actually put them into practice because we attempted them during my home studies classes in middle school.*

Back on Earth, I had experienced tie-dyeing and resist-dyeing firsthand. An otaku friend of mine had surprised everyone by using the latter method to masterfully dye an illustration of her favorite anime character on a handkerchief... but what had surprised me the most was that she had misspelled the name of the character despite so enthusiastically claiming to be their biggest fan.

In the end, despite my misgivings, we settled on the Gilberta Company running a competition that would focus on “reviving old technologies and securing the ‘Gutenberg’ title.” It seemed the competition had to be held at the end of summer, since otherwise there wouldn’t be time to debut the cloth made by my new exclusive dyers at winter socializing.

Judging by how lively Leon was about my deciding on new exclusive workshops, I could guess that his family would be profiting immensely from the Gilberta Company’s orders.

This ended up much bigger than I expected, but oh well.

And so, my discussion with the Gilberta Company concluded. Once I was back in my room, I wrote out the details for the cloth-dyeing competition while looking over the notes Fran had made on the meeting.

“Once the Starbind Ceremony is over, I don’t have any plans until the Harvest Festival, correct?” I asked.

“None in the temple,” Fran replied. “Do you have any in the castle?”

“Mm... It depends on the results of the Archduke Conference. The merchants of Ehrenfest might all find themselves in quite a bind afterward.”

As it stood, I didn’t have any particular plans between the end of summer and autumn. I smoothed out the wax of my diptych to erase the text on it, and that was when Gil came rushing in with a letter.

“Lady Rozemyne, the Plantin Company has sent a letter,” he announced. It was good timing—I had been thinking about meeting the Gutenbergs once before leaving for Haldenzel, both to order the safety pins and to check up on the progress of my previous orders.

“Thank you, Gil. You may rest for a moment as I write my response. I imagine you were quite busy preparing for and cleaning up after the demonstration,” I said, praising him as I opened the letter. On the surface, it was a simple request for a meeting laden in heavy noble euphemisms; but if one carefully read between the lines, it could possibly be read in an alternate way: *“What the hell did you do this time? Explain yourself, idiot.”*

Is it just me, or does this letter exude a sense of frustration too strong to be contained by noble euphemisms? I don’t think this is just my imagination...

Having sensed seething anger from the letter, I wrote my response, in which I simply stated that I wanted to meet with the Gutenbergs and discuss their progress over the past two years before our departure for Haldenzel. Having other people present would no doubt serve to block some of Benno’s anger for me.

That might make him even more frustrated, since it’s blatant trickery on my part, but I’m not about to ignore the tools I have at my disposal.

The date for the meeting was scheduled instantly, perhaps because I had mentioned at the end of my letter that I didn’t have much time, since I would be returning to the castle after the spring baptisms. The Gutenbergs would be gathering on the day before the baptisms in the orphanage director’s chambers, and the attendees were going to be the Plantin Company Trio; Johann and Zack, the smiths; Ingo, the carpenter; Heidi and Josef, the ink makers; and Gil, of my own workshop. All in all, there were quite a few people attending.

“Thinking about it, this is going to be the first time we’ve held a gathering of the Gutenbergs here,” I mused aloud. Johann, Zack, and Ingo had come to the temple before to make the printing press, but this would presumably be a new experience for Heidi and Josef. “Fran, Damuel, Angelica. This will be a meeting of craftsmen from the lower city. I expect some of them to have somewhat substandard manners, but please overlook it.”

“Understood.”

There were enough people coming this time that we would be holding the meeting in the hall on the first floor. My attendants did their best carrying down chairs from the second floor and preparing a table to accommodate the expected numbers.

As I gave orders from the second floor, I glanced at my hidden room—at the door that would no longer open. A sense of sadness and loss struck me all at once, but I slapped myself on the cheeks and inhaled deeply, forcing the feelings away. I had promised Lutz that I would continue advancing toward my goal; I couldn’t allow any pain to show on my face while he was here.

“Lady Rozemyne, the Gutenbergs have arrived,” Fran said.

I glanced down to see that Gil was guiding my visitors in one after another. The Plantin Company Trio were used to the orphanage director’s chambers and so they looked completely calm. I greeted them with a soft smile, and they returned my greeting with polite smiles of their own. To my relief, neither Benno nor Damuel appeared at all bothered by that exchange—a smile, at least, was permitted between a noble and the merchants they did exclusive business with.

The three of them were followed in by Johann and Zack, who seemed a bit nervous, perhaps because it had been so long since they were last here. Ingo entered next while looking behind him, as though he were being pushed inside, and then came Heidi, who actually was pushing him inside. She was in turn followed by Josef, who was trying to stop her.

“I see you’re doing well, Lady Rozemyne!” Heidi exclaimed with a wide grin and a two-handed wave after popping her head over Ingo’s shoulder to see me. “That’s great! I was so worried after you didn’t wake up for two whole years!”

I smiled a little with nostalgia, but that attitude wouldn't do here. My guard knight, Damuel, had stiffened up, and Fran averted his eyes from Heidi while rubbing his temples much like Ferdinand would. It seemed as though he was willing himself not to get annoyed.

Josef, paling at Damuel's and Fran's reactions, pushed his wife's head down and then pulled her toward him. "You idiot!" he chided her in a hushed voice. "You're talking to the High Bishop who gives real blessings! You can't talk to her like you used to anymore!"

"Sure, but she's also the one funding my ink research for her books, right?"

"You're not wrong there, but still. You're being too rude! You're a mother now, so calm down a little, alright?!"

I felt my mind go blank at those words. Heidi hadn't looked any different to me, since she had already come of age when we met, so it hadn't occurred to me that she might have had kids since the last time I saw her.

I guess it's not unusual for Heidi to have kids now, since she was already married... Even Volk had kids while I was asleep. I really shouldn't find this strange, but you know what? I still do.

"He's right," Benno said. "You just can't act like that here. Noble scholars are going to be attending our meetings from now. Josef, either fix her attitude, or don't let her come next time," he warned, speaking so frankly either because he was caught up in the atmosphere, or because he thought the language used by nobles wouldn't be understood by the commoner craftspeople.

Josef clapped his hands together and said, "That second one's a good idea." It seemed that he had decided not to bring Heidi to meetings with the scholars present.

"As Benno said, I expect that scholars will be attending all meetings henceforth," I noted. "Josef, it seems that you alone will represent the ink workshop from now on."

"Compared to the struggles that come with bringing Heidi along, it will be much easier for me to come alone," Josef said with a tired sigh, earning him a refined giggle from me and firm nods of agreement from both Damuel and

Fran. “If ink weren’t involved, Heidi would perhaps be more calm, but she’s excited to be seeing her investor again after so many years.”

“That’s right!” Heidi exclaimed. “I’ve been dying to give you a report, milady! I’ve done tons of research, and now we can make ink of consistent quality and color! To be more specific...”

She had started giving me her report before I even asked for it. I gave her a half-smile while briskly recording her results on a sheet of paper. It seemed they had invented new fixing agents, or rather, a varnish-like substance that could be applied atop ink to preserve it without changing its color.

After praising their efforts and promising to continue funding their research, I told the Gutenbergs about ingredients having certain elements and that Ferdinand had commended them for getting any results at all without knowing this.

“...So, in short, the elements within an ingredient change what the color is when mixed,” I said.

Heidi, who had been listening with trembling fists, shot me an excited look. “I can’t believe such a convenient magic tool exists... I want one too, milady! Please let me buy one with my investment funds!”

“I know how you feel. I similarly wanted one to help further your ink research, but they are not so easy to acquire. Furthermore, it being a magic tool means I do not know if commoners will even be able to use it.”

“Aww, that’s not fair... How comes nobles get all the luck?” Heidi moaned, flailing about in a show of exaggerated agony that felt all too familiar to me. It was like I was seeing myself, back when I had just awoken in this body and learned that only nobles got to be librarians.

“I wanted to base predictions of what kind of paper a given feyplant would produce on existing research,” I explained, “but nothing can be done without the measuring magic tool.”

“Milady! Don’t give up!” Heidi cried. “We can still win this!”

“If we had the time and resources, perhaps. But at the moment, I do not have either.”

Heidi slumped her shoulders, tears welling up in her eyes. “If you can’t get it, I guess there’s nothing we can do...”

“Moving on.” I turned my attention to Johann and Zack. “What results have the smithies seen?”

Johann and Zack exchanged glances, deciding who would speak first through silent expressions and eye movements. They had both come of age while I was asleep, so the boyish looks I remembered had vanished completely. Now, they both looked to be adults capable of doing their jobs.

“I’ll start,” Zack eventually said. “Two years ago, I was given the task of designing carriages that don’t bounce and beds made with springs. Here are the blueprints. How are they?”

“I looked at Zack’s blueprints myself, and I think this design for the carriage will bounce the least,” Johann added. “But when it comes to mass production, this one is the better pick. The parts for it aren’t as hard to make.”

I took in their thoughts while looking at the three different blueprints. It seemed to me that he had made a suspended carriage.

“And this is the bed you requested,” Zack continued. “The blueprint is exactly as you requested it. I’m currently in the process of making improvements to the design, but it’s been quite the challenge, so I expect it’ll be quite some time before it’s finished. It’ll be more expensive too.”

“Make the best design you can,” I said. “The price is irrelevant, as I will make more money through it. That said... I’m surprised you were able to produce a workable design in the first place.”

Despite having only my vague recollections of pocket and Bonnell coils to work from, Zack had actually managed to design a bed, opting to use pocket coils since they were easier for him to visualize. Assuming he actually finished the whole bed, my time asleep was going to be blissful to say the least.

“In any case, begin making an adult-sized bed,” I continued. “As for the carriages, I will purchase the design for the one that can be mass-produced. The designs you produce henceforth can be entrusted to the Smithing Guild just as the pump designs were, correct?”

“We have to work in equal measures with the Carpentry Guild when making carriages, so please speak with them too. As for payment, we can follow the same approach we took with the pumps,” Zack said. It was a system wherein Zack and I would receive an inventor’s fee every time a carriage was made using the blueprints.

“Very well. I will trust the bridging of the Smithing and Carpentry Guilds to Benno. My initial idea was to have Ingo serve this purpose, but perhaps an unrelated third party is best.”

“...Understood.”

I paid Zack using the guild card I had as the forewoman of the Rozemyne Workshop and then turned to Johann. “How has your progress been? I believe I requested that you produce metal letter types and spread the hand pumps.”

“I am steadily increasing the number of metal letter types in circulation, and every single one is sold on the spot. Haldenzel does not yet have a smith that can make them perfectly, so they have purchased an especially large quantity.”

Those in Haldenzel were planning to print while stuck inside over the winter, and they couldn’t do their work without metal letter types. They wanted plenty of spares too, since I knew from Johann that he had rejected all of their letter types due to being imprecisely made.

“I hope Haldenzel learns to make them soon,” Johann said. “Going over there so often has been a real struggle...”

“If they are not ready when we visit this spring, I will consult Giebe Haldenzel about sending some of their craftsmen to Ehrenfest. This will be the last time you go to Haldenzel.”

Johann looked relieved to hear this, so I clarified that it was only because I needed him to travel to other places instead. He grimaced hard and slumped his shoulders, although I couldn’t quite figure out why. As I watched him with quizzical eyes, the other Gutenbergs all gave him sympathetic looks.

“Is there a problem with that?” I asked. Everyone looked at each other for a second, after which Lutz elected to speak for them.

“This is something of a personal problem for Johann, but his perfectionism

when it comes to the letter types and the difficulty he has interacting with others often earns him much reproach. He always struggles the most when teaching those of a new province."

"Aah, it certainly must have been rough in Haldenzel, considering their insular community and aversion to outsiders. However, the giebe has informed me that they praise Johann highly. The craftspeople were enthusiastically working together to secure a passing grade this winter."

Johann blinked at me in surprise, no doubt having expected his reputation to be much worse. Seeing that, Zack elbowed him lightly and grinned.

"Told you, didn't I? They were just shouty 'cause they knew you were better than 'em. Well, either way, you're the only one who can do this right now. You've just gotta suck it up until your guy's all trained and ready."

"Zack, who are you referring to there?" I asked.

"Johann's disciple, Danilo. He's burning with a passion to become a Gutenberg no matter what, so I imagine he will force his way into one of these meetings soon enough," Zack replied, laughing hard enough that his shoulders started to shake.

Johann bent his mouth into a sharp frown before continuing his report. "The hand pumps are spreading at a steady rate. We've been selling them in the north and to merchants, and now we're finally able to take orders from the east." Orders from the rich and those they had work relationships with inevitably took priority, but now they were finally able to start delivering hand pumps to other parts of the city.

"That is good progress indeed," I said. "Please do continue at your current pace. Oh, and I almost forgot—Johann, I would like you to make these as well."

Johann accepted the blueprints for safety pins, skimmed them, and then frowned. "Are normal pins not good enough?" he asked. "I don't think these are too different."

"It is dangerous to have the point of the needle sticking out, do you not think? I, for one, am not particularly fond of pain. That is why it is important to have the sharp tip of the pin hidden away," I said, tapping on the part of the

blueprint that described the cap in question.

Johann gave a small smile. “You always seem to focus on things nobody else would care about in the slightest,” he said; then, he put his business face back on. “Lady Rozemyne, may I give this order to my disciple?”

“Certainly, so long as he can make it according to the blueprint. He’ll need to be able to fulfill my orders to stand a chance at one day becoming a Gutenberg.”

“This is going to be good practice for him,” Johann said with a nod. As he carefully put away the blueprint, I shifted my gaze to Ingo. Next was my primary order of the day.

“And you, Ingo? Did you finish the bookshelves?” I asked, looking up at him with excited eyes. I had tasked him with making mobile bookshelves, then high-density shelving.

Ingo frowned a little. “I made a shelf according to your exact specifications,” he said, “but...”

“Were there any problems?”

“It moved just fine when the shelves were empty, but you’re going to have a hard time once you start putting books on them. In fact, when we packed the thing with stuff, it wouldn’t budge at all. It’s not good enough to be delivered to you,” Ingo explained, scratching his cheek awkwardly as my eyes widened. “I thought about improving on your designs, but I didn’t know what to do with the metal rails or the wheels; they’re outside of my specialty. I figured it would be best to start by redoing the blueprints themselves.”

It seemed that Ingo’s workshop could have figured things out through trial and error if the railing had been made of wood, but as carpenters by trade, there wasn’t much they could do with metal.

“Johann...”

“Please leave the blueprints to Zack,” Johann said at once, dumping it on his fellow smith as if begging not to be given any more work than he was already having to balance. I turned my eyes to Zack, who reluctantly accepted, albeit after noting that minor modifications weren’t his specialty.

Thank goodness. My dream of getting high-density mobile shelving is still alive...

Just as my stress levels began to dip back down, however, Benno spoke up. He wore a deep smile, but his dark-red eyes were brimming with an indescribable anger that made my anxiety shoot right back up. “By the way, Lady Rozemyne. Corinna told me something very interesting the other day. It seems that you are branching into the dyeing industry as well now—that you are ‘reviving ancient technologies,’ as she put it. That is very interesting indeed.”

His expression made it clear that he was actually saying, *“Are you stupid or something? Is now really the time to get so involved with dyeing?”*

I placed a hand on my cheek, unsure whether he was more angry or exasperated. “There is no end to the benefits brought about by new trends, and as this is merely reviving old technologies, I would hardly even give myself credit for it. All the honor should go to the craftspeople who learn the revived technologies and use them anew. I believe now is a good opportunity to leisurely train dyers in these new practices.”

“Hmm. It seems that nobles have an entirely different understanding of the word ‘leisurely’ than us commoners,” Benno said, this time with a clearly exasperated expression. The other Gutenbergs were nodding to themselves, like, *“So this is what nobles consider leisurely? That explains everything.”*

In a shocking twist, people had come to believe I was some kind of ruthless educator who trained people by having them complete more and more difficult work. It was horrible. That was Ferdinand, not me. The tasks I gave were simply things I hoped would one day be completed; it wasn’t as though they absolutely needed to be done or else. But when I attempted to convey this, Zack frowned and shook his head.

“Our perspectives are different,” he said. “To us, a craftsman who can’t finish the jobs he’s given is incompetent.”

Oh, okay. That makes sense. Sorry for all the trouble. That said, I’m not going to change.

“I believe spreading the new dyeing method will increase ink sales, and so it is

worth doing. I have not spoken of the dyeing method relevant to the Plantin Company, and Corinna said that it would be best to do business directly with the Dyeing Guild."

"The dyeing method relevant to the Plantin Company, you say...?"

Oh, crap... I've said too much. I was planning to keep quiet about stencil dyeing for a little while longer.

"There is another dyeing method, one that is more related to the Plantin Company," I explained. "I expect to sell this method to the Dyeing Guild once I have decided on my exclusive workshops, and then have them predominantly focus their efforts on using it."

I could feel Benno's mood darkening as I spoke. His eyes narrowed, demanding that I explain exactly what this had to do with the Plantin Company.

"N-Ngh... I merely said it was related to the Plantin Company because it uses special ink and paper. It will simply result in you selling more stationery. A-Any more details will come at a price!"

"...Understood," Benno said, leaving it at that.

After everyone had given their reports, we moved on to discussing our plans in Haldenzel. I explained that those coming were going to be traveling with me in my highbeast, and that we would depart as soon as Spring Prayer ended. The magic contracts being changed had far-reaching impacts, and to handle the resulting red tape, Benno and Damian from the Plantin Company were going to accompany me, as were Johann and Zack.

Since they had already finished teaching those in Haldenzel to make black ink, Heidi and Josef didn't need to come along. And as for the colored ink, the Plantin Company could bring and sell it themselves. Ingo likewise had finished teaching them to make the printing press itself, and the carpenters over there had since achieved a passing grade. The Rozemyne Workshop didn't need to send anyone either, since those in Haldenzel already knew how to print, and their paper-making was postponed for now.

"Benno, how long will your affairs take?" I asked.

"If you are with us, Lady Rozemyne, I imagine three days will be enough," he

replied. Under normal circumstances, even getting a brief meeting with a noble took forever, but he expected things to progress much more quickly with me around. It sounded like we would be able to go there and get back in the blink of an eye.

"Then I, too, will put my all into the negotiations with the scholars, such that printing may be spread as much as possible."

"I believe it would be better if you contained yourself a little more," Lutz said, his cheek twitching ever so slightly. But I had already decided to devote my all to making my dream a reality, so there was no holding back now.

"It has been decided that a legal deposit system will henceforth be introduced," I announced. "The castle has permitted it, so be sure to inform the workshops through the Printing Guild." I then went on to explain what the legal deposit system was, and how copies of all printed material would need to be given to me and Ehrenfest's castle.

"I understand the system and do not mind its implementation, since nothing will change in practice... but why two copies?" Benno asked. "Will you not always remain in the castle, Lady Rozemyne?"

He was indirectly saying that I didn't need a copy for myself when I wasn't going to be wed to another duchy. I stuck my pointer finger up and wagged it at him. My ambitions wouldn't be satisfied by the castle's book room. No, I had my sights set on a much, *much* bigger future.

"I plan to one day build a massive library, one that contains a copy of every book in not just Ehrenfest, but Yurgenschmidt as a whole. To that end, I must begin collecting books immediately," I said, puffing out my chest with pride as I announced my goal.

Upon hearing this declaration, the Gutenbergs all cradled their heads as they realized they were stuck with me forever.

Disappearing Ink and Returning to the Castle

The spring baptism ceremony had begun.

As I made my way to the shrine, I glanced at the children who weren't any smaller than me out of the corner of my eye. Hearing the crowd whisper as I walked was nothing new, but since this was a baptism ceremony, they were all children... and children were a lot more direct than the adults at the coming-of-age ceremony.

Hey! Don't say, "HOLY CRAP, SHE'S SO TINY!" I can hear you! And don't point at me like I'm some freak of nature. If my guard knights were here, they'd pick you up and throw you out!

I walked on, feeling a bit like an animal at a zoo, and climbed atop the podium. Ferdinand then began his speech on the gods, after which I ended the ceremony by blessing the children. I didn't see any of my family at the door, maybe because the coming-of-age ceremony had only been a week ago.

Oh well... Tuuli has work too.

"And now that is done," Ferdinand said to me.

"Are you planning to lock yourself up in your workshop again?" I asked. "We're going to be hiding in the temple until Count Leisegang leaves the city, correct? I heard so from Eckhart."

Great-Grandfather and Count Leisegang had been planning to marry Ferdinand and me to make him the next archduke and minimize the amount of Ahrensbach blood in the archducal family. They had apparently been convinced that Ferdinand was aiming for the archducal seat, considering that he had put me under his protection, played a considerable role in my adoption, returned to noble society after Veronica's expulsion, and then officially become my guardian.

Ferdinand, having been probed by Count Leisegang over his plans for marriage, had subsequently shattered Great-Grandfather's plotting by having

Wilfried and me get engaged. It seemed odd to me that we were hiding away and refusing to attend meetings despite this, but reining in nobles plotting to put their ideal archduke on the seat was apparently the job of the current archduke and the planned future archduke—that is, Sylvester and Wilfried. In other words, it wasn't something for us to concern ourselves with.

Eckhart had explained it to me like so, while eyeing the door to Ferdinand's locked workshop: "Were Lord Ferdinand ambitious, he would have remained in the castle instead of returning to the temple. There, he would have acquired all the backing he needed simply by accepting the proposals he was given and remaining silent. But he instead demonstrated his loyalty to Lord Sylvester by minimizing contact, relaying information to the archduke, and subsequently leaving any cleanup to him. There is no better way to display one's complete lack of involvement with politics than locking oneself away in the temple."

It seemed that I could also display my position, that I would follow Aub Ehrenfest's orders, by similarly avoiding contact and remaining in the temple.

"As Eckhart explained, I have no intention of opposing Sylvester," Ferdinand said. "The same goes for you, no? And you are always more lively in the temple. Remaining here is far from a discomfort for you, is it not?"

"True. I have no interest in the next archduke, and remaining in the temple is not discomforting in the least. I must say, though—the same goes for you, Ferdinand. You are always more lively when you can do your research."

The blue priests could now properly assist him with his work, and since most of the work inherited from the former High Bishop had since been completed, Ferdinand could much more easily acquire free time in the temple. He curved his lips up into a slight smile to signal his agreement; the fact that he didn't audibly agree was probably because nobles weren't really allowed to say they preferred the temple to the castle.

"I think it's fine for you to spend your time here on your research, at least. You can lock yourself away in the workshop if you wish," I said.

Ferdinand raised an eyebrow. "I would appreciate not being interrupted for such trifling matters as food, but... Putting that aside, there is something I must discuss about that ink of yours. I will be visiting your workshop after lunch;

prepare for my arrival," he said, his expression hardening ever so slightly. His research on my special ink must not have produced good results.

I asked Fran about my plans for the day and then agreed to the visit.

Ferdinand arrived after lunch, bringing with him a box filled with various jars of ink. I opened my workshop's door to allow him and Eckhart inside. Justus was absent, since he was visiting the Noble's Quarter to get updates on the situation there. My guard knights, Angelica and Damuel, came in as well.

After instructing the guard knights to wait by the door, Ferdinand got me to hold a sound-blocking magic tool. "I made the same ink and performed various experiments," he began as he lined up the various jars one after another. Each one had a unique label tied to it with string, but what was written on them caused me to blink in surprise.

Rozemyne. Ferdinand. Minus 1. Minus 2.

"I recognize the names, but what are the minuses?" I asked.

"The ink I made with one or two fewer elements. It is clear that the mana dust added in the final stage is responsible for the unusual ink; nothing else caused similar changes," Ferdinand explained. He had evidently managed to make ink with one and two elements removed from his mana.

How does one remove elements...? That sounds pretty tricky.

"My results showed that the ink would not swell or disappear unless one has all the elements," Ferdinand continued. "Rozemyne, try writing with my ink as well."

I took the pen presented to me and wrote on the cloth. This ink, unlike my own, bled a little. Then, after a moment, it started to swell up.

"As expected," Ferdinand observed, looking at the line I had drawn with great interest. "If one has the elements, mana colors, and quantity, the ink does not bleed much at all. There is no mistaking that those with all the elements will see such swelling no matter whose ink they use."

Ferdinand seemed satisfied as his theory became confirmed with evidence. I

tilted my head at my line on the cloth; using his ink hadn't resulted in a clean marking.

"It seems to bleed more than when you used my ink, Ferdinand."

"That is likely due to the difference in mana. You have less mana than I do. It is only natural that you would have an easier time writing on cloth dyed with your mana using ink made with your mana."

To think that ink made with someone else's mana made this much of a difference... I now understood why it was so much more efficient to make magic tools for personal use with one's own mana.

Hence Ferdinand making everything he needs himself.

"This ink is the product of sheer circumstance," Ferdinand said, "due to you wanting to avoid embroidering and thus creating mana-rich ink to use on cloth dyed with your mana."

"It seems so."

"We shall use this ink solely for creating the outfits and make the production method a secret. It is too dangerous to unveil. There are countless ways in which ink that disappears but can nonetheless activate magic circles could end up being misused," Ferdinand noted, his light golden eyes watching me quietly.

I nodded slowly in agreement. "One could easily use it to modify magic contracts in secret or stealthily place attack-orientated magic circles anywhere. It is quite dangerous indeed."

"I find it concerning that you would think of such malevolent tricks on the spot. Perhaps you are the scary one."

"But you're choosing to hide the production method precisely because you considered the same things, aren't you?" I asked.

Ferdinand grimaced and nodded. "Only someone with all elements can create disappearing ink. Likewise, only someone with all elements can use it. This restricts its usage to select members of royalty, Sovereign archnobles, and archducal families throughout the duchies. If someone of such high status elected to misuse this ink, it could result in an entire duchy—or even the

country itself—being turned on its head.”

He was right—there was no need to introduce something so dangerous to the world. I wasn’t a fan of danger or violence, and there was no harm in keeping something that could be misused a secret.

“I agree entirely. All I care about is escaping the need to embroider my clothes.”

“Good grief... I appreciate that you understand the dangers involved and will cooperate with keeping it secret, but an engaged woman still needs to know how to embroider. Escapism is not healthy,” Ferdinand said, shaking his head and rubbing his temples as if to say that I was making his head hurt.

“I will arrange for the library’s magic tools to be embroidered as before,” he continued. “It is possible that their clothes might be examined by their next owner, as we have examined those provided previously, so we will draw the magic circles with your ink and then embroider the circles atop them using thread dyed with your mana. Under normal circumstances, having another do the embroidery would weaken its effects, but that will not be relevant with you having first drawn them with ink. That said, I expect you to embroider at least one of the circles yourself, both as bridal training and to learn more about magic circles. Is that understood?”

My shoulders drooped with utter despair as he fixed me with a stern glare.

“In the end, I couldn’t escape embroidering... Was there even a point in brewing the ink, then?” I asked, with a hint of melancholy.

“You need only embroider a single circle now. Is that not significant enough?”

Ferdinand placed the ink back inside the wooden box; then, he turned around and gestured for me to return the sound-blocking magic tool. It seemed that our secret conversation was over.

“Eckhart, Damuel, Angelica. We have elected to keep the production method for this ink a secret. You are to speak of it to nobody. Is that clear?” Ferdinand asked, addressing the three guard knights who had seen the ink being made up close. None of them had all of the elements, so there was no risk of them making the ink themselves, but we certainly didn’t want them spreading the

method.

Ferdinand received a sharp “Yes, sir!” from all three guards, after which Angelica proudly added, “I don’t even remember what I saw, so you don’t need to worry about a thing.”

Ferdinand was rendered speechless for a solid moment, having never expected that a noble could watch the brewing of a magic tool up close and remember absolutely nothing of the process. This silence was his response when his mind shut down at something that he found utterly impossible to comprehend, but after years of dealing with me, he was able to recover much faster.

In the end, Ferdinand elected not to think too hard about it. He glanced at Angelica, indicated his understanding in as few words as possible, and then changed the topic. “Incidentally, Rozemyne—Fran came to deliver his report. In it, he mentioned that you have begun something strange with the lower city merchants again. You have your sights set on dyeing now, hm?”

I cocked my head, unsure what he was trying to say. I had entrusted the report to Fran, and I was pretty sure he hadn’t left anything out.

Ferdinand gave an exasperated expression at my confusion. “If you are starting something which could possibly become a new trend, speak first with Lady Florencia or Elvira. This will only cause confusion.”

“Understood.”

I wasn’t sure whether it would draw enough attention to become a new trend, considering that we were just reviving an old method, but I decided to give the report regardless.

For the two days we needed to wait for Justus to return, I spent my afternoons swimming in a veritable sea of books. My brain became a soup of letters, and the floaty sensation in my head was amazing. I made the most of the bliss until Ferdinand inevitably summoned me.

“It seems that Count Leisegang has finally left the castle,” he said. Count Leisegang had been awaiting our return to the castle for as long as he possibly

could, desperate to arrange a meeting with us, only to eventually cave and leave.

“All nobles other than the Leisegangs have given up on making you the next aub,” Justus explained. “Your repeated proclamations to the children in the Royal Academy that you do not intend to take up the position proved effective to say the least, as did your former guard knight Brigitte speaking of your lack of ambition for power.”

It seemed they were beginning to settle for keeping me in Ehrenfest as the archduke’s first wife, such that I wouldn’t end up being wed to another duchy. Their relenting was thanks in large part to Sylvester’s hard work and efforts in convincing the others.

“Now would be a good time to return to the castle,” Justus concluded. “There are going to be meetings before the Archduke Conference, and the aub wishes to discuss the infrastructure of the lower city.”

“Very well,” Ferdinand said. “Rozemyne, we shall return tomorrow.”

“Okay. Oh... Wait.”

“Is something the matter?” Ferdinand asked, furrowing his brow as he put up his guard.

“What shall we do with my personal chefs? I have given Hugo time off to prepare for his marriage, and while we can bring Ella with us, I am worried about sending an unmarried woman to the castle kitchen, especially since she knows all my recipes. I would not like her to be taken away.”

Ferdinand thought for a moment and then nodded. “She will certainly be targeted if she is left alone. Considering the possibility that she may be put in a state where she cannot get married, it would be wiser to leave her in the temple. Perhaps you could negotiate with Sylvester, offering him a recipe or two in return for temporary access to one of the castle’s chefs.”

“I could do that?” I asked.

“There is only a short period of time between now and Spring Prayer. He would rejoice at the opportunity to acquire a new recipe or two at so little a cost.”

I ultimately followed this advice and decided to leave Ella at the temple. The less danger she was in, the better. I informed her that she was going to stay behind, then had Fran and the others prepare my things.

"Farewell, Lady Rozemyne. We await your safe return."

"May we meet again at Spring Prayer."

After saying my farewells, I soared through the sky on my way to the castle, riding in Lessy with Rosina and my luggage.

"Welcome back, milady."

My retainers welcomed me upon my return, with Rihyarda at the lead. The guard knights exchanged places with Damuel and Angelica, who had earned themselves a break.

"What have you learned in my absence?" I asked. "I wish for a report on what has happened in the castle."

It seemed that Cornelius, Leonore, and Brunhilde—all of whom were related to Count Leisegang—had been called by their parents and other family members, who interrogated them all about the situation. They had ultimately managed to calm even the most outraged of nobles by conveying that I had no intention of becoming the next aub to begin with and that this wasn't a marriage I was being forced into.

"I heard from Lamprecht that Lord Wilfried is exceedingly depressed at the moment. The nobles are insulting him, saying that he is forcing his way to the aub seat despite his criminal history by exploiting your reputation as a saint," Cornelius said.

Rihyarda grimaced. "Please cheer up my boy Wilfried. Help him get through this. You are engaged to him, after all, milady."

"I find myself unmoved," Hartmut said. "It is the truth that Lord Wilfried committed a crime that should not be forgotten, and also that he is exploiting the Leisegangs' support for Lady Rozemyne to regain the political capital he lost committing said crime. He knew before accepting the engagement that he would receive such fair and accurate criticism. And if, for whatever reason, he

did not, then he was simply being too naive.”

It was a harsh perspective that was likely shared by most nobles... or rather, most Leisegang nobles. Rihyarda, in contrast, saw the situation through much more forgiving eyes. That was to be expected, considering that she had served Sylvester for such a long time and had known Wilfried since his birth.

The previous Count Leisegang’s beloved daughter had been disrespected after he allowed her to wed the archduke candidate set to become the next archduke. Despite having been wed as the first wife, the butting in of Lady Gabriele of Ahrensbach had knocked her down to second wife. On top of that, the archduke candidate had been removed from the candidacy for fear of causing discord throughout the duchy, thus becoming Count Groschel.

At the same time, the archduke at the time had instructed that Count Leisegang wed his youngest daughter to Bonifatius, to bring back order to the duchy. Bonifatius, however, had shown no attachment to the archduke seat and actively surrendered it to his younger brother.

The younger brother in question had taken as his wife Veronica, the daughter of Lady Gabriele, who ended up mistreating the previous Count Leisegang’s grandchildren. The giebe boasting the most profitable land was slowly being pushed further and further away from the center of power. The months and years he spent enduring this humiliating abuse were long and painful, and in the end, he felt as though he had brought shame to his ancestors.

As far as Hartmut was concerned, there was absolutely no chance that they would ever accept Wilfried, who had been raised by Veronica.

“Someone who cannot endure criticism and does not strive to prove they are superior is not suited to become aub,” Hartmut continued. “For as long as he is due to wed Lady Rozemyne, he must strive to be fit to stand beside her. As things currently stand, he will be an embarrassment.”

“Hartmut, that is enough,” I said. “Predicting criticism is not always enough to maintain calm when receiving it. What matters is what Wilfried does next. Although, more importantly, has Count Leisegang truly given up? Judging by the fact he remained in the castle for as long as possible, it does not seem to me that he has...”

Brunhilde, who had been asked to check up on Great-Grandfather as his relative, stepped forward to explain. “Leonore and I were invited to visit him, and while there, we were asked endlessly about your tastes and preferences, Lady Rozemyne. After that, he expressed the concern that you were being threatened by the archducal couple to not become the next aub, just as Lady Veronica had abused Lord Ferdinand to prevent him.”

Brunhilde had firmly rejected the idea and emphasized that I was on good terms with the archducal couple. Leonore, as Count Leisegang’s niece, had likewise conveyed that I did not wish to become the next aub.

“When I informed him that you were not used to noble society due to your temple upbringing and that you have no intention of becoming the next aub, he was exceedingly moved.”

“He was... moved?” I asked, confused. It was hard to imagine such a response about me being raised in the temple, considering how it was seen by most nobles.

“This is something Father told me, but it seems that your absolute perfection astounds him,” Hartmut said. “You have an ideal bloodline, an immense mana capacity, and a record of impressive accomplishments despite the circumstances of your birth. He said that no one in history has been more deserving of the title of ‘saint.’ How should I say this...? Your reputation as a saint has spread much more rapidly thanks to the previous Count Leisegang’s efforts.”

Leonore smiled upon hearing this—not because she was pleased, but because she was utterly exhausted knowing that her efforts to convince him had been for nothing. “It seems he will be supporting you with all that he has, so that you will not need to worry about your upbringing. We refused for your sake many times, saying that this was not what you wished for, but Great-Grandfather is hard of hearing, and is thus very skilled at picking up only what he wishes to hear in these discussions. It is therefore impossible to say what he heard, and what he didn’t...”

Eep! G-Great-Grandfather?!

My head started to hurt as I realized he was continuing to scheme in the

shadows for my sake.



Once my retainers finished reporting what they had learned, Hartmut brought me several stacks of documents. “These are from when the Royal Academy dormitory was remodeled,” he said, “and these are from when the castle and the Noble’s Quarter were remodeled.”

It seemed that these documents had been collected after Elvira received my message. She had compiled a team of scholars, which naturally consisted of Hartmut and Philine, as well as Wilfried’s and Charlotte’s scholars. They had worked together to pore over old documents and find everything that was relevant to the remodeling.

“Thank you. I shall share my documents as well, then. Here are records of my meeting with the Gilberta Company, and records of my meeting with the Gutenbergs. I would like for these to be delivered to Elvira. Hartmut, I ask that you organize the information relevant to printing and the lower city infrastructure, while Philine, I ask that you organize the information relevant to dyeing.”

Fran had written the records for his reports to Ferdinand, and so he had described the entire flow of the meetings. I passed the documents to Hartmut and Philine in turn, requesting that they cut out only the relevant parts from within.

Hartmut flipped through the pages and then furrowed his brow slightly. “Did a scholar of yours in the temple write these?”

“Yes. They were written by my attendant, Fran. In the temple, attendants do scholar work as well. Fran and Zahm served Lord Ferdinand as his attendants before they served me, and they are well-trained, as you can no doubt tell from these documents.”

Hartmut flipped back to the front of the documents and started going through them again, this time with a more serious look in his eyes. “Indeed. I never would have expected a gray priest of the temple to be this skilled,” he said.

Philine looked my way after hearing the phrase, “gray priest of the temple.” Her worried expression made it clear that she wanted to ask about Konrad, so I smiled to ease her worries.

“Philine, Konrad is doing quite well. He is smiling more often and eats his fill every day. I went to see him in the orphanage myself and found that he has made a friend his age, and that he is learning to read and do math.”

Philine clasped a hand against her chest with relief, but then she blinked in surprise. “Erm, Lady Rozemyne... What do you mean by that? Konrad is learning to read and do math?”

“My orphanage has full sets of playing cards, karuta, and picture books, so children learn to read and do math even before their baptism. Thus, Konrad is being taught to do both by the other orphans.”

Philine widened her eyes in stunned silence, while Hartmut likewise turned my way, looking surprised.

“Lady Rozemyne, if the children in the orphanage know how to read and write before their baptism due to those learning implements, wouldn’t that mean they are receiving better educations than laynoble children?” Hartmut asked. Philine nodded repeatedly in agreement, having barely been able to read or write following her baptism.

I internally compared the orphanage children to those in the castle’s playroom. “I don’t know exactly what kind of education normal nobles receive, but I believe they are as well-educated and well-mannered as mednoble children, save for matters related to mana. That said, no precise comparisons can be made, since their studies and future prospects following their baptisms are so dissimilar.”

I had made the karuta and playing cards for the orphans to begin with, and it was only because Sylvester had been impressed with their results when he did his tour that they had ended up being used in the castle playroom. There was nothing strange about the orphans who had been using them first being able to read, write, and do math... Or so I thought, but apparently nobles didn’t think that orphans were capable of an education at all, even when they had access to the same resources.

“If not for the taboo of the temple, I would suggest we host a classroom to educate laynoble children at a low cost, but that seems still too hard to implement. I am postponing my plans for a temple classroom for later.”

“A temple classroom...?”

“I plan to one day teach all commoners to read, write, and do math, although I am speaking ten, perhaps twenty years in the future,” I said, glancing down at the documents in front of me while explaining my long-term hopes. At the bottom of the page I was reading was a calculation detailing how much time and mana it would take to remodel the lower city.

Hmm... Mana will probably be a bit tight for a few years, but it’s not impossible.

“Um, Lady Rozemyne. What is this dyeing?” Philine asked.

I glanced back up. “They are methods that used to exist in Ehrenfest. I learned of them when discussing the purchasing of multicolored cloth for Schwartz’s and Weiss’s outfits with the Gilberta Company. They will be consulting with dyeing workshops to see if those old methods can be revived.”

Such was the cover story we had gone with. I explained tie-dyeing and resist-dyeing to Philine, but since she didn’t know what they looked like in practice, it didn’t mean much to her. It was Rihyarda who reacted to them.

“Tie-dyeing and resist-dyeing, hm? How nostalgic...” she said.

“You’re familiar with them, Rihyarda?”

“They were in fashion when I was a little girl. I may even have a few outfits dyed in that style, though I would need to search my closet at home.”

It seemed that nobles tended not to throw away sentimental outfits or outfits given to them by the one they served. This was an unexpected place to learn about old dyeing methods.

“I would like to see what manner of cloth was produced with these old dyeing methods,” I said. “Please do show me them when you have the time.”

“Yes, certainly.”

Brunhilde let out a dissatisfied noise at our promise. “What is the point in such old things?” she asked. “I think it would be best for you to use your time inventing new trends, not falling back on old ones.”

“My goal is to create a new dyeing method using old techniques. Whether the

results are worth it will depend on the skill of the craftspeople and our eyes for fashion. Will you assist me in creating trends, Brunhilde, not just spreading them?”

“You wish for me to make a trend alongside you?” Brunhilde asked, her eyes widening as if that thought had never occurred to her. She had only ever focused on finding good things and spreading them to push trends, but since Florencia and Elvira, among others, were superior to her in both age and faction, she had never even considered creating a trend herself.

“I have faith in your social acumen, Brunhilde. You deftly chose the pound cake and teas to be given to Lady Eglantine, and the scents of the rinsham, no? I believe you will be able to select from a series of dyed clothing what will be most liked by noblewomen.”

Brunhilde gave a proud smile and nodded, her amber eyes developing a strong light now that she had the goal of creating a new trend from the ground up. “I will select the most suitable cloth for you, Lady Rozemyne. I would very much like to start a new trend with you.”

The Archduke Conference Approaches

Having been advised to learn about the old technologies before selecting what new thing was best, Brunhilde began interrogating Rihyarda in detail about outfits of the past. It didn't take long for the two of them to become rather invested in the discussion, particularly since they cared more about fashion and accessories than most. Even Philine and Lieseleta started to listen to Rihyarda's speeches with interest.

As I watched on with a warm smile, Ottilie entered with a letter of invitation. "Lady Rozemyne, Aub Ehrenfest has summoned you for a tea party at fifth bell today," she said.

Now that we had returned and all of the archducal family was in the castle, we would be holding a tea party to primarily discuss the upcoming Archduke Conference. Since this was going to include talk about the printing industry and the infrastructure of the lower city, Elvira would also be in attendance. Although the letter had only just arrived, Ferdinand and Sylvester had ironed out these plans through ordonnanz while we were at the temple, so I had already expected the meeting.

"It is only natural that Lord Wilfried and you are going to be present, as you have begun attending the Royal Academy, but I see that Lady Charlotte will also be attending."

Under normal circumstances, a noble would only begin apprentice work after entering the Royal Academy. Those who had just finished their baptism would help with their parents' work, hear about work life from their family and friends, and consider their future so they could choose their course in the Royal Academy when the time came. Charlotte, however, was destined for the archduke candidate course, and since she actively wanted to work with us, she was being included in the printing industry.

"Charlotte is working as hard as the rest of us, so she must attend as well," I explained. "Her retainers would no doubt find themselves in quite the

troublesome situation if she alone were not kept up to speed, do you not think?”

Ottilie placed a hand on her cheek and sighed. “I am worried about how both Lady Charlotte and you are neglecting your bridal training duties to focus on this printing industry, among other things...”

Charlotte was working with almost manic desperation to avoid falling behind Wilfried and me as an archduke candidate. However, considering that Wilfried and I were now engaged, the next archduke was all but set in stone. It seemed that Ottilie and Charlotte’s attendants had been discussing how they wished we would focus more on preparing to be brides.

Sorry, Ottilie. I’m a thousand times happier being busy with work than preparing to be a bride.

As unfortunate as it was for all our attendants, what I cared about most was reading. I was putting my all into spreading the printing industry so that I could one day retreat into the darkness and read to my heart’s content, but as for bridal training... I would never care enough to take it seriously.

“Lady Rozemyne, shall we head to the meeting room?” Lieseleta asked once she had finished preparing for our leave. I was going to be accompanied today by Rihyarda and Lieseleta as my attendants, and Cornelius, Leonore, and Judithe as my guard knights. Hartmut and Philine would also be joining me as my scholars, so they briskly gathered their stationery together.

I climbed into my Pandabus and drove to the meeting room, which was on the second floor of the castle’s main building.

“Ngh. I’m so nervous about attending a meeting with the entire archducal family. I’m just a laynoble...” Philine said, carrying her stationery with trembling hands.

“I’m an archnoble, and even I’m tense,” Hartmut said, his expression somewhat stiff. “This is also going to be my first time attending a meeting with everyone from the archducal family.”

Lieseleta gave a smile that reminded me a lot of Angelica. “I am anxious myself, but we need only perform our duties with diligence,” she said. “All we

apprentices are expected to do is our very best.”

I thought the only thing Lieseleta and Angelica shared was their looks, but their attitudes toward work are pretty similar too...

Attendants and guard knights had different jobs, but they resembled each other in how they took full responsibility for their work and performed all the duties expected of them. Angelica maintained a strict delineation between tasks she was willing to do and those which required her to think, but when it came to her guard duties, she was twice as serious as anyone else.

Lieseleta was likewise frighteningly observant and considerate, especially with Rihyarda respecting her abilities and putting so much effort into training her. It was easy to overlook, but she always prepared what I needed, usually before I even realized that I needed it.

Only one guard knight could enter the meeting room, so Cornelius followed me inside while Leonore and Judithe waited in another room.

A crowd had already gathered in the meeting room. The archducal couple sat in the highest seats, with Bonifatius and then Ferdinand sitting next to them. Wilfried, Charlotte, and I came next, and we all had our scholars and guard knights with us. Our attendants were also hurrying about preparing tea, so even though this was only a meeting for those affiliated with the archducal family, it was still rather packed. Elvira, higher-up scholars, and higher-ups of the Knight’s Order were here as well.

“There you are, Rozemyne. I hear you finished the ceremonies without incident,” Sylvester said. He gestured me over, and so I approached with Cornelius. My scholars and attendants had their own work to do.

“You seem rather tired, Sylvester.” I was seeing him up close for the first time in quite a while, and I couldn’t help but notice that he looked more exhausted than I was used to. There were bags under his eyes, and his smile exuded a little less energy than usual.

On second thought, perhaps it was more accurate to say that Sylvester seemed *calmer* than I was used to. The hyperactive man who normally acted like an elementary schooler now felt more like a white-collar worker, drained from having served as a middleman between his juniors and higher-ups.

“I knew this would happen the moment we decided on your engagement to Wilfried. It’s not important. How’d you spend your time in the temple?”

“Outside of the ceremonies, the same as always. I practiced whirling and the harspiel, then helped Ferdinand with his work. Outside of that, I received reports from my attendants on what occurred in my absence, held meetings with merchants, and toured the orphanage. I also prepared important magic tools needed for the royal outfits we are preparing and even secured some reading time. They were very freeing and productive days,” I said. On the whole, I was pleased that I had finally been able to relax a little, but Sylvester just grimaced.

“So you didn’t get any time to rest at all. You’re working too much...” he muttered.

Florencia smiled at Sylvester. She agreed with me and said that he needed to work harder to match my pace.

Sylvester nodded and then turned his attention back to me. “Thanks to that intel you gathered in the lower city, it seems that we’ll be able to avoid bringing shame to Ehrenfest after the Archduke Conference. I owe you one.”

After saying that, Sylvester gently stroked my hair—which was a little weird, considering that he normally mussed it—and then told me to return to my seat. It seemed that he had sent me to the temple not only to distance me from those in the castle, but also to give me a break.

“Your attention. This emergency meeting on our future plans for Ehrenfest will now begin,” Sylvester announced.

Ehrenfest, which had for years been stuck at the bottom of the rankings despite being a middle duchy, was finally garnering more influence. Sylvester explained the reasoning for this—that our written grades were improving due to the studying taking place in the winter playroom, that we had caught the attention of the Sovereignty and the greater duchies during the Interduchy Tournament, and that the Rozemyne Compression Method was due to greatly increase the amount of mana in the next generation of children.

“During the Interduchy Tournament, we received business requests from all other duchies,” Sylvester continued. “We exchanged vows with Klassenberg and

the Sovereignty, promising that we would establish deals with them for hairpins and rinsham during the coming Archduke Conference. It is all but inevitable that Ehrenfest will be doing large-scale trade with other duchies from this point onward, but we have rarely accepted so many visitors before and so we do not have the infrastructure to support outside merchants. Elvira, if you would."

"By your leave."

Immediately upon receiving the command, Elvira stood up and started to explain with documents in hand how our lower city compared to the lower cities of other duchies, as well as how we were decades behind them. Everyone here knew this already, but it was important to make sure that we were all on the same page.

"Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte investigated the matter using information Lady Rozemyne acquired from the lower city, and they discovered that the lower city's infrastructure was ultimately neglected due to mana shortages. We need to correct this before the merchants come following the Archduke Conference," Elvira concluded.

Sylvester stood back up with a nod. "If a course of action exists that will improve the disastrous state of the lower city, we must take it. I went to investigate the place myself while under the same assumption—that a city of commoners will end up laden with filth no matter what. They can't use magic tools, so I was convinced that their conditions were inevitable, but this isn't the case in other duchies. Their lower cities are as clean as their Noble's Quarters."

The vast majority of nobles living in the Noble's Quarter refrained from entering the lower city—they would summon merchants to them for business matters and soar over the city on their highbeasts when traveling. On the few occasions when a noble did need to travel through the lower city via carriage, they would simply express their shock at the filth and hold their noses until they were through.

It was hard to ignore what a terrible state Ehrenfest was in when one heard that the lower cities of other duchies were comparable to our Noble's Quarter. From what I recalled, the guildmaster's letter hadn't gone as far as to say these lower cities were *as* clean as our Noble's Quarter, but Sylvester had probably

decided to exaggerate the truth in order to convince the more hardheaded of scholars.

"We must make good on the debt accrued all those decades ago," Sylvester declared, a noticeable sharpness in his dark-green eyes as he looked across the room. "We will use the mana we've stored up to cast entwickeln and rebuild the lower city's infrastructure before the Archduke Conference. This decision is set in stone."

Entwickeln...? I wondered what Sylvester was referring to, but it didn't take me long to figure out it was the official name of the Extreme Makeover.

"Entwickeln, on the lower city?" came a scholar's voice.

"Do we have enough mana for that?" asked another.

Surprise and uncertainty surged through the room. In that moment, the archducal couple exchanged a glance and then nodded at each other; it seemed they had decided between themselves to make this Extreme Makeover happen no matter what.

"This is an order from Aub Ehrenfest to the archducal family!" Sylvester declared. "Offer up your mana for the sake of our duchy!"

Ferdinand was the first to move, crossing his arms in front of his chest to express his obedience. Bonifatius followed suit, I did the same, and then Wilfried and Charlotte copied us a beat later.

Sylvester nodded, having acquired the approval of every member of the archducal family. It was decided that entwickeln was going to be used; we now needed to iron out the more minor details of our schedule.

"We must inform the lower city of our decision," one scholar noted.

"Indeed. We will need to momentarily expel the commoners," another said in agreement. But this was much easier said than done. Would it even be possible, considering all the furniture and food the commoners would have? I couldn't help but frown as I pictured my own family being chased out with a ton of luggage on their backs.

"Were all nobles expelled from the Noble's Quarter when it was

renovated...?" I asked. "What did they do with their furniture? Lord Bonifatius, if you recall what happened at the time, would you kindly share with me what you know?"

Excited to be speaking to his granddaughter, Bonifatius did just that. He explained that, in order for the nobles to have toilets and baths added to their homes, they had needed to submit the blueprints to their estates to have them altered or remade before entwickeln was performed. It had apparently been quite the ordeal, since everyone had needed to bring all of their furniture outside onto the gardens of their estates.

"To complicate matters, we are dealing not just with ivory buildings here, but also with the wooden stories the commoners have constructed themselves," a scholar mused. "I am unsure of how to deal with them."

"We don't have the spare mana to turn those extra floors into ivory too..." Sylvester replied, his arms crossed. "These numbers are purely for remodeling the existing ivory buildings."

In short, while it was possible to remodel the bottom two stories made out of the ivory stone, doing so would cause the upper stories to collapse. Casting entwickeln would destroy a lot of people's homes.

"If we allow these upper stories to collapse, the streets are going to be flooded with homeless citizens," I protested. "The majority live in these wooden extensions, while the stone sections below are used for workshops and stores. Furthermore, many workshops are currently working to create the products the incoming merchants intend to purchase; if we shut them down for a long period of time, we will not have the products that sparked this entire issue. The potential losses are much too great."

Having merchants from other duchies come to Ehrenfest only to find massive refugee camps and no products to buy was pretty much the worst-case scenario. Ferdinand listened to my concerns, stroking his chin all the while, and then offered a solution to the matter.

"Although we are using entwickeln again, there is no need to treat the lower city exactly the same as the Noble's Quarter. Rather than adding toilets and baths to the inside of every building as was done previously, we could add

several communal places where the commoners can dispose of waste, like there are in the temple. This would avoid the need to alter the buildings themselves."

Oh, so that's how the temple handles things? The more you know.

I pretty much left everything to do with temple life to my attendants, so not once had I wondered how the waste there was dealt with. Apparently there were spots for tossing waste, and these used the same slimes used in the Noble's Quarter.

"If there is a way to solve this without touching the buildings themselves, that would be ideal," I agreed. "Your suggestion will also greatly reduce the mana expenditure, will it not?"

Ferdinand responded with a frown, keeping an eye on Sylvester to see his reaction. "It would be possible to create an underground sewer system beneath the roads without touching the buildings," he said. "If we create places to dispose of waste and then have commoners bring their waste there rather than tossing it out their windows, it would be possible to create a sewer system without destroying any houses. However, in order to maintain cleanliness, the commoners will need to be taught personal hygiene and the good sense not to litter, in the same way that those in the temple have been taught."

"The temple looks great, so that sounds good to me," Sylvester said.

"Indeed," Ferdinand replied. "And if orphans are able to adopt such habits, surely commoners will manage too."

"It will depend on how they are taught, and that is a problem," Elvira said with a sigh, being the person in charge of dealing with the lower city's infrastructure. Cleaning things up once with entwickeln was simple, but getting commoners to keep things that way was going to be much more of a challenge.

"This seems like a job for Gustav. He has a lot of influence in the lower city, right?" Sylvester asked, turning his eyes to me. I was more familiar with the lower city than anyone here, and everyone knew that I got emotional when it was mistreated. In other words, he was instructing me to come up with a good idea for the lower city's sake.

I paused for a moment in thought. “I believe that Gustav’s word as the guildmaster will suffice for the majority of the city; the north has the richest commoners and the largest stores, the west has the markets, and the east has the travelers, all of whom will no doubt listen to him.” The people in these areas would take the remodeling quite seriously, since defying Gustav’s will would result in fines, withdrawn approval to run stands in the market, and a ban from submitting business applications to the Guild.

“The problem is the south,” I continued. “The rich rarely go to that area of the city in the same way that we rarely go to the lower city as a whole, and although there are many craftspeople there, I am uncertain how much a message from the guildmaster will spur them to action.” I wasn’t sure how they would want to spread the word through Craftsman’s Alley and all the poor apartments, nor how they wanted to punish those who refused to comply.

Daaad. Heeelp!

“Oh. How about using the soldiers?” I asked, clapping my hands together in realization. All eyes gathered on me at once, and Sylvester in particular gave me a searching look.

“By soldiers, you mean the commoner guards at the gates?” he asked.

“Correct. The guards I hire when sending priests to Hasse’s monastery have informed me that the soldiers’ duties outside of guarding the gates include patrolling the city and preserving the peace. Furthermore, since the majority of the guards live in the southern area of the city, if the knight commander takes charge, the soldiers will do everything from teaching the people, ensuring the practices are upheld, and ensuring they last into the future.”

Instructing people to do something once likely wouldn’t be enough to make it a regular part of their everyday lives; they needed people to remind them over and over again, using the fact that it was an order from nobles to scare them into complying. It would be more effective to have friends and family filling those roles than a more distant figure like the guildmaster.

“The knight commander already has meetings with the soldiers,” I continued. “We need only tell them about the date and time we will be casting entwickeln. They can tell the citizens to hide in their homes to minimize disruption for us.”

“Hm. Not a bad idea,” Sylvester said. He glanced at the higher-ups from the Knight’s Order, and they nodded in response. It was decided that the scholars would inform the Merchant’s Guild, while the Knight’s Order would inform the soldiers.

“Erm, Aub Ehrenfest... Since we have saved on mana costs, could we not only have tubes for disposing of waste but also tubes for purifying and moving water?” I asked. Paper-making and dyeing both needed a lot of water, and this requirement would only increase as the industries grew larger. Perhaps we could draw water from the large river to the west.

“Ferdinand, what do you think?” Sylvester asked. “Could we use water-purifying magic tools on the river?”

“In the long-term, it would use far too much mana; the magic tools would need to be redesigned to be usable. However, if the water will only be needed in the future, perhaps we could add only the pipes for now? Those alone would not be a significant burden.”

Sylvester nodded. He then instructed the scholars to recalculate the mana expenditure and prepare blueprints for using entwickeln before moving on to the next matter at hand.

“Next up, questions and requests from the Merchant’s Guild. They want to know how to distinguish between merchants from duchies that have permission to do business here and merchants from duchies that don’t. Other duchies apparently have large-scale magic tools that even commoners can use, but we’ll struggle to make them before the merchants arrive. Any ideas for how else to handle this?”

My creativity left much to be desired, so the only solution I could come up with for distinguishing the merchants was the red-sealed letters I had considered previously. I tried describing how the system worked.

“Not a bad idea, but we’d want something unique to Ehrenfest,” Sylvester said in response. “Or at least, something that can’t easily be copied.”

“In that case, what say we use nanseb paper to mimic this so-called ‘red-sealed letter’ system?” Ferdinand suggested, looking up from where he was seated. He explained to everyone that Illgner’s newly developed nanseb paper

had a particular quality that meant any large, ripped-up pieces would slowly crawl back together. The scholars widened their eyes in surprise, having known about plant paper, but not about paper made from feyplants.

"If each is dyed with the respective duchy's colors, with the Merchant's Guild having one half of the sheets and the duchies the other halves, we could immediately identify which merchant is from which duchy," I said. "We can tell the merchants of other duchies to keep their halves in mana-blocking bags so they do not move on their own."

The paper for merchants would end up sliced into smaller bits, so the half-sheets in the Merchant's Guild would inevitably end up larger. Ferdinand said that putting a restriction on the size of the paper would prevent them from sending too many merchants.

These sound less like red-sealed letters and more like verification slips, but okay...

"This is a fitting method for us to use, since we hope to soon move on to selling plant paper as well," Florencia said with a smile. "Given that merchants from other duchies will not easily be able to fake these papers, I see no issue with us using them."

Sylvester nodded. "Alright. Buy nanseb paper from Illgner and make sure it's ready for the Archduke Conference."

"Father—or rather, Aub Ehrenfest..." Wilfried interjected. "I think it would be wise to buy normal plant paper along with the nanseb paper, so that we may have the scholars use it during the Archduke Conference." His voice cracked as he spoke, and his rigid expression as he looked across the room made it clear how nervous he was about speaking here. "Rozemyne used a lot of plant paper in the Royal Academy for transcribing and taking notes, which I am told generated a lot of interest among the citizens of other duchies. Perhaps we should do the same during the Archduke Conference?"

Everyone stared at Wilfried in surprise, keeping their silence, having not expected him to speak here. He took a short breath as he endured their gazes and then pressed his lips together, trying to steady his nerves.

Moments passed without anyone making so much as a sound, until...

“Hm.”

Everyone looked toward the source of the interjection to find that it had come from the High Priest himself.

“It may be somewhat expensive to have scholars use plant paper at the Archduke Conference, but it is easier to write on and will save us a tremendous amount on luggage costs,” Ferdinand said, expressing his support for the idea. “It will also be a good way for us to market our products to other duchies. It is worth considering.”

Wilfried suddenly looked a lot more at ease than before, perhaps relieved that his idea had been accepted.

“I see. If we wish to spread plant paper, we must set an example by using it ourselves,” Sylvester said. “I will consider it.”

“In addition to this,” Wilfried added, “I think we should have all those attending the Archduke Conference use rinsham, and all the women wear hairpins, as Rozemyne did at the Royal Academy. Doing so will draw much attention to our duchy.”

“You certainly learned a lot at the Royal Academy, didn’t you?” Florencia said, accepting her son’s proposition with a smile. Wilfried smiled at her in turn.

We went on to discuss some more of the finer details, such as what recipes to introduce at the meetings held over meals during the Archduke Conference, how many more business partners we would be able to take next year, and how we would sell pound cake to the duchies we couldn’t do business with this year. And with that, the meeting came to a close.

It was agreed that I would remain in the castle until the week before Spring Prayer. It was also my responsibility to inform Wilfried and Charlotte where they needed to go and in what order so they could prepare for the trip. This time, Ferdinand’s attendants were going to be accompanying them.

“The locations have been assigned as per our earlier discussion,” I said.

“I see that your schedule is much shorter than the others, Sister...” Charlotte noted.

“That is because I will be using my highbeast, which halves the number of days I would have needed to spend traveling. It isn’t that I have less to do, of course; I can just go to multiple places in a single day.”

“Can I speed up my schedule too, then?” Wilfried asked.

“I’m afraid not, Brother.”

“Huh?”

“My highbeast is a drivable one, and I can make it so there’s enough room for the gray priests and shrine maidens with the chalices. Your highbeast, in contrast, is a rideable one that only holds a single person. Even if we had the same highbeast, I can’t imagine your retainers would want to ride with your gray priests, would they? They were shocked enough to voice their surprise when I said I would be letting the Gutenbergs ride in mine.”

Since Spring Prayer could not be performed without the chalices, one could not get through their schedule quicker without being able to fly with the priests who carried them. My guard knight Damuel had gotten used to me flying with my attendants after spending so much time in the temple, but those serving Wilfried would probably be against flying with orphaned gray priests.

“And those aren’t the only problems either. You and Charlotte lack the mana required to perform multiple blessings a day, do you not?”

“Hm... You’re right.”

They were currently performing the blessings by using feystones infused with my mana. It wasn’t something that I really understood since I had never done it myself, but using someone else’s mana was apparently more tiring than using one’s own.

“I have more mana than stamina, so I’m prioritizing finishing Spring Prayer as quickly as possible,” I explained. “I will be bedridden in the temple for some time afterward, so in practice, we will most likely be occupied for the same number of days.”

I had gotten a lot better since the jureve, but I would still probably end up bedridden when all was said and done. Wilfried and Charlotte both frowned at the same time, like they had something to say about how my plans literally

accounted for me ending up in such a state.

Sorry, but there's no point denying reality. Gotta plan around it.

The day after we discussed Spring Prayer, I had a tea party with Florencia, Elvira, and Charlotte. As Ferdinand had instructed, I needed to report to Florencia and Elvira about our printing plans, since they were the heads of our faction.

I need to show that I can remember to do what I'm told!

And so, I reported that the Gilberta Company would be reviving old dyeing methods with the Dyeing Guild and that a competition centered around it would be held at the end of summer.

Behold, I have remembered to keep people up to date with what I'm doing! Even I can grow!

As I puffed out my chest and showered myself with praise, Florencia widened her eyes in confusion and placed a hand on her cheek. "Why is this event being held...? I'm not sure I see the connection."

"It just kind of happened. I blinked and everyone had already agreed to it."

"Lady Rozemyne, you *must* be more clear when giving reports," Elvira said. She was smiling as she spoke, but the intensity in her eyes made me recoil in fear.

"This may be of use to you, Lady Rozemyne." As if on cue, Philine stepped forward from behind me, holding out the dyeing-related documents she had compiled from Fran's report. She truly was a well-trained scholar. I took the reports and passed them to Florencia, who immediately began reading them alongside Elvira.

"It seems that many in the lower city envy the dramatic success of my Gutenbergs. Thus, the Gilberta Company suggested that it would be wise for me to use this opportunity to select a dyeing workshop or two to give my exclusive business," I explained.

"It is normal for a noble to pick workshops to favor, but my goodness, Sister...

Everything always ends up so dramatic when you are involved," Charlotte said. According to her, a normal noble would pick their workshops based on introductions from their parents or other family members, or from their friends. It certainly wasn't standard practice to give every single workshop the same job and then pick one's favorites from among them.

Once she had finished reading the documents, Elvira returned them to Philine and then looked at me, her dark-brown eyes sparkling with excitement. "Since this is happening regardless, I would like to see these dyed pieces of cloth myself. When the end of summer approaches, let us call the Gilberta Company here and discuss the details."

I feel like Mother getting involved is only going to make this even more dramatic... but I guess that's fine?

Despite that thought crossing my mind, I pressed my lips together and refrained from vocalizing it.

I really have grown.

The next day, following the tea party that had granted me an opportunity to really feel my growth, I needed to meet with my retainers to discuss Schwartz's and Weiss's outfits. It was important that we settle on the designs soon and order the cloth from the Gilberta Company.

Lieseleta and Brunhilde were at the center of the discussion, since they had poured more passion into the designs than anyone else. I also allowed Charlotte to join, since she seemed rather interested; her retainers in particular had been squealing alongside Lieseleta in the Royal Academy dorm, so I could imagine they were having fun. Cornelius and Hartmut, in contrast, awkwardly moved to stand in a corner and sit this meeting out.

"Lady Rozemyne, rather than giving Schwartz and Weiss matching outfits, I would like to dress them as a boy and a girl, respectively. Would that not make them look far more adorable when they are standing next to each other?" Lieseleta said, her dark-green eyes gleaming as she extolled her position with clenched fists. Her usual reserved self was nowhere to be seen as she raved on about how cute shumils were and how much she was looking forward to

making these clothes. I welcomed her enthusiasm, since I wanted someone who would gladly handle all the embroidery for me, but I was at the same time stunned to see how differently she was acting.

"I do not mind that idea, but will you be able to handle the increased workload it will require?" I asked. "We will need to think of not one, but two ways to embroider the magic circles on their outfits."

"I do not mind. I will pour my all into this."

Lieseleta really is Angelica's little sister... She's making the same expression Angelica did when presented with my mana compression method.

Despite how differently they usually acted, I could feel an unmistakable bond of blood between them. As I worked to contain my laughter, the other girls were already chatting about the clothing designs.

"The sleeves need to be short so they don't get in the way of Schwartz and Weiss's work. That's too bad. At the very least, let's decorate them with lace."

"We will need to think about where to put the embroidery."

Since I was planning to give Schwartz and Weiss Library Committee armbands, I tried suggesting a sailor suit and a gakuran, the kind of school uniforms worn by students in Japan. I drew up the designs, and Angelica helpfully added the magic circle designs to show what the clothes would look like once the embroidery was done.

Ngh. Now the school uniform looks like a biker's jacket... It's not cute at all.

"I see that magic circles greatly change the feel of an outfit," I observed. "This is not at all as I imagined it."

"Schwartz and Weiss certainly need cuter outfits," Lieseleta and the others agreed, turning down my designs in a heartbeat.

For my next suggestions, I proposed maid and butler uniforms. It was a simple combination—a dress with an apron versus a shirt, vest, and pants—so it didn't receive an instant rejection.

"This should suffice for the basic design," Lieseleta said.

"It looks nice. For the shorter sleeves, I believe it would be cute to puff them

up," another girl replied. From there, the discussion among the attendants continued.

"Will the new dyeing methods be used on their outfits?"

"The cloth is going to be finished at the end of summer. But that won't leave enough time for the embroidery, will it?"

"We could save the dyeing for only the small accessories."

As they continued their excited chatter, I slipped out of the group and went to read a book. My plan was to listen from a distance; these girls were so passionate that they would certainly produce something cute, with or without my direct involvement.

"Could we perhaps make the clothes black, the color of the Sovereignty, and then embroider the apron and vest? That way, we could have them change dresses and blouses to different ones."

"Good idea. We shall dye the scarf using the new method and then clasp it with an Ehrenfest hairpin."

"As for the hairband, let us make it with flower ornaments rather than cloth. Would that not be wonderful, like a crown of flowers? For the male outfit, we can clasp the chest with a flower ornament."

They pooled their ideas together and ultimately decided on cute, folksy dresses for the both of them. My butler and maid combination was nowhere to be seen.

They're still cute though, so I suppose it's fine.

"Lady Rozemyne, please dye the embroidery thread and the cloth for the apron and vest with your mana as soon as possible. We shall get started on the embroidery right away. We will struggle to finish in time if you do not select the cloth before you leave for Spring Prayer," Lieseleta said, organizing all the opinions of the girls. "I believe it would be wise to call the Gilberta Company over tomorrow or the day after so that we may select the cloth together. How does that sound to you?"

"You may do what you think is best, Lieseleta."

Lieseleta was about as skilled of an apprentice attendant as I could ask for, and she displayed her talents by summoning the Gilberta Company over the next day and masterfully selecting the best cloth for the job. Once again, I simply read during the meeting and gave my approval at the end.

“Please take the cloth and thread we ordered today to the temple. My workshop is there.”

“Understood,” Corinna said, leaving with our orders.

We were one step closer to finishing Schwartz’s and Weiss’s outfits. As I sighed in relief, watching the girls swell with excitement, Ottilie gave a calm smile.

“Lady Rozemyne, Lady Charlotte, perhaps you should use this valuable opportunity to practice your embroidering.”

Charlotte and I exchanged glances before shrugging at each other.

Spring Prayer in the Central District

Once it was the week before Spring Prayer, I was scheduled to return to the temple. Fran and the others were handling all of the necessary preparations, so I was just there to make any final checks. Selecting those who would accompany me, preparing the food, organizing carriages, preparing the guards, managing the orphanage during our absence... They were used to it all by now, and so almost everything was already complete.

Although the Plantin Company were going to be preparing our carriages, they wouldn't be accompanying us themselves this time. They had their hands full getting the Gutenbergs ready for Haldenzel and making arrangements for the entwickeln that was going to follow. It seemed the scholars had already sent their messages, and from what Gil had told me, the lower city was in something of a panic.

I wrote letters to the Gilberta Company, the Plantin Company, and the Merchant's Guild, describing the details of the entwickeln and the system planned for distinguishing merchants and noting that Elvira was going to be participating in the dyeing competition. It was information they had probably already received from the scholars, but I sent the correspondence anyway; Benno had told me that the more sources one had for their information, the better.

"Lady Rozemyne, the cloth and thread from the Gilberta Company has arrived," Zahm informed me. "What shall we do with it?"

I needed to dye the cloth and thread with my mana, so I had asked for them to be delivered to the High Bishop's chambers in the temple. I needed Ferdinand to come to my workshop before I could get started, though, since I didn't have any ingredients of my own to use.

"Zahm, please inform the High Priest that there are materials I wish to dye and arrange a meeting. I would like to have all this done by Spring Prayer."

Ferdinand agreed that it would be best to leave as much time for the

embroidering as possible, and the dyeing was completed in no time at all. Incidentally, I tried using waschen for cleanup again, this time controlling my mana so as not to drown anyone.

"Angelica, please deliver this to Lieseleta and the others," I said, sending the dyed materials to the castle alongside sheets of paper with the magic circles drawn on them. "Once that is done, I will grant you time off until Spring Prayer, since you will not have time to rest while guarding me throughout the journey."

"I thank you ever so much. I will draw my own designs and prepare thread so that I can embroider my cape during the trip."

It sure sounds girly for her to be killing time with embroidery, but don't be fooled—she's doing it to boost the defensive power of her armor.

After I watched Angelica happily fly away from the temple, Damuel looked down at me with a dissatisfied frown. "You're always soft on girls, Lady Rozemyne."

"Hm? But you're the one who said you were fine taking your break after Spring Prayer. I took all of your opinions into account before making my decision," I said, my brow furrowed, but Damuel just shook his head.

"I'm not talking about the time off. You immediately granted Angelica's wish to embroider her cape, but you still haven't found me a marriage partner. Didn't you promise to ask Lady Elvira about it? Will my future betrothed be introduced to me at the Starbind Ceremony or something of the sort?"

"Honestly? I forgot to ask."

"I knew it!" Damuel exclaimed. He collapsed to his knees, despair written on his face. I hadn't realized just how eager he was to get married.

"Sorry about that. I'll ask Mother later."

"Are you going to forget again?" Damuel asked. Life was apparently hard for bachelors when the Starbind Ceremony approached.

Right. I actually need to remember this time!

I sent Damuel's pleas to Elvira by ordonnanz before I forgot, and a number of days later, it was time for Spring Prayer.

“Lady Rozemyne, I am relieved to see you well,” Dad said, having come early in the morning with the platoon of guards who would be heading to Hasse. The wrinkles under his eyes conveyed that he was getting older, but the love in his gaze was as strong as ever and seeing it warmed my heart. I could also see the soldiers lined up behind Dad looking clearly glad that I was well.

“I apologize for worrying you all. I am quite fine now. I shall trust the guard to Gunther once again. Thank you for your service.”

“You may count on me!”

Gray priests and apprentices climbed into the carriages to switch places with the three gray priests we were bringing back. Hugo and Gil were already inside, as I understood it. I watched them off, praying for their safety on the road, and then went to prepare for the Spring Prayer this afternoon.

After lunch, I changed into my ceremonial robes, then moved by highbeast with Fran and Monika like always. Once Damuel and Angelica were ready, it was time to go.

“There are fewer places to visit this time, which should place less strain on your body,” Ferdinand said as he saw me off.

And with that, I soared up into the air in Lessy. Angelica was sitting in the passenger seat this time, a smile touching her lips as we flew over Ehrenfest. “This is my first time doing guard duty outside Ehrenfest,” she said. “Are we going to be fighting strong feybeasts?”

“We will be visiting the mansions where commoners live over the winter. I have no plans to visit anywhere strong feybeasts might appear.”

“What...? But how will we gather ingredients, then?”

Unfortunately for Angelica, who had evidently wanted to gather ingredients, deviating from the plan to do something dangerous would have comically severe consequences for me. It wasn’t going to happen.

“Why did you think we would be gathering ingredients?” I asked.

“The feystone that Damuel was going to give Brigitte wasn’t from the castle’s forest, so I thought he had gathered it while on guard duty for a ceremony. I

thought for sure that the ceremony was an ingredient-collecting adventure filled with feybeast hunting...”

The first half was surprisingly accurate, but the second was completely wrong. The ceremony certainly wasn’t “an ingredient-collecting adventure,” as she had put it.

“This ceremony is about refilling the land with mana,” I explained.

“Oh...”

Fran and Monika let out chuckles from the back seat as Angelica visibly deflated. *They must be surprised to hear that someone thought ceremonies and ingredient collecting were the same thing. I can understand why their bafflement would turn to nervous laughter.*

“Angelica, that is the city of Hasse. The ivory building there is the monastery, where we will be staying tonight.”

It didn’t take long at all for us to reach Hasse. Even from high up in the air, we could see the enormous crowd gathered in the plaza before the winter mansion. The people began making an opening so that we could land.

“It’s Lady Rozemyne!”

“The High Bishop!”

Hasse welcomed us enthusiastically. I climbed out of Lessy and was immediately approached by Richt, the city’s mayor, and the local town chiefs. They all looked a little different than I remembered; in fact, one of the town chiefs was a new person entirely.

“We have been eagerly awaiting your return ever since those in the monastery informed us that you had awoken, High Bishop,” Richt said. I nodded at his greeting and then had Fran carry me to the stage; my robes would have gotten dirty otherwise, since the ground was muddy. It also would have been unthinkably shameful for me to step on my hem and fall over.

Fran set me down on the stage and prepared the chalice. Meanwhile, I expressed my thanks to the people of Hasse, who were gathered in front of the stage.

“I am told you have all taken good care of those in the monastery during my two years of sleep. Thank you. I shall express my gratitude to Hasse.”

An enthusiastic cheer ran through the crowd. I waved to them, after which Fran picked me up and set me down on the table. I confirmed that the five town chiefs had climbed up onto the stage with lidded buckets about ten liters in size, then reached out to the chalice.

“O Goddess of Water Flutrane, bringer of healing and change. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side. The Goddess of Earth Geduldh has been freed from the God of Life Ewigeliebe. I pray that you grant your younger sister the power to birth new life. I offer to you our joy and songs of glee. I offer to you our prayers and gratitude, so that we may be blessed with your purifying protection. I ask that you fill the thousand lives upon the wide mortal realm with your divine color.”

I poured mana into the chalice as I prayed, causing a glowing green liquid to flow out from within. Fran tilted the chalice, pouring the liquid into the lined-up town chiefs’ buckets.

After the ritual was over, I spoke with Richt about what had happened over the past two years, and when my little sister Charlotte came up, I made sure to brag about her. A lot had apparently piled up, and I stood up after hearing the gist of it all.

“I am relieved to know that Hasse has gotten back on its own two feet,” I said. “Now, I must visit the monastery as well, considering that it has been two years since I was last there. If you’ll excuse me.”

“The people of the monastery are no doubt just as eager to see you,” Richt replied. “Please, bring peace to their hearts.”

With the people of Hasse seeing me off, I flew to the monastery by highbeast. Upon our arrival, Fran and Monika opened the monastery door, allowing the gray priests and shrine maidens to come out to welcome me.

“Lady Rozemyne!”

“Greetings, everyone.”

Nora and the other former orphans of Hasse had all grown a lot since the last

time I saw them. They were fully used to the orphanage now and didn't seem shrouded with any regret whatsoever.

"Nora, you took the initiative in helping with Lily's child, correct?" I asked. "None in the orphanage know much about births, and I am told that your guidance was essential."

"I did not have much experience myself," she replied. "Rather, it was the women of Hasse who truly helped. I was filled with relief when the child was born safely."

"Is the child doing well...? Is he growing bigger?" Marthe asked timidly. I nodded with a smile; he had been quite energetic in the dining hall when I visited the orphanage.

"We need eyes on him at all times now that he has started to crawl. He tried crawling all the way over to me, so Lily had to hurriedly stop him. Has anything happened in the monastery?" I asked.

"Yes. We have started a field."

The field itself was only as big as a home garden, but they had apparently started growing vegetables. Thore and Rick were heading the operation, and since the area surrounding the monastery was rich with mana, it gave excellent yields.

"It is good that you have found more to do," I said. "However, take care not to focus so much on farming that you grow distant from printing and paper-making."

"Of course."

After supplying mana to the feystone in the chapel, I made my way to my room, changed, and then went to eat dinner. Nobles, gray priests, and soldiers all ate together here, albeit at separate tables.

"You may find the manners of the soldiers to be unpleasant, Angelica, but please overlook them for tonight."

"Understood."

After eating the food that Fran and Monika had served me, I moved to the

table where the soldiers were beginning to lounge after finishing their own meals. There was something I needed to speak to them about. Dad noticed me first and straightened his back, while Fran prepared a chair for me at once so that I could sit down.

“Lady Rozemyne,” the soldiers said, hurriedly moving to kneel. I instructed them to sit back down before sitting in the chair now provided for me.

“I have news, as well as a request for you and all the other soldiers,” I said.

“What might that be?” they asked, leaning forward. I prefaced my answer by saying that I was sure the knights had informed them already and then explained that entwickeln was soon going to be performed.

“In short, there will be contracts signed during the Archduke Conference at the end of spring. Merchants from other duchies are going to be coming to Ehrenfest, and the lower city will be remodeled for cleanliness before then.”

“I felt it was fairly sudden, but now I understand why it is happening,” Dad said, nodding at my explanation and speaking politely as soldiers were trained to do. The soldiers had apparently been told about the upcoming entwickeln and instructed to provide assistance for adjusting the populace to the new rules, but they hadn’t been told why it was happening or what modifications were due to take place.

“If this remodeling does not beautify the lower city to the standards of other duchies,” I answered, “we will need to perform large-scale remodeling that will flip the entire lower city on its head.”

“The... entire lower city?” the soldiers asked, exchanging confused glances.

I looked at Dad head-on. “The entire city would be remodeled with a large-scale spell, in which case, only the ivory stone buildings made with the archduke’s mana would remain. The wooden parts where most live would all vanish.”

“What?!” The soldiers all inhaled sharply, their eyes wide. It came as no surprise that they were so taken aback; they themselves lived in the wooden parts of the lower city’s buildings.

“It is actually much simpler to design blueprints for changing the entire lower

city rather than just the streets. These plans were only changed to minimize the impact on homes because I personally requested it."

It was impossible for commoners to overturn the decisions of nobles; things often ended up being finished before they even knew they were happening. My dad swallowed, knowing well how tyrannical nobles were.

"Instead, we will be remodeling the streets and the ground beneath them," I explained. "When we are done, we will need the help of citizens to make the changes stick and prevent the need for more drastic measures. I would like to ask for all of your assistance in teaching those of the lower city the dangers involved here."



Rule one was to either stay in one's home or outside of the city entirely on the day of the remodeling. Rule two was to lock one's doors and windows tightly, and to keep them locked until word came that the remodeling was complete. Rule three was to assume that anything left on the street would be gone for good. Rule four was to dispose of all garbage and waste in designated spots following the remodeling so as to keep the lower city clean. And rule five was to keep rule four in mind and make sure that one's neighbors stayed on track too.

As I listed off all the warnings I could think of, Dad and the soldiers listened with serious expressions, committing them to memory. The look in their eyes made me feel like everything was going to be fine in their hands.

"The fate of countless homes in the lower city rests on your shoulders. Please work together to protect what you have," I concluded.

"We are deeply grateful for your consideration, Lady Rozemyne. I will protect our homes with all that I have," Dad said, tapping his left chest with his right fist. The other soldiers did the same, tapping their left chest twice, and I returned the salute with a smile.

The next morning, Dad and the other soldiers prepared to leave for Ehrenfest with the carriage of gray priests.

"Gunther. Everyone. I trust my priests to you once again," I said.

"We will convey what you have told us to the others. Rest well, Lady Rozemyne."

I delivered the extra payment to the soldiers, like always, and then saw the carriage off. I would need to leave for the next winter mansion posthaste.

"Gil, Hugo—you may depart for your rest stop for tonight."

"Yes, Lady Rozemyne."

Once the carriage with my belongings had left, I looked over the gray priests and shrine maidens from the monastery who had come to watch me go.

"During the two years I slept, I am pleased to see you have all cooperated

with the people of Hasse and formed strong bonds. This is a splendid feat that not even the Ehrenfest temple has managed to accomplish yet. I ask that you continue your excellent efforts," I said. I then turned my attention to the field. "And Thore, please do tell me if you farm any especially delicious vegetables. I will come try them for myself."

Thore grinned proudly and agreed, saying that he'd give me the best vegetables. I truly was looking forward to when the harvest came.

Everyone knelt to see me off, after which I climbed into Lessy and headed to my next destination. From there, Spring Prayer ended without incident; each winter mansion welcomed me with heated excitement, but that was about it. It was quite easy this year, since I was used to doing four times as much while traveling all throughout the Central District with Ferdinand.

I stretched, content that there was nothing left to do but return to the temple. I had only needed to chug two of Ferdinand's kindness-infused potions this time, so I didn't even feel as though I had been pushing myself.

"Doing only a part of the duchy is so much easier," I mused aloud. "I'll need to thank Charlotte and Wilfried."

"Lady Rozemyne, you must not forget to thank the High Priest as well," Fran said, fixing me with a sharp look. I returned a polite smile. I hadn't forgotten; I just considered it much less of a priority.

"My gratitude for him lies elsewhere," I said. "The High Priest deserves even greater thanks for making me such wondrous potions."

"I see."

Since we were traveling by highbeast, Fran and I were the first to return to the temple, carrying with us the chalice. Gil, Hugo, and several others were going to take an extra day since they were returning by carriage to Hasse, where they would stay the night before coming back to the temple. They would most likely be returning tomorrow afternoon.

"*Ordonnanz*," I said, using the ordonnanz feystone I was borrowing from Ferdinand to inform him of my return. "This is Rozemyne speaking. I'll be reaching the temple at fourth bell, so go ahead and inform Charlotte for me."

There was only one primary chalice—the divine instrument—so we were taking turns going through the Central District. I had gone first, since it was known that I would need to take a break. Next up was Charlotte, then Wilfried, and then Ferdinand.

I arrived at the temple front gate as scheduled, whereupon I found Charlotte waiting in blue ceremonial robes alongside a chain of carriages.

“And so I have returned,” I said.

“Welcome back, Sister. How are you feeling?”

“Thanks to Wilfried’s and your help, I completed my Spring Prayers duties without falling ill. I imagine this is going to be difficult for you, but you have my gratitude.”

The chalice was handed to Ferdinand’s attendant who would be accompanying Charlotte on her trip. Charlotte watched him cradle the precious divine instrument and then climb into the carriage which she too would soon be getting into. She would perform the ceremony at the closest winter mansion to the south before turning in for the night.

“Well then, I suppose I must depart,” Charlotte said. “I wouldn’t want to arrive too late.”

“Indeed. Farewell. Everyone, take good care of Charlotte.”

After seeing Charlotte off, I turned to go to my room, only for Ferdinand to grab my arm and jerk my head up.

“Eep! What’re you doing?!” I exclaimed.

“You have just returned from Spring Prayer, but you look healthier than expected.”

“I managed to drink only a few potions thanks to the short amount of ground I needed to cover. It’s nice how little work we each have when we share the job.”

“Indeed. However, you will still want to spend this afternoon in bed,” Ferdinand said. And so, as instructed, I spent the rest of my day rolling around in bed with a book in hand.

I returned to my normal life the next day, spending my mornings practicing whirling and the harspiel and then helping Ferdinand with his work. Plus, on days when I didn't have any plans involving the orphanage or the workshop or what have you, I also attended Professor Ferdinand's Brewing Lessons. He started with the basic potion-making that knights regularly used, with his aim being for me to at least be able to make my own potions by the end. It was exactly the kind of protectiveness I could appreciate.

Ngh, but my precious reading time... How I wish to read books...

I continued brewing despite the pain in my heart and soon learned to make the most basic and fundamental rejuvenation potion there was. It was a recipe that was also taught at the Royal Academy, and it didn't taste bad at all. It was completely drinkable... but didn't really do anything. Not only was it weak and slow to take effect, but I was so used to the special brew that Ferdinand usually made that it seemed almost entirely useless in comparison.

"Do not consider yourself on equal terms with your classmates, who have not obtained an absurd quantity of mana through ridiculous amounts of compression. Rejuvenation potions on this level are more than enough for an average apprentice. They sell like hotcakes to the knight apprentices Lord Bonifatius is training—those who have neither the time nor energy to gather ingredients and brew potions themselves," Ferdinand told me with a grin. It seemed that making them had proved to be a good source of money for him during his days in the Royal Academy.

"But wouldn't the potions you brew sell for more than these simple ones?"

"No, they are too expensive to be profitable. The ingredients themselves are rare and difficult to gather, and the brewing recipe is much more complicated. They are not of a price that apprentices could easily afford."

A cold sweat ran down my back as I was informed that the rejuvenation potions I used on a daily basis weren't cheap. "Wait, but I use them all the time, don't I...? I don't remember ever paying for one..."

"That is fine, since you are performing work that more than makes up for their cost. The mana you recover is immediately spent for the duchy's sake as

well.”

Under normal circumstances, Ferdinand would be paying me for the work I did while helping at third bell—in fact, the blue priests who had also begun to help him were all getting paid. I was the sole exception. It was something I had never really thought about, since I had always viewed the situation as me helping him rather than working for him.

I can’t believe he was funneling my pay into financing the potions I drink!

I could only hang my head at how severe Ferdinand was. He had given me rejuvenation potions like it was nothing while at the same time keeping it hidden from me that my own money was being used to pay for them.

Haldenzel's Craftspeople

Charlotte had returned from Spring Prayer, meaning it was now time for Wilfried to take his turn. Ferdinand and I needed to observe the transfer of the chalice as the High Priest and High Bishop, respectively, but once that was done, we saw them both off and started making our way back to our rooms.

"Wait a moment, Ferdinand. Aren't you going to be traveling by highbeast?" I asked. "Why, then, are you due to be away for the same number of days as Wilfried and Charlotte? You aren't saving any time at all."

"Unlike you, I need not prioritize preserving my stamina above all else. My objective is not to minimize my schedule."

Rather than using his highbeast to visit multiple winter mansions in a day, Ferdinand was going to finish a ceremony each morning and then gather ingredients in the surrounding area. He apparently had much more leeway this year in more ways than one, since I was awake now, and we were still getting help from Wilfried and Charlotte.

"This is a rare opportunity to travel," Ferdinand concluded. "I must make use of it."

"Ferdinand, might I ask that you not say these things in front of Angelica?" I asked. She was looking at Ferdinand and Eckhart with an expression that radiated pure envy, muttering "Ingredient gathering..." to herself. Ferdinand and Eckhart were, of course, ignoring her entirely.

"You will be leaving for Haldenzel before I return from Spring Prayer, correct? Here, Elvira sent a letter. Read it later," Ferdinand said.

"Okay. Eheheh... It has warnings about the trip and who will be accompanying me, I see."

"Did I not say *later*?" Ferdinand asked. He was exasperated that I had started reading the letter as soon as I took it from him, but I ignored him and continued reading.

The essential core of the party was going to be me, the Gutenbergs, Elvira, and then Wilfried and Charlotte, who we were going to properly introduce to the printing industry. Ten knights from the Order and Karstedt, as the knight commander, would also be accompanying us as guards, since so many of the archducal family were going to be together in one place.

“I see you won’t be coming with us, Ferdinand. I thought you might be, since you’re my guardian.”

“There is no need, considering that your parents, Karstedt and Elvira, are both attending.”

“Oh, true. Hm... The letter says to bring only one attendant, one scholar, and one personal guard knight, since there are going to be so many people coming... but also that they need to be the same gender since they’ll be sleeping in the same room. What should I do? I don’t have any single adult women among my scholars or attendants.”

It was hard for wives with families and underage children to go on such long trips, and with how harsh and cold the journey was going to be, I didn’t want to bring Rihyarda either. Ferdinand had made the decision for her to accompany me to the Royal Academy, but given her age, it felt wrong of me to push her so hard.

“You cannot pick a new retainer just for Haldenzel, and we have little time. For now, discuss this with Elvira,” Ferdinand said.

After confirming with Elvira that I was allowed to bring apprentices as well, I settled on having Lieseleta and Philine accompany me. Angelica was going to be coming along too, but that had been set in stone from day one, since she was my only female adult guard knight.

Several days had passed since Ferdinand departed for Spring Prayer, and I was now getting ready to leave for Haldenzel. Fran carried over a box wrapped in cloth.

“Lady Rozemyne, these are the three small chalices we are to deliver to Haldenzel, and this is the greeting to say when delivering them. Please use it as a reference.”

“Thank you, Fran. This will be very helpful.”

It was the temple’s responsibility to deliver the small chalices, so I would be traveling to Haldenzel in my ceremonial High Bishop robes. I had accompanied Ferdinand when he was delivering them to giebes back in my shrine maiden days, but this was going to be my first time doing it on my own. I was feeling somewhat uneasy and wanted to bring one of my temple attendants with me for support, but I soon gave up on the idea; they would almost certainly die of stress from having to travel with an entire party of nobles.

“Good morning, Lady Rozemyne.” Benno and Damian greeted me from the front gate where they were waiting with the carriages; they had been instructed to come to the temple early so that we could reach the castle by third bell. Johann and Zack must have come on foot, as I saw a gray priest guiding them over from the back entrance.

“May we load our luggage into the highbeast?” Lutz asked.

“Oh my. Lutz. They brought you here to help?”

“Yes, because the carriages must be ridden back,” he replied. He wasn’t going to be following us to Haldenzel, but Benno had still brought him here to help us. I smiled a bit at that and opened the door to Lessy’s back seat.

“Bwuh?! The heck is that?!” Johann exclaimed, recoiling as he saw one side of my Pandabus start stretching open.

“This is Lady Rozemyne’s highbeast,” Lutz replied. “You are going to be traveling inside it, so put your things inside.”

Everyone else had ridden inside Lessy before, so they were carrying their things inside without even the slightest reaction. Among the luggage we had plant paper and colored ink to sell, tools that we needed for altering magic contracts, tools that Zack needed for his work, and changes of clothes. Meanwhile, Johann was observing my highbeast with a grimace. It was only when Zack barked at him to hurry up that he timidly started loading his own things too.

“C’mon, Johann. You’re in the way. Go sit down already. It’s more comfortable than a carriage.” After a few terse remarks, Zack shoved Johann

into Lessy before climbing in himself. And with that, we were off.

Johann kicked and screamed as we soared up into the air. It was an experience that everyone else in my highbeast had gone through themselves at one point or another, so they watched on with knowing sympathy. It was honestly quite funny.

I followed Damuel to the castle, where we were due to meet up with the others coming with us to Haldenzel. Angelica was in the passenger's seat; I needed to have a guard with me when I was riding with commoners.

Third bell hadn't yet chimed, but everyone was ready and waiting in front of the castle—over twenty people in total. I came down in Lessy and started greeting them. Damuel was temporarily relieved of duty, while Lieseleta rushed forward with Angelica's luggage.

"We leave at once," Elvira declared as the person in charge of our group, spurring a flock of highbeasts to rise into the air. Wilfried was among them, riding on his own highbeast, while Charlotte was having to ride the highbeast of one of her attendants.

And so we made our way to Haldenzel, surrounded by guard knights. Unlike when we had traveled to the castle, it was completely quiet inside my Pandabus.

"This is around where Haldenzel starts, right?" I asked.

"It is the duchy's northernmost province," Benno replied. Last year, the Gutenbergs had traveled by carriage while selling books on the road, so the journey had taken them days. By highbeast, however, it hadn't even taken us half a day. We soared over a thick conifer forest, and there was Haldenzel. Its southern area was covered in forest, while the north mainly had shorter trees and was still blanketed in snow. In the middle of a wide plain was a large stone castle of ivory white, which served as both a summer mansion for Giebe Haldenzel and a winter mansion for the people of the province.

"Welcome to Haldenzel."

We were greeted first by Giebe Haldenzel, then by the other residents of the

castle. Elvira returned their lengthy greetings as our representative, after which I stepped forward with the small chalices as the High Bishop.

“By the grace of Flutrane the Goddess of Water, the bringer of healing and change, and the twelve goddesses who serve by her side, Geduldh the Goddess of Earth has been granted the power to birth new life. I pray from the bottom of my heart that the countless lives upon this mortal realm are filled with Flutrane’s divine color.”

“Indeed, Geduldh the Goddess of Earth is filled with Flutrane the Goddess of Water’s mana,” Giebe Haldenzel said. “Blessed be the melting of the snow. Blessed be the coming of spring.”

Upon delivering the chalices to the giebe, my duties as the High Bishop came to an end. It had been a bit of a nerve-racking experience, since it was my first time delivering chalices to a noble directly, but I had ultimately done it without issue. Giebe Haldenzel’s attendants accepted the chalices and carried them off somewhere. They probably knew exactly where to store them.

“I believe it best if we enjoy tea and discuss our future plans over a break,” Haldenzel said. We were subsequently taken to a wide dining hall and served warm tea. It was a little sweet and unlike any tea I had drunk before in this world, but it warmed my body and soul all the same.

One of Haldenzel’s scholars stepped forward. “After this, I shall guide you all to our printing and smithing workshops,” he said. “We have craftspeople working there at present, so Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte may see for themselves what work is being done. After that, we shall go to the scholars involved in the printing industry and sign new contracts with the Plantin Company.”

Wilfried and Charlotte received this news with tight expressions. This wasn’t a sightseeing trip; it was a work trip for them to see the printing industry in action. It was going to be the first time their retainers (and Elvira, for that matter) saw an actual printing workshop. They all seemed excited to be properly delving into the subject for the first time.

“Now then, shall we go?”

The castle in Haldenzel apparently had an underground area where the

commoners lived, while the upper floors contained workplaces and accommodation for the nobles. It felt entirely like its own little city.

“You were raised here, Ernesta?” Charlotte asked.

“Indeed. The printing industry was only established in Haldenzel a few years ago, however, and since I have been in your service for the entire duration of its existence, I am not very knowledgeable about it myself.”

It seemed that Charlotte’s guard knight Ernesta was a mednoble from Haldenzel. We listened to her talk about the province as we walked along a dim hallway. There were heavy banging sounds coming from the far end.

“What’s that noise?” Wilfried asked, covering one ear as we came closer and closer to the source of the racket. “It’s really loud.” I could sense our knights heightening their guard as the rhythmic banging continued.

“That is the sound of printing. We only have one press working at the moment, but the banging is even louder when all three move at once,” Giebe Haldenzel answered with a smile as he opened the door to the printing room.

The clamor intensified in an instant. Inside were a number of tall, muscular guys gripping a large rod which made a loud banging sound each time they pulled it. They looked like the kind of people who would be hunting during the summer, but at the moment, they were working in clothes stained with black ink. The sight alone was enough to overwhelm those raised in the Noble’s Quarter; it was all they could do to watch with wide eyes.

Meanwhile, a scholar involved with the printing industry began his explanation. He noted that there were three printing presses here: one that Ingo had brought and built himself, one that had been made under Ingo’s instruction, and one they had made themselves without assistance. Only one press was being used at the current moment.

“This is the case for the metal letter types,” the scholar continued. “As commoners cannot read, we are having scholars handle the typesetting and proofreading. We were surprised to learn that, in Lady Rozemyne’s workshop, there are gray priests doing that work.”

“Those of my orphanage are all quite skilled,” I replied.

The craftspeople took out the printed paper, applied ink to the press, and then set the next sheet in place. They had only been doing the work for about two years, but their movements were already like clockwork.

“Haldenzel treats printing as winter work. We take a break from it in the summer, since we have to prioritize hunting in the north and farming in the south. Printing is something to do over the long winter,” the scholar explained while going through the printing steps. Everyone listened and the other scholar started making notes, but this was all information that I already knew, so I found myself more interested in Haldenzel culture.

“Haldenzel has a hunting industry?” I asked.

Giebe Haldenzel nodded with the look of a man who took great pride in his work. “It is our greatest duty to hunt as many feybeasts as possible,” he said.

“The more feybeasts that get hunted in these cold lands, the weaker the Lord of Winter will be when he eventually rises,” Karstedt added, offering his insight as the knight commander.

Winter feybeasts consumed each other to grow more powerful, with the last surviving one becoming the Lord of Winter, and it was for this reason that those from Haldenzel tried to reduce their numbers as much as possible. Historically, Haldenzel had the most knights out of any province due to the nobility being raised in this environment. Even the commoners were tougher than average, since they had to be able to hunt feybeasts to a certain degree themselves.

“But that is not the only reason we hunt feybeasts. We also hunt them to protect our food,” Haldenzel continued. The commoners would starve if the feybeasts destroyed their fields of valuable crops. Although those in the south lived similar lives to the farmers around the city of Ehrenfest, those in the north better resembled tribal hunters and spent the summer traveling around Haldenzel to hunt before spending the winter in the castle. “Many of the tribes have finished preparing to depart. Once Spring Prayer ends tonight, they will leave to hunt.”

“I look forward to it,” I said. “This is my first time participating in Spring Prayer for a province.”

After our tour of the printing room, we moved on to the smithy. Inside were a

bunch of craftsmen with a wooden box, wearing tense expressions as they awaited Johann's arrival. I could hear Johann swallow hard when he saw them, and they all exchanged stern looks.

"Now, show Ehrenfest's craftsman the results of your winter labors," Giebe Haldenzel instructed, prompting the smiths to step forward with their box. Johann accepted it, set it down on a table, and then started going through the metal letter types inside.

All was quiet in the smithy, and the air was thick with tension. The craftsmen watched Johann's hands with almost frightfully intense expressions, but he was examining each letter type so carefully that he seemed not to notice them at all. The smith who had previously been afraid of my highbeast and floundering amid all the nobles was now nowhere to be seen.

Johann continued to examine the metal letter types in silence while the scholars explained to Wilfried and Charlotte how the letter types and all the other parts that were needed were made, as well as how they were being used with the printing presses. The repeated clinking of metal could be heard as Johann separated the letter types into two piles.

"These ones pass. These ones don't," Johann said plainly. "They aren't made according to the blueprints. They fail." He must have put his all into the examination because there was sweat beading on his brow by the time he was done. He wiped it away with his sleeve and sighed, pleased that the job was done.

The craftspeople whose letter types hadn't received passing marks stared at Johann with wide eyes. "Whaddaya mean, they fail?!" one cried. "Don't mess with us! We *did* make them according to the blueprints!"

"What's even wrong with 'em?!" yelled another.

Johann shook his head, enduring the barks from the young craftsmen and the hard looks from the older ones. "I mean... I told you. They're not made according to the blueprints. They're not usable."

"Say that again. I dare you!"

The atmosphere became immediately hostile as the Haldenzel craftspeople

began to audibly threaten Johann. The nobles around me had turned to look at them, clearly shocked by the aggression.

This isn't good...

The Haldenzel craftsmen were enraged about having spent all winter making the letter types only to be rejected without explanation, while Johann glared back at them, unwilling to budge on his decision. This was about the only time he showed the backbone that came naturally to most other craftspeople, and while neither side was wrong in its position, it was exceedingly dangerous for this kind of aggression to be shown while nobles were watching. I instinctively stepped forward to break up the feud.

"Johann, allow me to see them as well. I am the one who ordered them to begin with."

"Lady Rozemyne..."

A stir ran through the nobles and the craftspeople as I, the adopted daughter of the archduke and a guest of the province, involved myself in a commoner dispute. I ignored the fuss entirely and started to examine individual letter types from both piles, checking them from all angles.

"...Ah. These certainly won't do indeed. Am I right to assume this is the problem?" I asked, pointing out the issue I was referring to. Johann nodded in response. If one compared the two piles, it was clear to see that the failed letter types varied in length and width. Such inconsistencies, no matter how slight, were a grave issue. I recalled how the letter types Johann had initially created for me hadn't had any such discrepancies and once again found myself surprised at how much more skilled he was than other smiths. "These are so slanted that the printed letters will smudge on the page, which makes them unusable. And this one did not receive a proper metal finish, meaning it will damage the paper during the printing process."

I pointed at each tiny letter type in turn and explained why it had received a failing mark. The craftspeople balked at me, clearly wanting to say that our expectations were much too high, but my status as a noble meant they were unable to protest.

"I suppose you must find this level of precision unreasonable, but I have been

ordering such exact products from Johann for years now. Metal letter types do not allow for any degree of concession; the result must be perfect in all areas." As the craftspeople deflated, I turned my attention to Johann. "Now, this is a problem that many craftspeople have, but your explanations are fatally lacking. In Ehrenfest workshops, you may be able to reject products without giving further explanation, as the people there know you are not much of an orator. But this is Haldenzel. I imagine those making these for the first time will not understand their faults if you do not explain them in detail."

"But, the blueprints..."

"Not everyone can read blueprints. They may be able to read the numbers as you do, but not the more detailed instructions written alongside them. And most importantly, it is rare for customers to demand as much precision as I do. It is possible they do not understand the level of precision I require here."

Johann blinked in realization. He was so used to my requests that he considered it a matter of course to follow the blueprints without even the slightest margin of error, but even in Ehrenfest, that was something unique to him.

"Rozemyne, these all look the same to me. What are the issues?" Wilfried asked, having at some point walked up to us from behind to look at the letter types.

"Ah, Wilfried. I believe you will understand if you compare these," I said, lining up four letter types that had passed Johann's inspection beside four that hadn't. Wilfried examined them with narrowed eyes before eventually voicing his thoughts.

"From this pile, this one looks a little shorter."

"Brother, allow me to see as well," Charlotte said, changing places with Wilfried to peer at the metal letter types herself. I started telling them how printing worked and noted that even the slightest letter type imperfection could cause huge problems, only to notice that the Haldenzel smiths were listening with humbled expressions. It occurred to me that I had never before tried to explain this topic in detail, since Johann completed my orders perfectly every time. Perhaps *I* was the one who needed to work on my explanation skills.

“The height of each letter type needs to be exactly the same before they can be used, and slanted letter types will cause a mess of problems,” I eventually concluded. “The metal letter types Johann makes are completely identical in size. I would even go as far as to say there is beauty in their perfection. Do you not agree?”

It was easy to miss the flaws in the letter types when considering them individually, but when ten or twenty were lined up, they became quite apparent. Some couldn’t stand on their own, some were a little rough, and some stood slightly taller, even if only by less than a single millimeter. After confirming the mistakes themselves, the smiths of Haldenzel stood up with renewed strength.

“...We’ll remake them.”

“Approximately half of your letter types received a passing mark, so you’re almost there,” I assured them. “You should feel proud that you were able to accomplish that much; even back in Ehrenfest, there are extremely few smiths skilled enough to make letter types that receive Johann’s approval. Isn’t that right, Johann?”

“Yes. Even my disciple, Danilo, struggles with them. He has not yet earned perfect marks.”

“And so, I place my utmost faith in Haldenzel. I trust you all to take greater care when making your letter types, and to secure a passing mark from Johann.”

Any remaining hostilities faded in an instant, and the craftspeople all put on serious faces. They were going to return to working on their letter types, so we had Zack and Johann stay behind and then started making our way to our next stop.

“We shall now head to the Haldenzel Printing Guild,” the scholar guiding us said. “I am the only scholar in charge of the printing industry, so I must admit, there is not much there.”

Those from the Plantin Company had up to this point been trailing behind the nobles, but now was their time to start working. The scholar spoke to us about the Printing Guild, and we were introduced to a corner of the room where the

scholars worked. We were also shown several of the documents necessary for doing business with commoners.

“Here is our permit from the Merchant’s Guild. The existence of this document is what proves that the Printing Guild has been formed. I also have here our permit from Aub Ehrenfest and our instructions from the giebe. Before expanding the printing industry to a new location, please check for these documents first,” the head scholar explained. He went on to describe the process of obtaining the necessary permissions, establishing the workshops, doing the actual printing, and then selling the printed goods. Some very specific details of the production process and the problems they faced came up here, likely due to him having been involved from start to finish.

Wilfried listened intently, since he was being entrusted with performing final checks, while his scholar speedily wrote everything down. Charlotte’s scholar did the same, as they had been informed ahead of time that they would be doing similar work from next year onward. Philine was likewise jotting things down, having received instructions from Hartmut to learn everything she would need to know as my retainer.

“I will now begin the meeting with the Plantin Company, so you may all use this time to rest,” the scholar concluded, gesturing Benno and Damian over once he had finished his speech. We went on our way as they smoothly transitioned into discussing tomorrow’s work, returning to the noble section of the castle.

Haldenzel's Spring Prayer

"You must all be tired. Please rest in your rooms until Spring Prayer tonight," Countess Haldenzel said. She hadn't accompanied us on the tour, but she nonetheless came forward to serve as an excellent hostess. Our attendants had already prepared our rooms and unpacked our luggage for us.

Philine, Angelica, and I entered the room I was guided to, where we found that Lieseleta had prepared my bathwater after having finished unpacking everyone's luggage. "Will you be wearing your ceremonial High Bishop robes during Spring Prayer?" she asked while she was bathing me.

"Indeed. I will be participating as the High Bishop and the one who brought the small chalices, so I will want my ceremonial robes," I replied. I personally believed that my work here was done now that I had handed over the chalices, but it was probably best for me to play it safe and wear my High Bishop robes for Spring Prayer.

Lieseleta had apparently been speaking with the countess, and she informed me that Spring Prayer was going to start at sixth bell. We had been asked to gather in the dining hall before then, and from there we would move to the plaza.

Once I was wearing my ceremonial robes and spring hairpin, I climbed into my Pandabus. I was still pretty tired from our tour that day, so I had gotten permission from Giebe Haldenzel to travel around the castle in my highbeast.

"Ah, Lady Rozemyne. That makes everyone. Now then, shall we move to the plaza?"

It seemed that I was the last to appear in the dining hall. Upon my arrival, Giebe Haldenzel stood up and started escorting his wife to the plaza.

"Under normal circumstances, Lord Wilfried would similarly escort you, but unfortunately..." Elvira trailed off and instead asked Wilfried to walk on my right as I traveled in my highbeast. Behind us was Charlotte, then Karstedt, who was

escorting Elvira, and then our scholars and attendants, who were lined up in order of status. Our guard knights were surrounding us in a protective formation, with Angelica walking directly to my left.

Giebe Haldenzel and his wife leisurely descended the stairs. I was starting to wonder why they had called the place they were going to hold Spring Prayer a plaza rather than a grand hall, but then I remembered that Illgner's Harvest Festival was held not in a noble estate, but rather in public, with the commoners and giebe celebrating together. Perhaps having shared celebrations was also common in Haldenzel.

I was already aware that the commoners had their own living space underground, and indeed, there was a long ivory hall with evenly spaced doors. It looked entirely like the hallway that linked the Royal Academy's dormitories. The white walls seemed to be glowing faintly, but aside from that, our surroundings were dim.

We soon arrived in a large plaza. The commoners were already gathered, but aside from that, this was nothing like Spring Prayer at the winter mansions in the Central District. There was a large cylindrical stage positioned in the center of the plaza, atop which was a stand and a shrine that held offerings to the gods and the small chalices.

During the Harvest Festivals in Hasse and Illgner, there were seats on the stage that looked down upon the commoners. Here in Haldenzel, however, there were round tables near the stage where the province's nobles were already seated. There were also several other round tables positioned right in front of the stage, but these ones were empty. I could guess that the table closest to the stage was for those from the archducal family, while the seats that were a little farther away were for Giebe Haldenzel and his wife.

"Here you are, Lady Rozemyne." Giebe Haldenzel pulled out a chair for me, and a tremor immediately shot through all those around me; it seemed that this development had come as too much of a surprise for them to completely hide their feelings. I glanced over at Karstedt and Elvira, unsure whether I should actually sit down, and they shook their heads ever so slightly. It was presumably a signal that I should refuse.

“My apologies, Giebe Haldenzel, but could you offer a seat to Wilfried first? I must put away my highbeast,” I said, indirectly refusing his offer while leisurely descending from Lessy. Giebe Haldenzel gave a noticeably broader smile in response before guiding Wilfried to his seat. He then led Charlotte to hers, and the tension in the air drained at once.

“Here you are, Lady Rozemyne.” Giebe Haldenzel repeated himself and pulled out the chair again once I had put away my highbeast. It seemed to be fine for me to sit now, so I obliged him. The seat was just right, with the height of the cushions having been adjusted for my sake.

Wilfried and then Charlotte were seated to my left, while Giebe Haldenzel and then his wife were seated to my right. Karstedt and Elvira were sitting across from me. It seemed that everyone was now in their designated seats, so our scholars and attendants sat down as well. Only our guard knights remained standing behind us. Our attendants would need to work again once Spring Prayer began.

It soon reached sixth bell, indicating the start of Spring Prayer. As each chime echoed through the plaza, the previously bustling commoners all fell silent.

“High Bishop. Please come to the stage,” Giebe Haldenzel said as he stood with his wife and headed up the stage. I promptly did the same and followed after them, my head spinning at the sudden request.

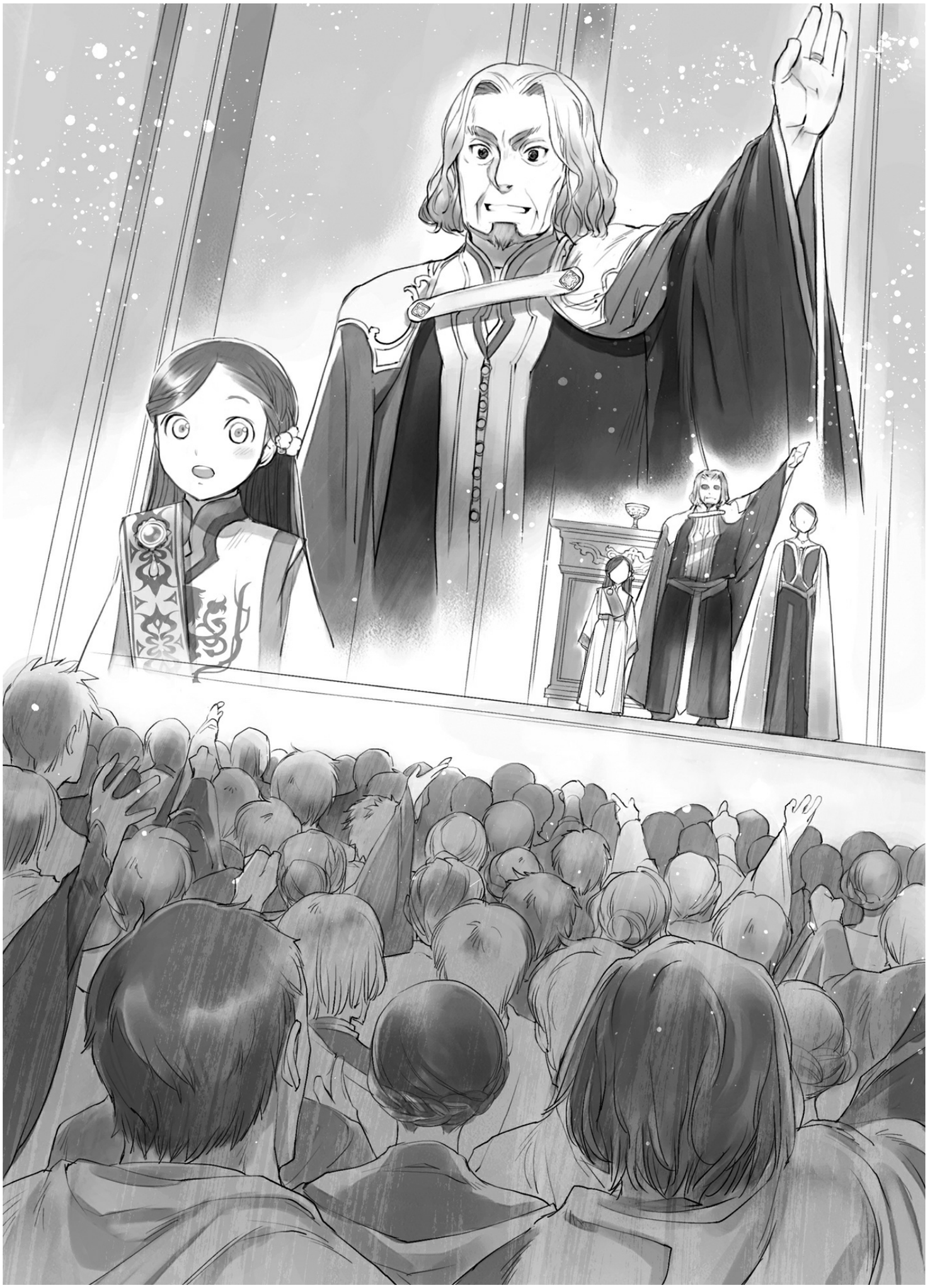
Hold on a moment. I never heard anything about this. I thought my work here was done after handing over the chalices! Ferdinand! Help! Fran! Hold up a sign telling me what to say! AAAAAAH!

“This is the celebrated High Bishop, known to all as the Saint of Ehrenfest. She is the daughter of my little sister, Elvira, and we celebrate her return to our homeland!” Giebe Haldenzel declared, causing the gathered commoners to erupt in cheers. It seemed that the people of Haldenzel intended to treat me as family entirely because I was Elvira’s daughter, even though they had never actually met me before.

Giebe Haldenzel extended his hand, raising it as high as his shoulder. His gesture quieted the crowd, allowing him to then break that silence with a declaration spoken in a heavy and profound voice.

“Today, the Saint of Ehrenfest has brought spring to Haldenzel. Once again, Flutrane the Goddess of Water’s clear streams have pushed away Ewigeliebe the God of Life and rescued Geduldh the Goddess of Earth.” Giebe Haldenzel pointed at the chalices on the shrine, paused for a moment to look over the crowd, and then continued in a louder voice. “Sing so that the gods might hear your prayers! Dance so that the gods may know your gratitude! Blessed be the melting of the snow!”

Again, the crowd started to cheer. The passion of the citizens who had eagerly been awaiting the end of winter was overwhelming to behold, and thus began Haldenzel’s Spring Prayer.



There would apparently be singing and dancing from this point onward. Now that the small chalices were here, the farmers who lived in the south would soon be heading home, while the hunting tribes would similarly be heading north. Spring Prayer was both a festival for celebrating the coming of spring and a melancholic farewell among citizens.

Having merely been called on stage to be introduced to everyone, I returned to my seat without doing anything in particular. Food was brought out, and we nobles began to eat while the commoners beat drums, played flutes, sang songs, and danced around.

“When the commoners are done, we will dedicate our own sword dances and songs to the gods,” Giebe Haldenzel informed me as he returned to his seat beside mine. Wilfried and Charlotte took that opportunity to note that they had heard similar songs while traveling between the winter mansions.

What ...? But I’ve never heard any songs during Spring Prayer before.

It seemed strange to me, but when I gave it more thought, it occurred to me that my top priority had always been going to give the next blessing. In other words, while I had gone all over the place for Spring Prayer, I had never actually stayed until the end and participated in the entire ceremony. It was a shocking twist.

“The two of you also participate in Spring Prayer?” Giebe Haldenzel asked Wilfried and Charlotte with widened eyes. It seemed that most were unaware of this fact, since land-owning nobles returned to their provinces after the feast celebrating spring was over.

Wilfried nodded in response to the giebe’s question. “Yes. We siblings need to help each other out. It would be too much of a burden for Rozemyne to bear alone, and we’re all equally the archduke’s children,” he said, speaking in a tone that seemed to emphasize this was obvious.

“Indeed,” Charlotte added. “Erm... We can only be of use because of my sister’s mana, but what matters is that we are participating at all. We are slowly developing more skills, and my goal is to perform the blessing without relying on Rozemyne.” As she spoke, her indigo eyes started to sparkle.

Oh no... My siblings are such wonderful people, and then there's me, the girl who cares only about books. Sorry! I'm not going to change, but... I'm sorry for that too! The most I can do is apologize and press forward.

"Lady Rozemyne, are you on good terms with your siblings?" Giebe Haldenzel asked.

"Of course. They worked very hard for my sake during my long sleep. They have grown so much that I can only bemoan my own lack of growth," I replied. Upon hearing this, the giebe leaned back against his chair and crossed his arms in thought.

"I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world," came a familiar prayer. I glanced over at the stage to see that the knights of Haldenzel, who were going to be leading the tribes heading north to hunt, were lined up next to each other. "Grant an end to this world of pure white," they continued. "Shatter the all-consuming ice and free our Goddess of Earth..."

Oh, I know this song.

Or rather, I knew the lyrics. It was the song that the goddesses subordinate to the Goddess of Earth sang when seeking aid from the Goddess of Water after the God of Life tore them from Geduldh. The subordinate goddesses offered their power to the Goddesses of Light and Water, praying for the Goddess of Earth to be saved.

It was my first time hearing the lyrics in song form, but they pretty much just repeated the same phrases over and over, so it was easy enough to follow along. I started to sing with them, but then I caught myself and stopped; singing biblical songs of prayer ran the risk of me granting some strange blessing.

Giebe Haldenzel noticed that I was humming to resist the urge to sing and leaned forward in amusement. "This is a Haldenzel song celebrating the coming of spring and marking the beginning of the hunt," he explained. "The hunters sing it before leaving."

"Oh...? Is this not a song to pray for the melting of the snow and summon the Goddess of Water?" I asked, cocking my head to one side. Giebe Haldenzel returned a curious look.

“Not once have I heard this song in the Royal Academy or in Ehrenfest, not even during the feast. I thought it was sung only in Haldenzel... Do you know it from elsewhere?”

“This is my first time hearing it, but the lyrics are written in the bible passed down from each High Bishop to the next,” I explained. “The lyrics also have art associated with them, and they aren’t found in the other bibles in the temple’s book room, so they must be truly old. According to the illustrations, the song was originally sung by the subordinate goddesses on a circular stage much like yours.”

First Giebe Haldenzel, then Karstedt and Elvira blinked in surprise. Atop the stage were offerings to the gods and the small chalices.

“Will you sing as well, Lady Rozemyne?” the giebe asked. “I feel that spring will come early this year if the Saint of Ehrenfest offers her prayers.”

I glanced around in surprise. It was written on everyone’s faces that they were interested in the suggestion, but I didn’t want to get in trouble for blasting out blessings like some kind of party trick. “I did not plan to perform any religious ceremonies here...” I noted.

“Oh, but is delivering the chalices not part of a religious ceremony?”

“I suppose, technically speaking... But...”

What do I do?! Ferdinand, heeelp!

Just as I was debating whether to send an ordonnanz, Elvira interjected. “Dearest brother, it would be cruel to have her sing a song she is only now hearing for the first time. Instead, why not have women from Haldenzel sing? We can have them sing together in the same way that the men did.”

There we go! Thanks, Mother! I can always count on you.

A wave of relief washed over me; there was no need for me to get involved when the women of Haldenzel could sing instead. But that reminded me—this was Elvira’s home province.

“Oh, does this mean we are going to hear you sing once again, Lady Elvira?” one noble asked.

“This is a rare opportunity indeed. I certainly would like to hear your harspiel playing again,” another added. There were Haldenzel elders who seemed about as old as the retired Bonifatius looking at Elvira with amused smiles; it seemed that she had seldom returned home after being wed to Karstedt, and the older folk found her playing to be nostalgic.

“Ah, now that is an idea. Elvira, how about you get on stage? You can still sing, I assume?” Giebe Haldenzel asked, his lips curving into a grin as his gaze moved from me to her. It was the expression of an older brother teasing his little sister, but his eyes still carried an unmistakable touch of familial warmth.

“If you insist. I suppose I am the one who brought this up. I shall sing with the women.”

In the end, an arrangement of only women gathered to sing atop the cylindrical stage. They already had the song memorized, since the men sang it every single year. The crowd stirred with excitement at the sudden, completely impromptu development. Unable to refuse the hopes and dreams of so many eager audience members, Elvira would be acquiring her harspiel and performing as well.

“Father, I did not mean for Mother to...” I began, feeling a little worried about Elvira having been somewhat forced into this situation. Far from being anxious, however, Karstedt was watching his wife with an amused smile.

“Don’t worry. Elvira is fairly skilled.”

“Are you really going to use this opportunity to brag about your wife...?” I said, having been so genuinely concerned that I couldn’t hold back my complaint. Lamprecht burst into laughter, while others covered their mouths with their hands and gave Karstedt teasing looks.

“Oh my, bragging about me now, are you?” Elvira asked, looking down at Karstedt with an expression that was far more teasing than the rest. He inhaled sharply and, after looking around, coughed to clear his throat.

“Er, Rozemyne... That’s the kind of comment you should keep to yourself. Alright?”

“Certainly. I will refrain from mentioning that you sometimes cannot contain

your romantic feelings for Mother.”

But no sooner had I made that promise than Elvira gave me a conflicting request. “Please do tell me more about that later, Lady Rozemyne.”

Okay then... What’s the solution here?

Karstedt was putting silent pressure on me to keep my mouth shut while Elvira smiled at Giebe Haldenzel and said that she was going to fetch her harspiel. The giebe returned a smile, telling her to hurry since her room was the farthest away.

Wait, why is Mother going to fetch it on her own when she has attendants?

That question played on my mind as I watched the sword dances dedicated to the gods, and it was only when Lieseleta moved forward to pour me some fresh tea that I received an answer. Elvira had apparently insinuated that she needed some time to practice, and the giebe had in turn said that she could perform at the very end of Spring Prayer, but that she would need to hurry up nonetheless.

How was I supposed to understand that?!

I was stunned into silence, and there was nothing I could do but watch the continuing sword dances. Seeing it up close reminded me of the sword dances that Karstedt and Sylvester had performed when the latter had accompanied us for Spring Prayer disguised as a blue priest. I remembered them being a sight to behold, and it was for that reason that I wanted to see Angelica dance too. I made sure not to voice that desire, however; the last thing I wanted was to cause chaos here in Haldenzel on a whim.

“Apologies for the wait.”

Elvira returned with her attendants carrying her harspiel after the sword dancing had finished and while the whirling was entering its final phases. She sat down and took a breath right as the performances came to an end.

Spring Prayer normally would have ended there, but not this year. Giebe Haldenzel stood up and announced that he wanted to have the women sing the song as per the ancient bible passed down through the duchy’s High Bishops. He then introduced his little sister, Elvira, as the harspiel player.

Elvira climbed onto the stage with her harspiel in hand. I could only kneel in admiration at how she did so without so much as a trace of panic or fear, especially after having been unexpectedly forced into the role to back me up.

Although the women had been instructed to climb onto the stage, there was no avoiding that this was not a regular part of the festival. They all eyed each other, waiting for someone to make the first move. Even those who actually wanted to go up found themselves in a bind, since they could only do so after those who were above them in status. The giebe's wife, Countess Haldenzel, sensed this and stood up, calling for the other noblewomen at the surrounding tables to join her.

"Lady Elvira is offering the sound of her harspiel to the gods. Let us sing and pray with her."

Now that the highest-status woman in Haldenzel had made her move, the other noblewomen advanced toward the stage while inviting each other up. I saw some women preparing instruments instead, presumably because they weren't especially talented singers.

"Lady Rozemyne, why don't you participate with us?" Countess Haldenzel asked, extending a hand to me with a calm smile. For a moment, I could only blink in surprise; hadn't Elvira sacrificed herself specifically to save me from this fate?

"I am not from Haldenzel, so..."

"Nonsense. Any daughter of Lady Elvira is family here. Furthermore, having you bless spring as the High Bishop will encourage our citizens and give them strength in the upcoming hunts."

In other words, I couldn't try to refuse on the basis of accidentally giving a blessing—any such attempts would just result in her saying something like, "Oh, please do bless Haldenzel." But what else could I say to get her to give up? I didn't have strong enough social skills to come up with anything on my own, so I looked to Karstedt for help.

"Cooperation and unity is important in festivals and celebrations of this kind," Karstedt noted with a shrug. "I understand that you may not be able to sing along because you aren't familiar with the song, but couldn't you at least stand

at the podium as the High Bishop?”

Um... They want me to climb up onto the stage and just stand there to boost the giebe’s reputation?

In all fairness, there was no need for me to disrespect him and risk tarnishing his reputation. I climbed onto the stage with Countess Haldenzel and Angelica, practically being pushed from behind.

“Lady Rozemyne...” Elvira said, her eyes widening when she saw me. It was an understandable response—her sacrifice had ultimately been for nothing. If she had any complaints, however, they would need to be directed at Karstedt.

“I shall only be offering my prayers as the High Bishop,” I explained. “I wish to respect Haldenzel’s culture of cooperation, but I cannot sing myself.”

Elvira sighed, having deduced the circumstances. Meanwhile, Countess Haldenzel instructed the women on where to go based on where the men stood, placing down stands which they then knelt upon.

“Lady Rozemyne, please stand here,” Countess Haldenzel said, directing me to a position right in front of the small chalices I had brought. Since I was standing among the other women, I could just pretend to sing and put on High Bishop airs. Having so many adult women surrounding me meant that I was actually quite hard to see, but all that mattered was that I, the adopted daughter of the archduke, was participating as the High Bishop.

I got on my knees like everyone else, rested my hands on the floor, and then listened as someone spoke a prayer I was already familiar with: “I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world.” Those with instruments were the first to slowly raise their heads and stand up. They lined up around the edge of the stage with Elvira at the center.

Elvira plucked a sharp note on her harspiel, and from there the music began. More harspiels soon joined in, as did several flutists, creating an impressive overture. The singers then gradually stood up in time with the music, with Countess Haldenzel standing in the very middle.

“Grant an end to this world of pure white. Smash the all-consuming ice and free our Goddess of Earth...”

Oh crap! They started singing!

It seemed that everyone from Haldenzel knew the song well enough to begin together without even needing to rehearse things first. I wasn't quite so fortunate, though, so I completely missed my cue to stand up.

Still on my knees, I desperately racked my brain, trying to figure out a good time to stand. Getting up now would make me stick out for sure, but I didn't have any other ideas. Maybe it would be best for me to keep kneeling and make it seem like I was praying. I decided to do just that, listening carefully to Elvira's harspiel playing and everyone's singing.

"Let us send our prayers to the gods," Countess Haldenzel declared once the singing was done. She was naturally leading into the part where we would all pray to the gods.

Now!

Having finally found my opportunity to stand, I sprang up onto my feet. I managed to raise my hands in prayer at the same time everyone else did.

"Praise be to the gods!"

In an instant, I felt my mana being sucked out of me. A massive green magic circle lit up beneath us, having apparently been sketched into the cylindrical stand to begin with.

"What...?"

Everyone watched with wide eyes, their mouths agape as the magic circle slowly rose above even the tallest person's head, reaching over two meters high.

As we looked up in awe, the magic circle suddenly paused. In the blink of an eye, it got sucked into the chalices that were directly beneath it, almost immediately being replaced by pillars of green light. A moment later, several of the women who had been staring up at the circle in a daze like everyone else abruptly collapsed, dropping to the ground without any warning whatsoever. It came as such a surprise that I inhaled sharply.

"Aah!"

“What in the world?!”

Cries of surprise and fear rang out. Not all of the women had collapsed—some such as Elvira and Countess Haldenzel remained on their feet, while others had slumped down into a sitting position, looking sick.

“Lady Rozemyne, are you okay?!” Angelica shouted, cautiously eyeing our surroundings with one hand on Stenluke. I responded that I was fine while likewise looking around. I could see the knights rushing over, their expressions a mixture of shock and grave seriousness. Karstedt reached us first, having been sitting the closest. He leapt onto the stage, ignoring the stairs to save time, and rushed straight toward me.

“Rozemyne, are you okay?!”

“I don’t feel unwell in the least.”

“That magic circle has to be responsible, but what even happened...?”

I had also cleverly deduced that the magic circle was responsible for the collapsing women, but I couldn’t work out what had actually happened, so I just shook my head. Karstedt looked me over from head to toe to make sure that I really was fine and then looked toward Elvira, who was already coming our way.

“Elvira, are you likewise feeling okay?” Karstedt asked.

“I feel completely fine, but the burden seems to have been too great for the laynobles,” Elvira replied. “The magic circle a moment ago must have completely drained their mana. Please give them rejuvenation potions at once.”

Upon receiving this order, the knights hurriedly pulled out the rejuvenation potions they always carried on their belts and started pouring them down the throats of the unconscious women. Those who were still conscious took that opportunity to drink their own potions. According to Elvira, the women who had collapsed were laynobles, while the sick-looking women currently sitting down were mednobles.

“Lady Rozemyne, let us entrust this matter to the people of Haldenzel. Brother, I shall escort Lady Rozemyne and the others to their rooms,” Elvira said, entrusting the cleanup to the giebe couple and taking on the duty of returning us three archducal children to our rooms. Karstedt and two others

guarded us on the way, while Wilfried and Charlotte looked at me with worry.

“Rozemyne, are you alright?”

“Sister, are you okay?”

“I am quite alright,” I replied. “It seems that the issue arose from the circle draining mana, but I am personally well suited for such a situation.”

Once we reached my room, I looked up at Elvira while waiting for Lieseleta to open the door. “I shall be resting in my room now, but will you be going to help Giebe Haldenzel, Elvira?”

“Indeed. This is an unprecedented event; I intend to help my brother as much as I can.”

“If you are going to assist Giebe Haldenzel, please do drink a potion first,” I said. “You also had your mana taken by the circle... Mother.”

Elvira smiled, said, “I thank you ever so much for your concern. Please do get some rest,” and then headed for Charlotte’s room. As I watched her go, I noticed that she seemed very similar to Ferdinand when he pushed himself past his breaking point despite claiming he was fine. I grabbed on to Karstedt’s cape.

“Father, please ensure that Mother actually does drink a potion.”

“Of course. Elvira’s always had a bad habit of putting the needs of others above her own. I know what to do,” Karstedt said, patting my head. I decided to trust him with this.

I went into my room, bathed, prepared for bed, and then climbed under the covers. Upon seeing that I was ready to sleep, Lieseleta glanced toward the liquid embodiments of Ferdinand’s kindness, which remained untouched on the table. “Will you not drink a potion, Lady Rozemyne?” she asked.

“I did not lose nearly enough mana to warrant drinking one,” I replied. “I may not have stamina, but I have plenty of mana.”

It was just as I started dozing off that I heard an unsettling rumbling coming from outside. Even with my consciousness fading fast, I recognized it in an instant.

Neat, thunder...

My calm drowsiness lasted only a brief while, however. The thunder quickly grew in intensity, becoming so loud that I feared it might splinter the wooden shutters covering the windows. Abrupt flashes illuminated the room and the curtains around my bed, creating an atmosphere that was disconcerting to say the least. It was impossible for me to sleep like this.

"Eek!"

What the heck?! This is scary! So scary! It's not just loud; it's also bright as heck!

I could hear it even when I buried my head beneath the covers. The next thing I knew, the curtains around my bed started to rustle—a development that caught me so off guard that I inadvertently let out a little shriek.

"Erm... Are you quite alright, Lady Rozemyne?"

"L-Lieseleta?! Y-Yes, I'm doing f-fine."

Despite my concerns, it wasn't the thunder that had pulled open my curtains, but rather Lieseleta and Angelica. On the one hand, I was relieved to see them, but on the other, having my head out from under the covers made the thunderclaps even harder to endure.

"Lady Rozemyne... I happen to be afraid of thunder," Lieseleta said. "Would you mind my staying with you for a short while?"

"Not in the least! You can even sleep here, if you'd prefer! You won't be afraid with me here, for certain."

Quick, quick! Under the covers!

I pulled back the bedcovers for Lieseleta and Angelica, but they naturally declined to sleep in the bed with me. Instead, Lieseleta sat by my pillow and held my hand, making a point to note, "My mother often did this for me when I was young."

"Lieseleta, I don't remember Mother ever doing this for me..." Angelica said, looking down at our hands with a conflicted expression. Seeing that, Lieseleta returned a small smile.

“Why, Sister, that’s because you never stirred no matter how loud the thunder got. You were always long asleep by the time this happened.”

“Wow. I never even noticed.”

It wasn’t until rather late at night that the thunder faded and I could finally sleep. I struggled to wake up in the morning as a result, wrapping myself up in my blankets and mumbling about wanting to stay in bed until I absolutely had to get up for breakfast.

“Lady Rozemyne, this is serious. Please get changed at once. Giebe Haldenzel has an urgent matter to discuss,” Lieseleta said, throwing aside the curtains in her haste. A messenger had presumably arrived a moment ago.

“Did something happen?” I asked.

“Spring has come to Haldenzel.”

“Well, of course... Spring Prayer concluded yesterday.”

In the Noble’s Quarter, it was considered spring after the feast, while in the lower city, it was considered spring after the winter coming-of-age ceremony. Meanwhile, in places like Haldenzel and the farming towns of the Central District, it was considered spring after Spring Prayer. Since Spring Prayer here in Haldenzel was already over, it came as no surprise that it was springtime, regardless of whether there was still any snow on the ground. I tried to express this to Lieseleta, but she immediately shook her head.

“That is not what I meant. All the snow vanished in a single night.”

“What?!”

I got changed at once and headed to the arranged meeting place—a tower that was the highest point of the Haldenzel castle and served as the best place for looking at the surrounding nature. There I found Giebe Haldenzel, his wife, the higher-ups of the province, Karstedt, Elvira, and a bunch of knights looking around in a daze.

When we had arrived at Haldenzel, the ground had still been blanketed with snow. The clouds had been thick and the sunlight weak, such that the north had

almost seemed to be a field of white from afar. But now that snow was entirely gone, and surrounding the castle in its place were fresh green trees, vibrant flowers of white and yellow, and bold red cliffs. The breeze stroking my cheek was still a little cold, but it could hardly be compared to the frosty winds that had originally greeted us. Even the sunlight was softer and more comfortable.

“Wow, this is a nice view,” I remarked. “The Goddesses of Spring certainly worked hard.”

“This is not spring in Haldenzel, Lady Rozemyne; it is a sight akin to the start of summer,” Giebe Haldenzel replied, pointing at the blue sky. “The noise last night was Verdrenna the Goddess of Thunder announcing the coming of spring. In Haldenzel, her thunder roars when the snow has melted completely.”

Although Verdrenna was called a Goddess of Spring, in Haldenzel, where the snow lasted for such a long time, her thunder ended up representing the end of spring and the coming of a short summer.

“It did occur to me last night that the thunder seemed quite out of season, but to think this had happened...” Giebe Haldenzel murmured, his brow furrowed in confusion. As I looked around, I noticed people steadily filtering out of the castle and onto the flower-covered fields.

“It seems that quite a few people are leaving the castle in a hurry,” I observed. “Does anything need to be done about that?”

“It’s only natural that they are in a bit of a panic. This is unprecedented.”

It seemed the southern farmers needed to rush home and get straight to work on their farms to ensure they could produce the biggest harvests possible, while the northern hunters would need to return to their hunting grounds posthaste, since they couldn’t predict how many feybeasts would appear in this new weather. The sudden change had managed to alarm the entire province.

“That magic circle is responsible, I suppose?” I asked.

“Given that nothing else was out of the ordinary, I believe that is a safe guess.”

“In that case, it may be that Spring Prayer was originally a ceremony during which citizens would offer their mana, pray to the gods, and summon true

spring. The power of the goddesses truly is incredible, is it not?" I was impressed to once again learn how powerful the gods were in this world, but Giebe Haldenzel widened his eyes and gave me a steady look.

"Lady Rozemyne..."

"Could you not repeat the ritual to hasten the coming of spring for future years too?" I asked. The magic circle was a part of their cylindrical stand, so if they used it again, they could probably repeat the process... albeit at a pretty hefty mana cost.

"We welcome the melting of the snow, but judging by the ceremony last night, the burden it places on the women is much too great," Giebe Haldenzel replied. "I am frustrated at myself for having been completely unable to help."

"In the temple, blue priests without much mana perform the Dedication Ritual using feystones containing my mana. I doubt that this ritual strictly forbids the assistance of men, so it should work if you men similarly give laynoble women feystones with your mana," I suggested. Everyone turned their heads to look at me, having apparently never even considered giving their mana to someone else.

"To think such methods are used in the temple..." Giebe Haldenzel mumbled. "We shall put some thought into it."

It was then that Karstedt, who had been looking around, narrowed his eyes and pointed at something in the distance. "Giebe Haldenzel, what is that?" he asked.

I used enhancement magic to enhance my eyesight and then looked where Karstedt was pointing. I could see a tree glowing gold in the distance. "That is one strangely colored tree. Is it a feyplant, perhaps?" I wondered aloud.

"Indeed," Giebe Haldenzel replied. "That is a blenrus, a rare source of sweetness in Haldenzel. Under normal circumstances, it is forbidden to share blenrus with those who are not from Haldenzel, but I imagine the citizenry will not protest some being presented to Lady Rozemyne, she who brought true spring to Haldenzel. Would you like to bring some home with you? Blenrus fruit can also be used as an ingredient for rejuvenation potions. It is exceedingly rich with mana, making it both valuable and expensive."

It seemed that a Haldenzel specialty was sweet tea brewed with blenrus leaves. The prospect of trying some made me happy, and so I responded to his offer with an enthusiastic nod.

“I thank you ever so much, Giebe Haldenzel.”

“So long as we have the knights here, we should not encounter any danger while gathering.”

Things in Haldenzel had gotten extremely busy, but we couldn’t leave before the Plantin Company finished their work, which was due to take a few more days. In the meantime, Giebe Haldenzel took the visiting Knight’s Order on a journey across Haldenzel under the just cause of acquiring blenrus fruit for me, during which he apparently hunted feybeasts like crazy.

Eventually, when Karstedt returned, he muttered something about Giebe Haldenzel having cleverly exploited him using methods that were very similar to Elvira’s. As a result, Karstedt had ended up being used before he had even known what was happening.

Well, what else can you expect from Elvira’s older brother?

“And this is a blenrus fruit.”

We departed from Haldenzel a short while later, with Wilfried, Charlotte, and I each receiving two of the mysteriously glowing golden fruits as souvenirs.

Johann and Zack both seemed sad to go, but they said their goodbyes to the other smiths with handshakes and bright smiles. Those from the Plantin Company had similarly finished their paperwork faster than planned, which came as a relief to everyone.

On the way back to Ehrenfest, I blinked in surprise after seeing that the blessing the small chalices had given applied only to Haldenzel. When seen from above, the province border was quite distinct; there were still sizable patches of snow in the forests of the province immediately to the south.

“How unusual...” I said.

“I think you’re the most unusual of all, since you’re the one who makes all

these unusual things happen," Angelica commented. Upon hearing this remark, all the Gutenbergs in the back expressed their universal agreement.

Entwickeln

Philine, Lieseleta, and the others returned to the castle, but since there was no point in us bringing the Gutenbergs there too, they rode with Angelica and me back to the temple. I landed my Pandabus in front of the main gate, where carriages for the Plantin Company were already prepared, and then turned to face Benno.

“I will contact you again once we have decided where you will be going next.”

“Thanks to your assistance, things went quite smoothly this time,” Benno replied with a satisfied smile. The trip had proved considerably less stressful than the year before, when he and the others had spent days traveling and found work much more of a struggle, plus Zack and Johann were pleased with having gotten an opportunity to productively work with the smiths. “We shall await your next summons, Lady Rozemyne.”

“I’ll work on my explanation skills so I can do a better job teaching the smiths about the blueprints next time,” Johann said.

“Same here,” Zack added. “I’ll do my best to bridge the gap between Johann and the smiths.”

I saw the Gutenbergs off and then turned back to the temple, where I found my attendants waiting for me. Ferdinand was with them, rubbing his temples.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne,” Fran said.

“And so I have returned.”

“Indeed you have, Rozemyne...” Ferdinand replied with a glare. “You have something to report to me, do you not? I have already received ordonnanzes from Giebe Haldenzel, Elvira, and Karstedt. And yet, strangely enough, I received no such correspondence from you, the person most involved.”

I inhaled sharply. My understanding of the events at Haldenzel was simply that I had pointed out how the ceremony was done in the bible, and that the goddesses had worked hard for our sakes when we followed the correct

procedures, but it seemed that the others had interpreted the situation differently. As it turned out, those developments were something I should have sent a report about.

“I shall send for you once I am changed,” I said.

“Quite. Your chambers are better for discussing matters concerning the High Bishop’s bible,” Ferdinand replied. He then turned around and walked away.

I entrusted my luggage to Fran and Zahm before returning to my chambers with Monika and changing into my High Bishop robes. In the meantime, Angelica sent an ordonnanz to Damuel, requesting that he come perform guard duty in the temple.

After asking Nicola to prepare tea and sweets, I let out a heavy sigh. “I am not enthused to ask this, but please summon the High Priest.”

“Understood.”

Zahm went to call Ferdinand, while Fran prepared the ornate bible passed down through generations of High Bishops and the key required to open it. Once that was done, I turned to the relevant page.

“Now then, Rozemyne. State your case.”

“What exactly do you want to know?” I asked Ferdinand. “I simply pointed out that the song the men in Haldenzel were performing during Spring Prayer was, according to the bible, originally sung by Geduldh’s subordinate goddesses.” It was Giebe Haldenzel who had decided to have the women sing it, Karstedt who had pushed me onto the stage, and the goddesses who had brought spring to Haldenzel. As far as I was concerned, I hadn’t done anything myself.

“There exists such a page? This is my first time hearing that the High Bishop’s bible differs from the others.”

“Have you not read it already? I seem to recall you reading from it for me when I first visited the temple...”

“One cannot see the text of that bible without the High Bishop’s permission.

At the time, I read only the opening pages, as Bezewanst had instructed," Ferdinand replied. Of the few pages that he had initially read, it seemed that nothing had differed from his expectations.

As it turned out, the bible passed down through the High Bishops was a type of magical device. It wasn't decorated with gemstones, as I had initially thought; rather, it was protected by feystones. This protective magic was linked to the key that was also passed down from one High Bishop to the next.

"It's quite common for the content of religious scriptures to be changed over time, whether it be to simplify the transcribing process, replace archaic words with ones that can actually be understood, or censor problematic content under political pressure," I explained. "One must compare books thoroughly to notice these differences."

"In short, you compared the bibles thoroughly?"

"Indeed. It was clear to see that the old bible contains more pages than the new one, so I checked to see the differences." The bible used by the High Bishop was heavier and much thicker than the bibles in the temple book room, even when accounting for the lack of gemstones, and the sizes of the bibles both shrunk and grew over the years. "It was how I passed my time in my blue shrine maiden days, when acquiring new books was more difficult. For the record, I also investigated the prayers that someone—most likely Bezewanst—had scribbled in the margins of the High Bishop's bible."

"There are prayers scribbled in the margins?"

"He added them so that he could pray during ceremonies even when he forgot the words. I investigated the other bibles to see if they likewise contained those notes and discovered that the scribbles tended to be on pages the newer bibles lacked."

"Show me the results of your investigation. You doubtlessly made notes as you compared them, no?" Ferdinand asked. He had a perfect grasp on how I thought, and as annoying as it was, he was right—there were several things I noticed and wrote down.

"Will you not be investigating the bible yourself...?" I asked. "If you need my permission, I am more than happy to grant it."

“I will if the opportunity presents itself. Because of a certain someone, however, there is a veritable mountain of other things that I must research first,” he said, fixing me with a harsh look. I decided to play dumb; those who want to dwell on things instead of simply accomplishing their goals and moving on without a care in the world sure have it rough.

“This recent discovery might just save Ehrenfest,” Ferdinand continued. “There are many provinces that would benefit enormously from Spring Prayer hastening the arrival of spring.” Ehrenfest was a brutally cold duchy, and many of its provinces were forced to endure long winters buried under deep snow. Managing the arrival of spring would apparently be a huge help to both farmers and the nobles collecting their taxes.

“I see. Giebe Haldenzel certainly was overjoyed. He gave me blenrus fruits as thanks.”

“Blenrus fruits, you say? Those are rather rare,” Ferdinand said, his eyes widening. They were Earth materials from a feyplant that was rarely seen.

“Giebe Haldenzel said the same. I received two; would you like one?” I asked, pulling one of the golden fruits out of my luggage.

Ferdinand glanced between the blenrus and me, his suspicions clear on his face. “What are you planning?”

“I am told it can be used to improve rejuvenation potions, so I thought you could possibly use it when making another batch.”

“...Very well. I shall accept your gift. Sylvester and the others will need rejuvenation potions to store mana in the foundation’s magic for entwickeln.”

Although I hadn’t requested it outright, Ferdinand seemed to understand that I wanted him to add a little more “kindness” to his rejuvenation potions. It seemed that the entire archducal family was going to be surviving on them for a while as we offered up all of our mana.

“We shall go to the castle once the improvements to the potions have been made. Spend the time until then storing as much of your mana in these feystones as possible,” Ferdinand continued, handing me a pouch of empty feystones and some potions.

And so, as requested, I got to work filling up the feystones.

You know, this is actually harder than the Dedication Ritual and Spring Prayer. A lot harder!

Ferdinand spent several days in his workshop finishing the improvements, after which he informed me that we were going to the castle. We put the improved potions and my bag of feystones inside Lessy before setting off.

Norbert was already waiting for us when we arrived at the castle. He guided us to the archduke's office, where we were going to be discussing the entwickeln.

"You stored up more mana than I thought," Sylvester said after seeing all of the mana-filled feystones I had brought. "Using these, we should be able to do the entwickeln after just two more days of saving up."

It seemed that while we children had been traveling around the Central District for Spring Prayer, Sylvester and Florencia had been busy storing up their mana, downing as many of Ferdinand's ultra-nasty potions as was necessary.

"Please do remember to inform the lower city of the exact date and time the entwickeln is due to be performed," I said. "Once the soldiers and the Merchant's Guild are told, they can pass this information on to the commoners. It will no doubt take some time for the news to fully circulate, though."

"Makes sense. I'll settle on fifth bell, three days from now. Karstedt, inform the soldiers. Elvira, contact the Merchant's Guild."

"Understood."

From there, we went to the Mana Replenishment hall, where we were going to be pouring mana into the foundation's magic. It was a fantastical room that contained a massive floating feystone with an armillary sphere-like arrangement of glowing magic circles spinning around it. We had each brought a cup so that we could drink the rejuvenation potion; I could see Ferdinand preparing it in the corner as he set down a pitcher. The pouch of feystones was also ready so that Wilfried and Charlotte could use them to participate.

"Alright. Wilfried, Charlotte—you're up first," Sylvester said. "Ferdinand and

Rozemyne will go next, then me, Florencia, and Bonifatius."

Having multiple people gather together and expel their mana while offering the same prayer resulted in an increase in the flow of mana. This made the offering process more effective, but in cases where there was a significant mana disparity between those praying together, it also ran the risk of gravely endangering those with less mana. Splitting into teams wouldn't have been necessary if we had instead worked at a more comfortable pace, offering our mana only once per day, but we needed to pour in as much as possible and this was the most efficient way to go about that.

"I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world," Wilfried and Charlotte said together, kneeling atop a magic circle and praying with the feystones containing my mana in hand. They had similarly used feystones to replenish the foundation's mana for the Archduke Conference during the two years I was asleep, so they already had experience with the process.

I stood by the wall in silence; this was my first time watching someone else offer a prayer like this. Their mana wavered such that it looked as though colored steam were rising from their bodies. A light-green mist was coming from Wilfried, while a light-red mist was coming from Charlotte. I assumed those were the colors their feystones would have turned had they dyed them themselves. The thought reminded me that Lutz and my family had mentioned a yellowy mist coming off of me when my mana had gone on a rampage.

"There," Charlotte eventually said, at which point she and Wilfried let go of their feystones. She then stood up slowly and walked over to the wall, her breathing so labored that her shoulders were heaving. Wilfried seemed to look a little less drained, as though he could have kept going.

"Cups," Ferdinand said, readying the pitcher. Charlotte and Wilfried needed to drink the rejuvenation potion to recover their mana, but they recoiled at the thought nonetheless, having already endured its taste during Spring Prayer. Once they were holding out their cups, Ferdinand poured them each a dose of the potion.

Wearing an expression of pure resolve, Wilfried took a large gulp of the

potion... and then looked at the half-empty cup in surprise. “This is actually pretty sweet,” he said. “It doesn’t burn my throat at all.”

“I improved it using a blenrus fruit,” Ferdinand explained. “Extend your gratitude to Rozemyne, who gifted the valuable ingredient to me.”

“Good job, Rozemyne! I’ll give you my blenrus too, Uncle, so please make more of these potions for next time.” It sounded as though the new concoction was exceptionally pleasant to drink, and the beaming smile Wilfried wore as he downed the rest attested to that.

Charlotte brought her own cup to her lips before swallowing with widened eyes. “With potions like this, Mana Replenishment is not bad at all,” she said.

Sylvester’s and Florencia’s expressions softened as they watched their children rejoice over the improved potions. They had just finished chugging the ultra-nasty version, so the flavor being improved was good news for them as well.

“We are up, Rozemyne.”

“Right.”

I performed the Mana Replenishment with Ferdinand and then drank the improved potion. It was sweet with a somewhat medicinal taste, much like the children’s cough syrup I was used to from my Urano days, but compared to the revolting bitterness of the previous recipe, it was rather easy to chug down.

Holy cow, blenrus fruits are something else! Giebe Haldenzel, thank you so much!

As I was mulling over the new potion, Sylvester, Florencia, and Bonifatius started performing the Mana Replenishment themselves. Once they were done, it was time for Wilfried and Charlotte to start again, and we repeated this process one team after another. It was when we reached our third cycle that my head started to spin. I crumpled down, no longer able to stand, and started gripping my head.

“Given your stamina, I assumed that you would reach your limit around this point,” Ferdinand remarked as he held out a cup to me. “You should stop for today.”

I nodded and took a generous swig of the potion. Although I had enough mana to continue, my body simply couldn't keep up. Wilfried and Charlotte were much livelier, since they were just using feystones.

"Ferdinand, is Rozemyne okay?" Bonifatius asked.

"She will be fine once she finishes her potion and gets some rest," Ferdinand replied, although his assurance wasn't enough to ease the anxious eyes peering down at me. He glanced between the two of us before taking my now-empty cup and setting it aside. Then, out of nowhere, he picked me up in a princess carry and proffered me to my surprised grandfather.

"Bonifatius, please extend your arms like this. I will hand her to you."

"What?!" Bonifatius examined Ferdinand closely and then attempted to replicate how he was holding out his arms. "L-Like this...?"

Ferdinand then haphazardly dumped me onto them. Bonifatius's arms twitched. "Bonifatius, I shall entrust Rozemyne to you, as there are other things I must carry. You may leave the Mana Replenishment hall first, although do take care not to move your arms. She is going to be fine once Rihyarda has her."

"I-Indeed. Understood. I will take great care. Here we go, Rozemyne."

I nodded in response, sweating nervously as Bonifatius started toward the door with uneasy steps. *I-Is everything going to be okay, Grandfather...?* I couldn't help but wonder. It felt as though he was going to drop me.

Our retainers were waiting for us outside the hall, and they balked upon seeing me in Bonifatius's arms.

"Lord Bonifatius?!"

"Milady!"

Rihyarda shoved through the crowd and over to Bonifatius, who immediately held me out to her. Once she had pulled me from his arms, he gave the heroic smile of a job well done and said, "Rihyarda, Rozemyne is not well. She has already taken her potion, but Ferdinand said to have her relax in her room. I leave the rest to you."

"Grandfather... I thank you ever so much," I said with a kind smile. Contrary to

my fearful concerns, he hadn't dropped or thrown me anywhere.

"Hm? Indeed. Rest well," Bonifatius replied with a grin. He then cleared his throat and put on a stern face, returning to the Mana Replenishment hall while Rihyarda carried me straight to bed.

It was the day of the entwickeln. We had apparently stored up enough mana now, so Sylvester announced during lunch that the spell was going to be performed at fifth bell, as we had planned. My time spent resting had allowed me to recuperate and recover my mana, so I promptly made my way to the archduke's office. Since only archnobles with archduke blood were permitted to enter, Rihyarda accompanied me inside.

"It seems like the soldiers and the Merchant's Guild did their jobs. According to the knights we had watch over the lower city by highbeast, come fourth bell, every building had its windows shut and all street activity had vanished," Karstedt informed me.

We entered the replenishment hall with the same group as last time, sans Sylvester, who was instead going to where the actual foundation was to perform the entwickeln as the archduke. Rihyarda saw us off, remaining in the office. Our job as the archducal family was to resupply the foundational magic with mana once the entwickeln had almost drained it dry.

"Is everything ready?" Florencia asked.

As we waited kneeling atop the magic circles, a cute chime came from a bell that was hanging at Florencia's hip. It was a signal from Sylvester that he had finished preparing.

"I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world," Florencia began, prompting us to begin praying in turn. I could feel my mana steadily being sucked out, perhaps because the foundational magic was getting used up.

"That's enough!" Charlotte shrieked, prompting us all to immediately stop offering up our mana. Since we no longer had to stockpile as much mana as physically possible, our plan from this point onward was to slowly replenish the foundation's magic over time.

Once we were outside the Mana Replenishment hall, Sylvester came back to the office looking exhausted. “Thanks for all your help,” he said. “The entwickeln was a success. The question now is what the commoners will do.”

“Fear not—they’ll keep things clean and presentable,” I said. And since I had both mana and stamina to spare today, given that we were prioritizing speed over quantity... “Sylvester, I would like to see how the lower city has changed for myself.”

“Hm... The Knight’s Order are going to be heading to the gates to tell the commoners that the entwickeln is done. They should do a good enough job serving as your guards,” Sylvester said, giving me his approval while chugging another potion. “Karstedt, take Rozemyne with you to the gates; the vice-commander can guard the rest of us here.”

“Understood.”

And so, I went to the lower city with Damuel, Angelica, and about ten knights. Ferdinand was also accompanying us after saying in no uncertain terms that he couldn’t even comprehend what sort of trouble I might cause alone. All the windows and doors were still shut tight, and while the streets were completely devoid of people, they didn’t actually look any cleaner.

“It seems to me that nothing has changed...” I commented.

“Naturally. The modifications were almost entirely underground, meaning there is very little to see on the surface,” Ferdinand replied. “That said, if you look closely enough, you will notice the locations that were added for disposing of waste.”

I squinted with magically enhanced eyes and spotted manhole-like covers at the edges of the roads. They weren’t particularly hard to see, since they were the only parts that were so white and clean.

“That said, this defeats the purpose,” Ferdinand muttered. “It is as I thought—we should have changed it all.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Hold on a moment,” I interjected. The last thing I wanted was him deciding that all our mana offerings and efforts in the lower city had been for nothing. “We just need to clean the place, right? We can do that right

now.”

“What are you getting at...?”

“There’s nobody here, see? We can just... *Waschen*!” I took out my schtappe and engulfed a portion of the city in a ball of water. It promptly ended up cleansed, a sight which caused Ferdinand to blink in disbelief.

“Rozemyne... Do you truly intend to cleanse the entire lower city with waschen? How foolish can you be?”

“It might be hard work, but it’s a better option than uprooting the entire lower city with another entwickeln!” I protested. The soldiers and those from the Merchant’s Guild had all promised to keep the city clean, and I wanted everything to be ready for them to do just that.

“Wait.” Ferdinand interrupted me as I started pouring more mana into my schtappe. “Your method is far too wasteful.”

“Oh?”

“If you wish to spread your mana over such wide areas, it is more efficient to use magic circles. Karstedt, tell Aub Ehrenfest that we are going to be using wide area magic. Rozemyne, pour your mana into these. *Stylo*.”

Ferdinand gave me five feystones before taking out his schtappe and starting to draw a magic circle in the air. The chants for spells had been tweaked and shortened over the long course of history to minimize the time spent casting them, but it was apparently more advisable to use magic circles when one wished to use large-scale area magic. I continued pouring mana into the feystones as Ferdinand finished up the magic circle with his schtappe. The feystones weren’t particularly large, so it didn’t take me very long to dye them.

“Rozemyne, are the feystones ready?”

“Yes.”

I handed the feystones back to Ferdinand, who grouped them together with eight of his own and started tossing them into the magic circle one by one. Each of the thirteen feystones flew to a particular location around the circle as though it had been pulled there by a magnet and then began to shine.

“O Goddess of Water Flutrane, bringer of healing and change. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side. Please hear my prayer and lend me your divine strength. I offer to you our joy and songs of glee. I offer to you our prayers and gratitude, so that we may be blessed with your purifying protection. May your cleansing waves wash upon this land so that it might return to its intended form.”

The feystones shone brighter as Ferdinand prayed, and a green light started to streak around the magic circle. An instant later, the circle split apart, leaving thirteen separate circles in the sky above the lower city, each with their own feystone in the center. Water poured from them all at once, raining down on the lower city like a deluge, rushing down the alleys so fiercely that I thought the entire city was going to flood.



Despite my concerns, however, the water didn't even last ten seconds. It disappeared in an instant, and the lower city was gleaming once again. The ivory stone parts of the buildings were as white as the Noble's Quarter, and even the wooden stories the commoners had added on top were no longer covered in a layer of grime.

"Wow! Ferdinand, that was amazing!" I exclaimed.

"It was your mana that I used."

"But I never could have done something like this without you! Isn't that right, Father?" I asked, turning to Karstedt with giddy excitement over the now-sparkling lower city.

"I thought the two of you were exhausted of mana after that entwickeln," Karstedt replied with a wry smile. "Seems like I didn't have to worry after all."

"Ferdinand deserves all the credit for that. The blenrus fruit made his potions easier to drink, meaning they're now even more amazing than before. Eheheh."

"And yet your stamina is as lacking as ever," Ferdinand remarked. "You are too excited to notice it now, but you are going to feel the consequences if you do not rest soon."

Once we had informed the gate soldiers that the entwickeln was done, I returned to the castle in an excellent mood. The feeling was short-lived, however, as soon after I went back to my room and started to relax, I collapsed. It was just as Ferdinand had warned.

Left at Home

Even once my fever had gone down, I was made to remain in bed. It was apparently an instruction from Ferdinand, who had given Rihyarda a book that he hoped would force me to rest for an additional two days following my recovery. She had warned me that the book would be taken away the moment I disobeyed the order, but I had no intention of doing so anyway, so I quietly read the book in bed.

The book in question was on the fundamentals of magic circles. It quickly became apparent that I would need to go through the arduous process of adopting a new language, including all the symbols to refer to the elements and gods. On the whole, it felt more like a dictionary than anything, and judging by the handwriting, Ferdinand had written it himself.

It must be pretty impressive that Ferdinand can just casually draw magic circles in the air without carrying a book like this around, huh?

An awed sigh escaped me as I recalled the city-wide waschen from a few days before and the magic circle that had been drawn in the air without any hesitation. Mana alone wasn't always enough when trying to accomplish a goal; sometimes, one needed the appropriate knowledge too. I genuinely wanted to be like Ferdinand in that respect.

"Philine, would you like to study this with me?" I asked, aware that she hadn't started learning about magic circles either.

"This really is impressive..." she muttered after coming to my bedside. Together, the two of us spent my additional two days of rest poring over the book, enthusiastically working on the coded language contained within.

"Now, now, milady. Hurry up and get ready," Rihyarda said. "If we leave soon, we may be able to see the archducal couple off. But you still need to meet with Ferdinand first."

Today was the day the archducal couple was leaving for the Archduke Conference. Ferdinand apparently wanted to make sure it was fine for me to be walking around freely again before then, so I went to the parlor closest to the northern building where he was waiting for me. He touched my forehead and neck with a stern look before exhaling.

"You look well. Your temperature and mana have both stabilized, so you should be fine to leave. Oh, and the archducal couple just left for the Archduke Conference. They expressed concern for you."

In a shocking twist, the archducal couple had already departed. Rihyarda had been worried about us making it in time to see them go, but we were evidently too late.

"As per the advice from Wilfried, they have had the adults wash their hair with rinsham and the women wear hairpins," Ferdinand reported. "They have also brought a great supply of plant paper with them, as well as several court chefs so that pound cake and other new recipes can be served. These are, of course, all things that you demonstrated in the Royal Academy. Now, you may return to your room." He then abruptly stood up, signaling that this was the end of my checkup. To my surprise, however, he had made no mention of us returning to the temple.

"Do you not need to return to the temple...?" I asked. "I recall you saying before that you can't be away for too long."

"My temple work has largely settled down now. I have entrusted the rest to our attendants and to the blue priests, Kampfer and Frietack. I intend to spend the day here in my office; the Archduke Conference this year has far too many worrying uncertainties, so there may be an urgent summons from Sylvester," he said, punctuating his explanation with a glare. There were the new trends and the announcement of my engagement, but both of those were Sylvester's decisions; I couldn't see why I should receive all the blame for them.

I made a point of returning the harsh eyes currently fixed on me. "In my opinion, the most worrying uncertainty here is *you*, Ferdinand."

"I am worrying?" Ferdinand asked, his brow furrowed in confusion. "How so?"

"When you say that you are going to 'spend the day' here at the castle, I

assume you mean that quite literally. You intend to return to the temple during the night to continue your work, do you not? Just how hard do you intend to push yourself?”

I saw no reason to worry about Sylvester—he had several scholars to consult and Ferdinand to fall back on in an emergency. Instead, I was worried about Ferdinand, the one who was going to have to deal with whatever messes arose.

Ferdinand scoffed as if automatically dismissing my concern. “You need not be concerned about me. Use this opportunity to deepen your bonds with your retainers and siblings,” he said. I apparently needed to work hard on socializing so that I could learn more about noble culture, and also so that I could recognize my current misunderstandings and clarify them with my retainers.

“Ferdinand, how do nobles deepen their bonds?” I asked.

“That question is better suited for someone like Rihyarda, rather than a man,” he replied after a momentary pause.

“Very well. I shall ask Rihyarda.”

My duty while sitting out the Archduke Conference was apparently to spend each day replenishing the foundation’s mana and deepening my bonds with my retainers. I was also told to report my daily activities to Ferdinand during dinner, something I hadn’t needed to do back at the temple, but I nodded reluctantly nonetheless.

Upon returning to my room, I wasted no time in asking Rihyarda my question: “How does one deepen one’s bonds with others?”

“I believe you simply need to do things together and communicate often.”

“Would making Schwartz’s and Weiss’s outfits meet those criteria? I am planning to work on them with Charlotte and the others.”

“That sounds perfect. I will make the necessary preparations at once.”

After borrowing a room in the main building of the castle, we archduke candidates and our retainers all gathered together. The cloth and thread was already dyed with my mana, and I had already drawn the magic circles with the disappearing ink, as Ferdinand had instructed. He had advised me to avoid

touching the cloth at all costs, since doing so would make the circles shine and become visible, and so my retainers were going to be handling it for me.

"The scholars most used to drawing magic circles will need to reproduce these circles on the cloth," I explained. "The women will then embroider them."

The scholars, who were being led by Hartmut, steadily began drawing the thin lines of the magic circles atop the cloth. Once they were done, it was the girls' time to shine. Even the female knights had opted to participate, entrusting guard duty to the male knights like Damuel and Cornelius.

"First-years such as yourselves are not yet experienced enough for these magic circles, so please handle this simpler section instead," Brunhilde said.

Charlotte, Philine, and I were entrusted with the decoy magic circles being embroidered on the apron pockets so that we could make mistakes without causing any issues. Meanwhile, the complex magic circles that required absolute perfection were being handled by those who were good at that kind of precise work. We really did have the right people doing the right jobs.

"It seems that, at the advice of Count Haldenzel, Count Leisegang has at least temporarily given up on making you the next aub," Brunhilde informed me. "Unless there is a significant change in the political situation, they will merely be observing for now. What happened in Haldenzel to cause this?"

I turned to Charlotte, hoping she could provide the answer I was completely oblivious to. Our eyes met, a moment of contemplation passed, and then she said, "I believe the most significant factor was my sister prioritizing Wilfried in public and demonstrating her support for him. Giebe Haldenzel must have been a bit reassured to see that they are on good terms."

Since when did that happen...?

Upon noticing my blank expression, Charlotte gave a troubled smile and expanded on her explanation. "The giebe attempted to guide you to your seat first during Spring Prayer," she said. "You refused his offer, instead allowing Wilfried to be seated first."

Giebe Haldenzel had attempted to treat me as the highest-ranking archduke candidate—that is to say, as the next aub. By refusing and then instructing him

to prioritize Wilfried, I had made it clear that I possessed no desire to take the archduke seat, even with my strong backing.

Ohoho. I see, I see. That was what all that meant.

I nodded, finally understanding the situation, which inspired Charlotte to give me a conflicted look. “It would seem that you require my support in social situations. I suppose this too is my duty,” she said.

The two sisters, Lieseleta and Angelica, were working harder on the embroidery than anyone else, and they were both wearing expressions of unshakable concentration. Lieseleta loved shumils and found making clothes for Schwartz and Weiss endlessly enjoyable, while Angelica wanted to embroider these circles onto her own cape once she was finished with her part of the work. Although they had different motivations, their embroidery skills truly were something to behold.

“Lieseleta, Angelica,” I commented, “I see you are both skilled at embroidery.”

“Oh my. Thank you. But you are certainly not lacking in skill yourself, Lady Rozemyne. You do not seem to enjoy the practice all that much, but the embroidery you complete is all magnificent,” Lieseleta said with a giggle, never pausing her embroidering for a moment. There weren’t many noblewomen who couldn’t embroider, since they were all made to practice it regularly as part of their bridal training. For that reason, it was only natural that a woman who planned to be the first wife of an archduke needed to be at least decently skilled.

“Leonore, will you be embroidering that entire magic circle?”

“Indeed. This is a rare opportunity, plus I would also like to memorize the pattern. It is not often that one is afforded the chance to see such a highly sophisticated magic circle up close,” she replied as she continued to embroider.

Brunhilde laughed, making no attempt to hide the sparkle in her amber eyes. “My, my... Just who do you intend to gift this magic circle to?” she asked. “Or have you already promised to embroider their cape for them?”

In an instant, everyone except Angelica turned their attention to Leonore.

Their expressions of eager anticipation reminded me so much of some of the girls I had known back on Earth. It seemed that girls loved to talk about romance no matter where you went.

"That is, well..." Leonore lowered her eyes and gave a troubled smile. "If possible, I would like to be in a position to embroider their cape, but I have not yet exchanged any promises. It seems they already have another on their mind, so..."

Leonore was beautiful, smart, and a high-status archnoble; I was pretty confident that she could earn anyone's affections if she tried hard enough. But as the incident between Damuel and Brigitte had demonstrated, in this world, love alone wasn't enough to make for successful romance. I couldn't say anything irresponsible when I still didn't fully understand noble marriages, so I decided not to say anything that might encourage her romance and instead focused on getting my questions answered.

"Is embroidering someone's cape a special gesture?" I asked.

"Yes. The only ones who can embroider your cape are you, your parents, and your spouse. If a family does not have a living mother then it is possible for sisters of the same blood to embroider each other's capes, but that is more rare than not."

As a noblewoman, it was apparently customary to confess your feelings by embroidering something like a handkerchief and giving it to your love interest. It was like giving them proof of your magic circle embroidery skills while simultaneously requesting to embroider their cape—a show of affection that was the exclusive right of a wife.

It was then that I recalled a scene from the Royal Academy romance stories Elvira's gang had written, during which a guy had said something like, *"I want you to embroider my cape."* I also remembered thinking that he was being a real pain in the neck for making such a sudden request, but now I realized it was meant to be read as a seductive line akin to a proposal.

I see... My heart was supposed to be aflutter there. Romance novels sure are hard to follow.

"You are already engaged, Lady Rozemyne. You will need to hone your skills

for Lord Wilfried. Who knows when he might ask you to embroider a magic circle onto his cape for him?"

"Lady Rozemyne would no doubt embroider an incredible circle for him. I cannot wait to see what she produces."

Nah, nah, nah. You really shouldn't expect that much from me.

"You also seem to be embroidering with particular enthusiasm, Judithe. Do you have a certain someone in your heart too?"

"Oh, no. I just want to copy Angelica and embroider my own cape. I'm a mednoble with less mana than everyone else, so my focus is on raising my base strength. I also want to grow a manablade like Angelica," Judithe declared, nodding with such firm resolve that her ponytail bounced around. She was even copying Angelica's hairstyle—or at least, her previous hairstyle, considering that Angelica had started wearing her hair up in a braided bun since coming of age.

"I cannot recommend using my sister as inspiration. You should instead find your own talents and focus on developing those," Lieseleta said. Angelica herself nodded along in agreement. Her talents had resulted from her focusing entirely on her strengths, leaving her weaknesses in the dust as she completely refused to engage with them.

"Judithe, why *do* you admire Angelica so much?" I asked.

"She uses a manablade that was grown using mana from Lady Rozemyne, she was selected for the Royal Academy's sword dance, she's been taken on as Lord Bonifatius's disciple, and she's engaged to Lord Eckhart. It would be weird *not* to admire her!" Judithe exclaimed. I could hear a trace of desperation in her voice, so I stopped my embroidering to look at her.

"You are extolling Angelica's virtues with a great deal of passion, but it seems to me that you are more anxious than anything. For what reason are you in such a panic?" I asked. My observation caused the smile on her face to freeze, and she soon looked down at her hands.

"That's... Well... Of course I'm anxious; I'm a medknight among a group of archknights. To make matters worse, Angelica has as much mana as an archknight, and now even Damuel, a layknight, has more mana than me. I was

also the only one left behind at the Royal Academy, so I didn't get to serve as your guard much..."

Although Judithe and Angelica were both medknights, there was a huge gap between their mana capacities. Furthermore, as a big sister herself with many younger siblings, Judithe needed to do a good job and earn recognition for her achievements. The problem was, she had less mana than any of my other guard knights. I figured that she would overtake Damuel as she grew older, but that apparently wasn't enough for her.

"Even though he's a layknight, Damuel has had your trust since you were in the temple. You even taught him your mana compression method before anyone else, didn't you? He has as much mana as a medknight, plus you and Angelica both trust him more than anyone."

"Damuel really is a big help when I want to focus on my guard duty," Angelica said with a smile. I immediately understood that as her being happy that he handled all the thinking work, but Judithe failed to pick up on this hidden message; her violet eyes shone with newfound determination, and she stood up with clenched fists.

"Since Angelica trusts him so much, he's going to be my first opponent to overcome. Damuel, I *will* defeat you!"

It thereby came to be known that Judithe's goal as a medknight was to become like Angelica. She had also evidently taken Damuel as her rival, which was more heartwarming than anything. She reminded me of a small puppy barking at a larger dog that had absolutely no interest in fighting. I almost wanted to wish her luck, albeit in the smuggest voice imaginable.

"M-Me too! I won't lose either!" Philine suddenly declared, standing up as well. "I might only be a laynoble, but Damuel has proved that we can grow to have just as much mana as mednobles! I'll work hard too. I'll earn as much trust as Damuel and make myself worthy of serving as Lady Rozemyne's retainer."

No sooner had Judithe and Philine announced their goals than the other girls giggled and made quiet exclamations—reactions that made the two girls realize everyone was now looking at them. They blushed, sat back down, and sheepishly resumed their embroidering.

“All of my retainers are such hard, dedicated workers,” I mused aloud. “If you keep up the enthusiasm, I am sure that you will both eventually attain perfection. I must say though, Judithe—you will not grow stronger by copying Angelica. A manablade will most likely be a waste of mana for you.”

“Wha?”

“You are not a sword specialist, are you? Your talents seem to be with the bow and other ranged weaponry. For that reason, rather than mimicking Angelica and focusing on swordplay, I sincerely believe you would grow stronger by working on your ranged abilities and trying to perfect your accuracy.”

My statement earned me surprised stares not only from Judithe, but from the other knights as well. All apprentice knights apparently carried swords, and there was a strong implicit belief that knights could only be sword users, but I saw no value in Judithe focusing on swordplay when she wasn’t particularly good at it. There was no denying that she was much better with ranged weapons; it was almost entirely thanks to her skill that we had managed to make the feybeast eat the ruelle during our game of ditter.

“If you hone your ranged abilities then you will eventually be able to launch stones even without mana,” I continued. “You could use this technique to strike your opponents as they are preparing their own mana, thereby breaking their focus. Another approach you could use is to fill your projectiles with sand, such that they will explode on impact. Not only would this frighten your opponent, but it might even temporarily blind them. A sword is not your only tool in battle. You have talent, so why not use it?”

“Sister...” Charlotte said, her cheek twitching ever so slightly. “That is not how knights are meant to fight, is it?”

“Charlotte, that mindset is unsuitable for a guard knight,” I shot back with a serious look. This statement likewise confused Charlotte and the gathered guard knights, so I once again explained my point. “A guard knight must not have pride in combat; their duty is to protect their charge without fail, and while duels or training may be clean and simple, the same cannot be said for actual combat. You will want as many secret techniques and options as possible

to secure the success of your mission, no matter what.”

Regardless of whether one was taking on feybeasts or other people, the primary objective was protecting one’s charge. The prideful type of combat that knights valued so highly served no purpose when there was no telling what tricks an opponent had up their sleeve.

“Ferdinand uses whatever tools he has on hand depending on the situation,” I went on. “During a battle against a trombe, he used a bow that duplicated its arrows, and when fighting numerous weak feybeasts, he used a net. Of course, he also uses a sword at times, but I have seen him wield a large scythe as well. He once mentioned that he could throw a feystone and have it explode while simultaneously fighting with a weapon. I imagine there are few others who can do all these things at once, but at the very least, one does not need to consider a sword their primary weapon. Other alternatives can be used instead.”

Judithe blinked at me in surprise before eventually conceding with a quiet, “I’ll think about it.”

During dinner that day, I reported to Ferdinand that we had embroidered Schwartz’s and Weiss’s clothes and that all of my retainers were exceedingly hard workers. Charlotte then proceeded to announce her resolve to support my socializing as much as possible when she started attending the Royal Academy in the coming winter.

Embroidery wasn’t the only thing I was doing with my retainers—I also had my harspiel practice, plus I was going to the knights’ training grounds for my physical rehabilitation. Angelica was able to watch the apprentices train while guarding the door for me, since she and the other adults trained at a different time.

During one of my rehabilitation sessions, I removed my magic tools and slowly started working my arms and legs. They still weren’t quite moving like I wanted them to, so I was immediately struck by the urge to use enhancement magic.

“Lady Rozemyne. Please don’t attempt to secretly use enhancement magic,” Damuel said. He always watched over me during my rehabilitation sessions, since he was able to feel even slight shifts in mana. “It may be subtle, but your

mana is definitely flowing.”

“Rozemyne can already unconsciously enhance her body?” Bonifatius asked, turning toward me in surprise. I immediately looked away from him. It wasn’t unconscious; I was doing it on purpose to cheat.

“How are the students, Grandfather? Are they showing more coordination now?” I asked, trying to change the subject.

“No, not in the least. They focus only on offense, not defense. As they are, they’re certainly not fit to be guard knights. I suppose the one thing I *can* praise is... their motivation, I reckon,” Bonifatius answered, looking down at the training apprentices.

Some might have found it unusual that Bonifatius was watching my rehabilitation session rather than training the apprentices himself, but there was a good reason for it—after just a single session, it had been concluded that his methods were simply too much for the layknight apprentices. He had consequently been removed from direct duty for all groups except the apprentice guard knights and was instead spending his time putting together training schedules, observing the ongoing drills from afar, and searching for those who could withstand learning under him directly.

“Guard knights have to fight while keeping their charge in mind,” Bonifatius continued. “We can’t let more knights end up like Traugott, who doesn’t understand that his natural position is *beneath* the one he’s meant to protect. Since you and Wilfried are in the same year, the knights need to know how to guard someone properly, even if they aren’t guard knights themselves yet. Otherwise, they’re going to be useless when it counts.”

Because the Royal Academy was founded around the concept of there being no interference from adults, guard duty was up to the apprentice knights. It seemed that Bonifatius was a bit apprehensive about entrusting that responsibility to these apprentices whose exclusive experience playing speed ditter meant they only understood offense.

“Try moving close enough to the training grounds that you can see the apprentices without using enhancements,” Bonifatius instructed me. I attempted just that until, soon enough, I could see the apprentice knights flying

around on their highbeasts with weapons in hand. “Do you need more guard knights, Rozemyne? Erm, I heard from Karstedt that you require an adult female knight to accompany you to the temple.”

“Angelica has come of age since then, so that is no longer a concern,” I replied. “Rather, I am more concerned about needing another apprentice guard knight once Cornelius graduates. Given that Traugott resigned, I am going to have too few guards in the Royal Academy.”

It was a struggle securing guards for the temple because I needed people who were able to get along with my gray priest attendants. Thankfully enough, Angelica and Damuel more than sufficed at the moment. My real concern was getting more guards in the Royal Academy.

“Unfortunately, it seems that serving as my guard is no easy task.”

“Because you’re sickly and might collapse at any moment?”

“Because Damuel is both my most trusted guard knight and the one I have the longest history with. Any guard knight who wishes to enter my service absolutely needs to be able to work well with him.”

Bonifatius narrowed his eyes in thought. “Have you ever thought of relieving Damuel of duty, Rozemyne? Karstedt and Ferdinand keep rejecting the idea, but it seems best to me. Never before has a laynoble been assigned to guard the archducal family. It seems to me like it would be best to replace him with a medknight or an archknight.”

“I am the High Bishop and the orphanage director. If there exists an archknight who would not mind entering the temple and the orphanage or helping my temple attendants with their work then I will gladly accept them into my service, but that does not seem entirely realistic. Most archnobles grimace whenever the temple is so much as discussed, and since the temple is where I was raised, I do not think highly of such reactions. I find it much easier to use laynobles and mednobles, who swallow such feelings for the sake of raising their status.”

Bonifatius let out a long sigh. “This isn’t gonna be easy...” he muttered. Although he saw me as his adorable granddaughter regardless of where I was raised, even he felt some revulsion to the temple.

“Scholars will soon be visiting the temple to discuss the printing industry, so I intend to negotiate with Sylvester to allow even my apprentice guard knights into the temple,” I explained. “I have no intention of taking on a guard knight who refuses to enter the temple and looks down on Damuel.”

Neither Judithe nor Leonore had displayed any particular aversions to the temple, perhaps because Damuel, Angelica, and Cornelius were all okay with going there, and that was exactly what I wanted from my guard knights. The last thing I needed was someone ruining that atmosphere.

“Furthermore,” I continued, “there is one more condition that must be met before someone can become my guard knight.”

“There’s more?”

“Yes. They must be able to help Ferdinand with his work in the temple. Even Eckhart assists him in this regard. Angelica instead spends this time guarding the door with her life, but she is an exception; I do not need two or three guards doing the same. That is why my guard knights need to be able to do at least the bare minimum of scholarly work.”

Bonifatius let out a laugh and looked over at Damuel. “You don’t want to let him go because he’s a good scholar, then?”

“Indeed,” I replied with a nod. “He is very good. He does Angelica’s share of the work as well.”

“Not because I want to.”

Upon hearing Damuel clarify the situation, Bonifatius laughed even harder. “I see now why you treasure him so much,” he said to me.

“Lady Rozemyne. Judithe is requesting permission to enter,” Angelica interjected, interrupting Bonifatius’s chuckling. I swiftly replied that she had my permission, and the atmosphere suddenly became tense as the question of what might have happened ran through our minds.

“I don’t have any more rejuvenation potions!” Judithe cried as she burst into the room, tears welling up in her eyes. “Please grant me permission to gather ingredients, Lady Rozemyne! At this rate, I won’t be able to participate in training even though I’m a guard knight!”

It seemed that the training for apprentices had intensified quite severely with Bonifatius putting together the new schedule. Judithe was having to use potion after potion to keep up, and now she had run out of the stock she had made while attending the Royal Academy. She had thought about buying more from the other knights, but everyone wanted to keep theirs for themselves. As a result, the demand for rejuvenation potions within the Knight's Order was skyrocketing.

"The only way for me to get more is to make them myself. Please grant me leave from training and my duties to gather ingredients!"

"I do not mind granting that permission, of course, but where will you be gathering?" I asked. "Apprentices cannot leave the Noble's Quarter."

She replied that she intended to go to the castle's forest, which was apparently where those who were raised in and never strayed from the Noble's Quarter, like Damuel, and those who were living in the knight dorms, like Judithe, did their basic gathering. It perhaps went without saying that commoners were forbidden from going there.

Gathering, huh? That sounds nice...

A strong wave of nostalgia washed over me as I recalled my days going to the forest with Lutz and Tuuli. I wanted to go gathering too.

I wonder... Can I think of a good excuse to use here?

After a moment of serious thought, I clapped my hands together and looked up at Bonifatius. "Grandfather, what say we give the apprentices some guard duty practice?"

"Hrm?"

"I will attend the gathering too, meaning the apprentices will need to protect me while collecting their ingredients. If you accompany us as a supervisor then there is nothing to fear, no? Will you accompany me to the forest, Grandfather?"

"Hmm... Good idea. They definitely need to experience fighting while protecting someone," Bonifatius replied, accepting my suggestion with a grin. He then began stroking his chin and got right to work discussing whom and

what we were going to bring.

“I believe it would be wise to report this to Ferdinand,” I said. “I have been repeatedly told not to make these kinds of decisions on my own.”

The message I sent was a simple one: *“We will be gathering in the forest to help train the apprentice knights. Grandfather will oversee us and intervene if necessary. There is nothing to fear.”* My response came in record time.

“You fool,” the ordonnanz said. “That is obviously not an option. Bonifatius is far more dangerous than any feybeast in the forest. He could toss you aside in an attempt to help and you would die. How many times has he almost killed you already? Do not trouble me with these unnecessary matters when the Archduke Conference is yet ongoing. Is that understood?”

The ordonnanz repeated the response twice more, making its message painfully clear. I exchanged a look with Bonifatius and then sighed. “Oh well... It seems we cannot go to the forest after all.”

“Nghhhhhh...”

I had already given up on the idea, but Bonifatius now looked more determined than ever. He ruminated on the situation for a moment, grinding his teeth in frustration all the while, then said he was going to “persuade” Ferdinand and almost literally flew out of the room; he must have been using physical enhancements, considering how ridiculously fast he moved.

“Rest in peace, Ferdinand...” I muttered, feeling a bit dazed.

Angelica let out a small chuckle as she closed the door Bonifatius had thrown open. “Master was delighted that you asked for his help, Lady Rozemyne. He was talking about how he doesn’t get to spend much time with you.”

Not everyone was taking the situation quite so leisurely, however. “Lady Rozemyne, what will happen to my gathering now?” Judithe sobbed, having been unable to hold back her tears since the gathering request was rejected.

“There is no need to worry,” I assured her. “I will ask whether the apprentice guard knights can go on their own. If not, I will give you some of the rejuvenation potions I made myself.” I had plenty that Ferdinand had evaluated as being good enough for apprentices, and it wasn’t like I was going to use

them.

“You’ve made rejuvenation potions?” Judithe asked, blinking in surprise. “But you haven’t learned how to yet, have you?”

“I learned from Ferdinand. It seems that knowing how to make your own is a necessary skill.”

“H-He certainly is strict...”

“I’ve been entirely reliant on his ingredients and potion-making skills. That’s why I wanted to learn to brew my own potions.”

As Judithe and I continued our conversation, another ordonnanz flew into the room. “Do not forget to bring rejuvenation potions,” it said, relaying an exceedingly displeased-sounding message from Ferdinand. “Furthermore, do not leave Cornelius’s side for an instant. Order him to protect you from Lord Bonifatius. Understood?”

Just as the ordonnanz turned back into a yellow feystone, Bonifatius burst into the room. “I got permission from Ferdinand!” he declared. “We go tomorrow!”

It was easy to assume that Bonifatius had taken this permission by force. He picked me up in an excited hug and started to spin me around, and it was then that I recalled Ferdinand’s initial warning—that Bonifatius posed more of a threat to me than anything we might come across in the forest. I could already feel myself growing exceptionally worried... and as the spinning continued, exceptionally dizzy.

And so tomorrow came.

I wanted to put on the same cool outfit I had worn when gathering for the jureve, but Rihyarda and Brunhilde immediately shot down the idea. They maintained that it wasn’t appropriate for the archduke’s adopted daughter, and since I had no chance of persuading them both, I was changed into highbeast riding clothes right after breakfast. These included a leather belt, which had pouches for the gathered materials and slots for rejuvenation potions.

“I am ready too, Lady Rozemyne.”

Philine came over once she had changed, now wearing her riding outfit and a leather belt similar to my own. She and Hartmut were going to be accompanying us despite only being apprentice scholars, since they needed ingredients for the magic tools required for Royal Academy classes. They would otherwise have bought such ingredients from apprentice knights, since venturing to places with feybeasts by themselves was much too dangerous.

"This is my first time going to the castle's forest *and* my first time gathering. I can't wait," Philine said with a smile. I could tell from her eyes that she was hoping I would share in her excitement, but this was far from my first time; I had gone gathering for my jureve ingredients many times before.

I've been to the castle's forest too. Well, when I was kidnapped and stuffed in a bag on a horse, at least...

I shook off that unpleasant thought, not wanting to remember it, and then exited the room. Wilfried was already waiting downstairs.

"I see you are ready as well, dear brother."

"Yep. This is going to be my first time gathering. I'm pretty excited," Wilfried replied. After hearing about our outing through his guard knights, he had asked to join us over dinner, wanting to harvest ingredients for his next year at the Royal Academy. Ferdinand was against the idea, maintaining that this addition would prove too much to handle, but Bonifatius had retorted that he could protect us both. And so, here we were.

There were a lot of people coming with us on this gathering trip. The Knight's Order had even dispatched a few knights to serve as our guards.

"Off we go, then!" Bonifatius declared, clearly in an excellent mood.

As our party began trudging forward, I climbed into my Pandabus and drove beside Bonifatius. Such was my position in our formation, as determined by the knights.

"I have no good memories in the castle's forest..." I said. "But you're going to keep me safe, aren't you, Grandfather?"

"Rest assured, any feybeasts that appear are going to be small fry like zantzes and eifintes. I won't even need to step in."

I was already familiar with zantzes and eifintes; the former species was catlike and grew tall enough to reach the knees of most adults, while the latter was more comparable to a squirrel and about as large as a normal cat. Damuel could beat them on his own, so with this many knights present, we were totally safe.

"You there! Apprentice! Don't break formation! You're on duty right now!" Bonifatius suddenly barked. It seemed that a young apprentice had attempted to run off upon spotting some leaves that served as a rejuvenation potion ingredient. In contrast, the apprentice knights who had received direct training from Bonifatius and the Knight's Order hadn't budged an inch, so as to preserve the formation. "What kind of guard disappears to gather materials?! First, search your surroundings for danger and ensure your charge is secure. Then and *only* then can you even *consider* gathering! Do I really have to go over something this basic?"

Bonifatius put his head in his hands, incredulous, at which point Cornelius chimed in. "You just need to put into practice what you've learned in your classes. Now, all of you, recite the rules of a guard!"

The apprentices began repeating the rules on instinct. It was something that Wilfried and I had seen many times before in the Ehrenfest Dormitory.

"You clearly know the rules; start putting them into practice," Cornelius said. His gaze then moved from the apprentices. "Over there. An eifinte."

Some apprentices moved to strike the lone feybeast, thinking this was finally their time to shine, only to get yelled at again. Their job was to guard their charges, not secure glory for themselves. Many understood the theory, but they were much too used to launching all-out attacks on feybeasts the second they saw them. They needed to learn to change that mindset, which was precisely why they were accompanying us today.

The apprentice knights hunted the small feybeasts that popped up, occasionally having to endure a harsh rebuke from Bonifatius, while we leisurely enjoyed our gathering. The particular ingredients they needed depended on what year they were in in the Royal Academy, and since some brews required more mana than others, there was a disparity between which ingredients the laynobles, mednobles, and archnobles were searching for.

Second-years and above had already taken brewing classes in the Royal Academy, so they knew and were easily able to gather what they needed. Wilfried, Philine, and I had only ever seen illustrations, however, so we didn't quite know what we were looking for.

"Behankraut is necessary for making rejuvenation potions," Damuel noted, offering some helpful advice.

"Yes, and you will want some of these as well. Schallaub is strong with Wind, so it is commonly used to make ordonnanzes," Hartmut added.

After receiving my impromptu lesson, I climbed out of my Pandabus, used messer to turn my schtappe into a knife, and started gathering.

"Rozemyne, look at this!" Wilfried exclaimed, proudly showing me his schtappe. He had added a crest that was popular among first-year archduke candidates and archnobles, but that wasn't all—he had also shaped the handle to resemble a lion, with the shaft of the wand protruding from its gaping maw. "Cool, huh?"

"It's certainly impressive..."

"Heh. Right?"

The crest was cool and all, but visualizing and producing a schtappe like that must have taken quite some time. I was more impressed that he had gone through all that trouble for the sake of aesthetics, especially considering that I had personally given up on the idea almost immediately.

For someone who described the Royal Academy as having been nothing but suffering while I was gone, he sure seems to have had a lot of spare time on his hands.

As glamorous as his schtappe was, it became a regular knife when he chanted "*messer*" a moment later. It was presumably too much of a struggle for him to maintain that cool form forever.

"Is this what we're looking for?" Philine asked, pointing at one particular plant.

Damuel shook his head. "It looks similar, but no. You'll have an easier time if

you focus on the roots. Here, see how this part's red?"

After listening to his explanation, I cut off one such plant with my messer schtappe and stuck it in one of my pouches.

"You'll want rungorbs as well," Bonifatius said to me, pointing up into a nearby tree. I followed his finger to several white fruits.

"Could you get them for me, Grandfather?" I asked. "I cannot reach that high."

"What are you saying? We can just do this," Bonifatius said, sticking his hands under my arms before hoisting me into the air. I was now close enough to reach the fruit, so I used my knife to cut it from the tree.

"I would also like some," Wilfried said. "What should I do, Lord Bonifatius?"

"Hmph! Here! Take what you need!" Bonifatius put me down and then picked up Wilfried, completely unfazed even now that he was carrying someone heavier. There was no doubting he was insanely strong.

Oh yeah... He was also swinging around Cornelius, who's way older than us.

"We were fortunate enough to have you here this time, Grandfather, but how does one normally gather fruit high up in trees? Are highbeasts not unwieldy in forests?" I asked. I personally could have flown up there in Lessy, but the winged highbeasts everyone else had were much harder to use in a place with so many trees.

"A tree this short can easily be climbed with enhancements. You just need to do this." Cornelius stabbed his knife deep into the trunk of the tree before using it as a foothold to boost himself up. He managed to grab and then effortlessly climb onto a branch. "Does anyone else want rungorb?"

"Me!"

"I do."

Several of the knights spoke up in response; rungorb was an ingredient commonly used to make marginally higher-quality potions for archknights. Cornelius harvested and tossed down quite a few before eventually returning to the forest floor.

“Here, Leonore. Take these,” Cornelius said. “Looks like you didn’t get too many.”

“I thank you ever so much,” Leonore happily replied.

Angelica was next to climb the tree, leaping up among its branches to take Cornelius’s place. She moved so weightlessly that I could tell she was using enhancement magic, and after spending a brief moment gathering some rungorbs, she jumped back down. It was clear that she was trying to minimize the time she spent away from me.

“There is a zantze on that tree,” Leonore said, indicating a feybeast that was noticeably wary of the approaching vanguard. “It is far enough away that ignoring it is an option, but we do not want to risk it attacking our rear. Exterminating it now would certainly be safer; what shall we do?”

“Judithe, instead of using your sword this time, turn your schtappe into a slingshot and aim for the zantze,” I said, pointing at the zantze. She nodded in response, turned her schtappe into a slingshot rather than the usual longsword of a knight, and then expertly fired a stone I had picked up and given to her.

A moment later, the zantze dropped from the tree.

Lamprecht must have heard the sound of the zantze being struck because he readied his weapon in an instant, bolted in the direction of the feybeast, and then cut it down before it could even reach the ground. All that remained was a tiny feystone.

“I imagine you will be able to extend your range once you learn enhancement magic, and since you can launch projectiles with mana, increasing how much mana you have will allow you to fire even more. You’ll do better focusing on this rather than your sword, I am certain.”

“Agreed. You’re already skilled enough to strike a feybeast that far away. If you practice hard enough then your accuracy will be something to behold,” Bonifatius said with an impressed nod as he looked down upon Judithe. “Your strength is going to be your ability to attack your foes while still remaining close to your charge. You would do well to focus on it.”

“Yes, sir!” Judithe replied enthusiastically.

“It depends on the weather and the specific battle situation, but Ferdinand mentioned in his notes that bags filled with sleeping or stun powder can prove very effective,” I suggested.

“No matter how effective of a method it might be, I can’t make powders like that...” Judithe replied, dispirited. It was because of my strategizing that we had won our game of ditter, so rather than bemoaning such a technique as cowardly or not very knight-like, she just regretted that she couldn’t utilize them herself.

“I suppose a skilled scholar is needed to make effective powders and magic tools...” I mused aloud, prompting Hartmut to step closer.

“Did you call for me, Lady Rozemyne?”

Oh, right. Hartmut is a skilled scholar.

“I was discussing ranged implements with Judithe,” I explained. “Specifically, about how sleeping powder and such are effective in ditter, according to Ferdinand.”

“I shall think about it. According to Lord Justus, during the days of treasure-stealing ditter, scholars would prove their worth by creating magic tools that guided their duchy to victory. The ones made back then had enormous areas of effect, but because they would pose a threat to the audience in an arena, they were banned for games of speed ditter. In actual fights, however... they would indeed be of use.”

“Indeed,” I said, looking up at him with nothing but respect and admiration. “Actual fights are what matter most. Please think up as many long-range magic tools for Judithe to use as you can; I will purchase them all.”

“Understood.”

Judithe broke into an overjoyed smile, having found her path toward the future. “I’m going to work hard compressing my mana so that I can learn enhancements and truly make my ranged skills my own, Lady Rozemyne.”

“You will need to prepare many things to throw and carefully consider which projectiles will prove most effective against which opponents. An eye for reading the situation and the enemy formation is going to be crucial, so study

these things closely.”

“Okay!”

There we go! Now she’s focused on more than just training her body to be like Angelica!

“Stop!” Bonifatius cried out while Judithe and I exchanged a smile. “I smell a grun!” My first instinct was to say that I couldn’t smell anything unusual, but before I could even get the words out, he started sniffing and pointed to a nearby tree. A grun had apparently marked its territory there.

Is it just me, or does Grandfather seem like a wild animal all of a sudden?

The gruns often encountered in this season were very much on edge, since they were hungry from having spent so long in their nest raising babies, and would commonly have their mate nearby with them. In other words, they were exceedingly troublesome to deal with.

“That’s enough gathering. We’re heading back immediately and forming a hunting squad. Rozemyne, can the scholars ride in your highbeast? They’ll be easier to guard when they’re together,” Bonifatius said. He had evidently made the right call, because just as we started to move, Angelica let out a cry.

“Master, it’s here!”

From among the trees appeared feybeasts with gaping mouths and malicious-looking eyes. Their bony torsos were striped with black and dark-green fur, although they weren’t particularly large. They seemed to be about as big as Saint Bernards.

“Those are gruns...?” I asked.

“That’s right.”

“They don’t look *anything* like my Lessy! They’re not cute in the slightest!”

The two gruns opened their gaping mouths wider, and in an instant, I was hit with a wave of what smelled like especially thick miso soup.

You know... this actually takes me back a little.

But as that thought crossed my mind, I noticed everyone else was holding

their noses and writhing about, bemoaning the terrible stench. It certainly felt odd to have such a different reaction from everyone else.

Hm. I guess the smell is pretty strong.

"Guard your charge and escape!" Bonifatius ordered. "Only the adults need to fight the gruns!"

The adult archknights stepped forward and morphed their schtappes into weapons, while the medknights got into formation behind them. A lone apprentice knight drew his sword, despite having been told to focus on protecting.

"We defeated a grun during the Interduchy Tournament!" the apprentice shouted. "We can fight too!"

"I don't care! Follow your orders!"

"Apprentice scholars, get in!" I called out, making Lessy larger for Philine and the others. But it seemed that the issue ran deeper than just a lack of battle experience—many had never even seen a feybeast before. They stared at the grun in shock, completely rooted to the ground.

Lamprecht was the first to take flight and retreat, carrying Wilfried in his arms. It took them a moment to snap back to reality and summon their highbeasts, but Wilfried's apprentice guard knights followed soon after. Hartmut was glued to the spot, vacantly watching the fleeing knights, so Damuel gave him a hard shove through Lessy's open door.

"Enough daydreaming! Get inside already!"

Damuel threw Philine inside next, then Judithe. I closed the door the very instant the girls were secured and gripped the steering wheel, prepared to fly away as soon as the others were ready.

Cornelius, Leonore, and Damuel took out and immediately mounted their highbeasts, and we all soared up into the air at once. A grun seemingly launched toward us at such an incredible speed that it was impossible to track with the naked eye, but Bonifatius jumped up in a similar fashion and smacked it back down to earth, no doubt using physical enhancements. I hadn't actually *seen* him smack the grun, for the record; from my perspective, it had suddenly

been launched back into the forest from whence it had come, crashing through trees along the way with a tremendous noise. Hanging in the air where the feybeast had once been was Bonifatius with his arm swung downward, so it was easy to conclude that he had moved faster than I could perceive.

"I won't let you touch Rozemyne!" Bonifatius declared. His announcement was reassuring to say the least, and with the immediate threat disposed of, I retreated to the castle, surrounded by guard knights.

Lamprecht had been the first to leave the scene, and we had seen his highbeast heading toward the training ground of the Knight's Order. Damuel told Cornelius to send an ordonnanz to Ferdinand, which he did effortlessly while still controlling his mount.

"I believe we can leave the rest to the Knight's Order," Damuel said before turning his attention to me. "Are you unharmed, Lady Rozemyne?"

I nodded. As far as I was concerned, it had actually been a rather productive day—we had completed our gathering *and* revealed flaws in the apprentices' training. I stepped out of my Pandabus with a satisfied smile, only for Judithe to angrily leap out after me.

"I'm not a scholar, Damuel! I'm an apprentice guard knight! I can use my highbeast, and I'm not someone who needs to be protected!" she yelled, her violet eyes narrowed into a fierce glare. After being tossed into Lessy with the scholars, her pride as an apprentice guard knight had seemingly been wounded. "Why did you throw me into Lady Rozemyne's highbeast?!"

Damuel gazed down at Judithe, wearing a troubled expression as tears began to well up in the apprentice knight's eyes, but Angelica interjected before he could respond. "Didn't he do it because he thought you'd make the best guard?" she asked, her head tilted quizzically. "That's how I saw it, at least."

"Wha...?" Judithe stared at Angelica with wide eyes, almost pleading for an explanation, but none was given. Instead, Angelica wore a pleased grin that seemed to say, "*My work here is done*," even though she hadn't actually *done* anything.

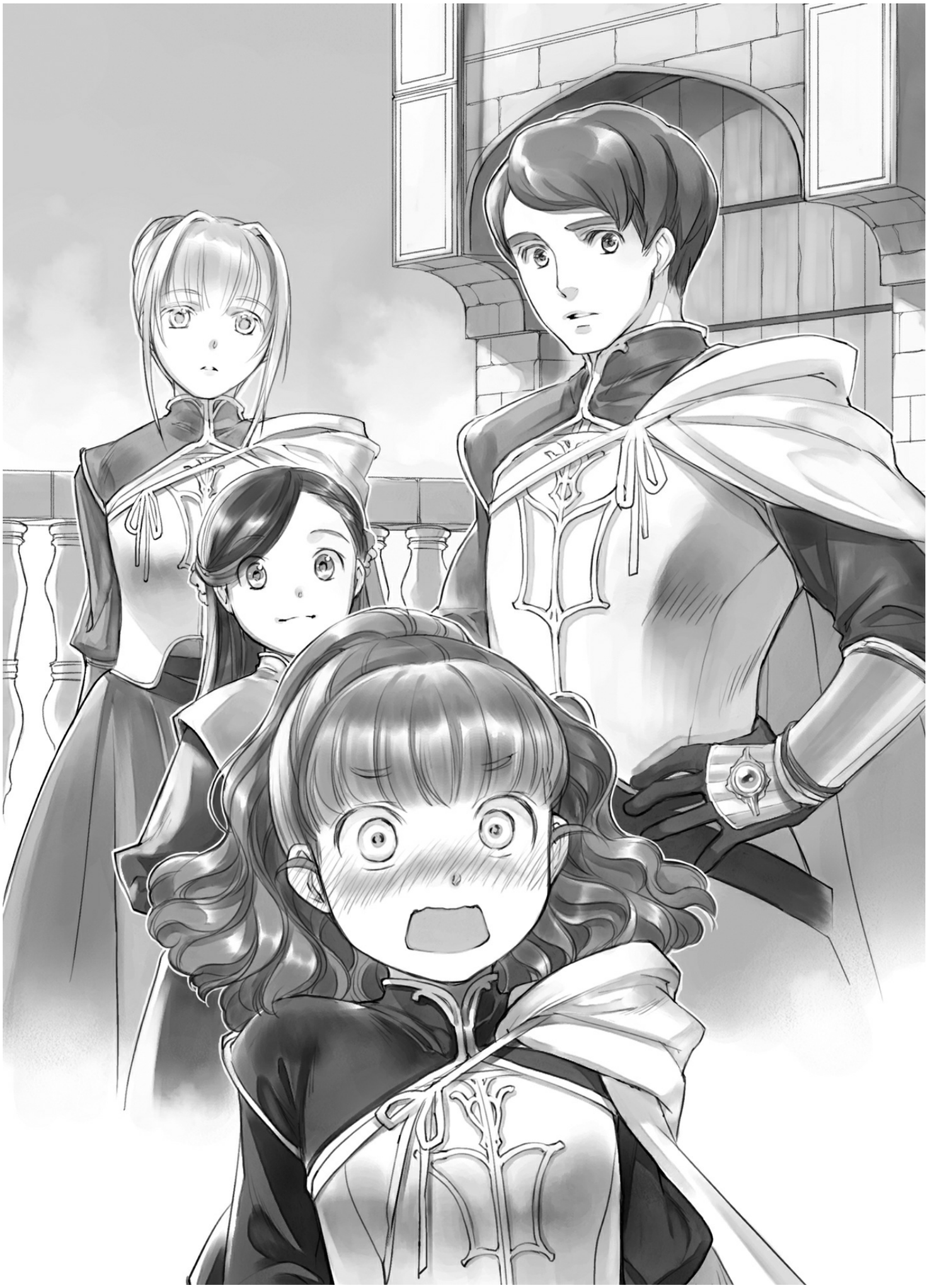
"Er, sorry. I'm not really sure why you're so upset. I guess it's because you want to know why I put you in the highbeast with Lady Rozemyne," Damuel

said, looking between the two girls while scratching his head. Judithe responded with a nod, her expression stiff, and so he continued with an explanation. “Given that the scholars were riding with Lady Rozemyne, at least one guard knight needed to remain with her. And since you can strike enemies from afar, you could attack from inside the highbeast, with Lady Rozemyne’s permission. I thought you were the best guard for the job—that was why I had you ride with her.”

“It wasn’t because you don’t think I’m a good enough knight...?” Judithe asked. It seemed that her complex about never getting assigned guard duty had twisted her perception, and upon realizing that, Damuel shook his head with a smile.

“I would never think of you like that, especially considering how impressive your aim is. Even Lord Bonifatius praised your skill. But if you were preoccupied with such thoughts... did you forget to do your duty as a guard while inside the highbeast?”

Judithe looked up in stunned realization, her mouth opening and closing as she struggled to compose a response, before eventually hanging her head and apologizing. She was blushing so hard that even her ears were bright red, but she had warmed up to Damuel in an instant and was now asking him all sorts of questions. As expected, entrusting the leadership of my guard knights to him had been the right course of action.



“Just as I warned, there were problems,” Ferdinand said during dinner, tapping his temple while looking my way.

“No one was hurt,” Bonifatius retorted. “You could even say this went better than expected. We would have needed to hunt those gruns sooner or later, and now they’re taken care of. The real problem here is the apprentice knights’ complete lack of coordination.”

Wilfried nodded enthusiastically. “I agree. I never understood why Rozemyne kept saying they couldn’t work together while we were in the Royal Academy, but after seeing them back there... I think they need to work on protecting others.”

If everyone had come away from this with a newfound understanding of the importance of coordination, especially the apprentice knights themselves, then I considered the gathering session a huge win. That said, I was now aware of something else that needed to be improved even more.

“What say we hold these gathering events more often?” I suggested. “It will serve as useful practice not just for the apprentice knights, but also the apprentice scholars, who desperately need to work on improving their self-preservation instincts. At the very least, they need to better understand their role as charges.”

“What makes you think this, Rozemyne?” Ferdinand seemed perplexed, so I described what the scholars had done when the gruns showed up.

“If scholars cannot summon their highbeasts to escape, prepare their schtappes to defend themselves, or even obey the instructions of the knights protecting them when enemies arrive, they will end up being abandoned by those protecting the archducal family in moments of danger. I think the scholars need more exposure to threats so that they may grow more accustomed to them.”

“Hmm... Now that you mention it, Rozemyne, you were surprisingly calm when the gruns arrived. You did exactly what you needed to without any hesitation,” Bonifatius observed. Of course, my composure had come from experience; I had encountered feybeasts during my jureve gathering several times before and was much too familiar with being ambushed, so working with

guards was something I had needed to get used to whether I wanted to or not. “Training the apprentice scholars to stop being dead weight, huh...? In that case, we should prioritize the ones working with the archducal family.”

“I do not mind you training the apprentice knights and scholars, Bonifatius, but I believe the Knight’s Order should first sweep the forest for any more feybeasts that must be hunted,” Ferdinand said. “If our scholars really are that much of a burden in times of crisis, we do not want to risk the appearance of any strong feybeasts.”

And so it was decided that the Knight’s Order would spend a few days sweeping the forest, allowing the apprentices a few days’ rest from training.

“Wha...? We’re going to be participating too?” Philine asked, paling when I explained our plan to have the scholars join the apprentice knights in their training.

I nodded. “You will not be following the same regimen, but considering how many times I have been attacked in the past, it is exceedingly likely that my retainers will find themselves wrapped up in dangerous situations moving forward. For that reason, it is crucial that you and Hartmut learn to protect yourselves. Even just running away requires a certain presence of mind that neither of you showed in the forest.”

“Understood...” Philine conceded after a pause, looking unwell. She then received a reassuring pat on the back from Judithe, who advised that she prepare lots of rejuvenation potions.

“Given that Philine cannot make rejuvenation potions, I think it would be a good idea for us to make some together for her sake. Let us use the castle workshop while the apprentice knights have their break,” I said. It was also an ideal opportunity for me to demonstrate boiling down a solution in a pot, which would in turn help me to teach my retainers the fourth step of my compression method.

We received permission to brew in a castle workshop under the condition that Ferdinand supervise us, which meant I was able to demonstrate the boiling down process to my retainers. As nobles, they had never cooked for

themselves, meaning the display was entirely new to them.

"Ferdinand, why is it that an older archnoble like Hartmut doesn't know about boiling down when Professor Hirschur mentioned during a lecture that she visualizes the boiling down of a potion?" I asked.

"There are some potions that become more effective when boiled down, but these are not particularly common," he replied. Those at the Royal Academy were apparently only taught how to put ingredients in a brewing pot and stir them together with their mana. From a noble's perspective, Ferdinand was unusual for going beyond those lessons and using all sorts of additional techniques, while Hirschur was even more unusual for attempting to teach first-years through such an obscure potion-making method.

Though, well... she was just offering her own approach in case anyone else found it useful.

Soon enough, all of my retainers had reached and adopted the fourth step of my mana compression method. For Philine, this meant also learning the first three steps. She would need to work pretty hard from this point on, since she had the least base mana out of any of my retainers.

Although Philine had earned enough money in the Royal Academy to pay for my compression method, the accompanying contract magic was somewhat problematic. Country-wide contracts were much too expensive to use on her alone, so we decided that we were going to have her sign with the next batch of people, as we had done with Damuel. In the meantime, we were using an Ehrenfest-wide contract, which prevented her from teaching others the method until we could have her sign the country-wide one during the next group teaching session. I very much doubted she was going to reveal the secret either way, but it was important that we took the same approach with everyone.

The days that followed had a lot in common. My retainers took turns undergoing training and making potions with their gathered materials, while I practiced the harspiel, embroidered Schwartz's and Weiss's clothes with Lieseleta and Brunhilde, answered various questions from Hartmut about blessings, and worked on my rehabilitation. Before I knew it, the Archduke Conference had come to an end.

Report on the Archduke Conference

“Welcome back.”

Florencia gave a soft smile upon seeing Wilfried, Charlotte, and me lined up in front of the teleporter room. “I see you have all come to greet us,” she said.

Sylvester led us out of the room with a similar grin. “A lot happened, but I’ll give the details at tomorrow’s meeting. You’re all going to be in attendance.”

Ferdinand had been summoned to the Ehrenfest Dormitory on several occasions during the Archduke Conference, while Norbert and several others had been gathered to handle some behind-the-scenes matters. These developments had given me cause for concern, but in the end, the archducal couple returned with bright smiles and no signs of exhaustion.

“Father. Welcome back,” I said to Karstedt, who had accompanied the archducal couple as the commander of the Knight’s Order.

“Mm. You look well, Rozemyne.” Karstedt cracked a weak smile, looking so much wearier than Sylvester that I couldn’t help but wonder what had happened. I gave him a concerned look, but he merely pushed for us to leave, since more guard knights, attendants, and scholars would soon be returning.

The next day, Wilfried, Charlotte, and I went to the room where the meeting was being held. Those of us old enough to attend the Royal Academy needed to attend, since the results of the Archduke Conference would no doubt have a massive impact on our lives as students. I hadn’t participated in the last meeting due to being asleep in the jureve, while Charlotte was starting at the Royal Academy next winter, so this was a new experience for us both.

“This is also when they announce any changes to the duchy rankings,” Wilfried said with a confident smile, having participated in the previous post-conference meeting. “I’m so excited. We must have gone up since last year.”

“That certainly would be nice,” I replied from my highbeast.

Charlotte was walking along in silence, no doubt tense about joining this meeting for the first time. In attendance were the archducal family, our retainers, representatives of the Knight's Order, and the higher-ranking scholars. Only once everyone was ready did the archducal couple enter.

"The meeting shall now begin," Sylvester said. "There's a lot for us to talk about, considering all the developments we've seen over the past year. I'm guessing Ehrenfest is going to continue changing and growing in power, and for that reason, I want to use this opportunity to boost our ranking as much as possible. For that, I need your help."

Sylvester's scholars stepped forward to announce this year's rankings. Ehrenfest was now in tenth place, meaning we were going to be using the tenth-ranked dormitory door and rooms from now on. Considering how low we had ranked in previous years, that was pretty good.

"Our grades in the Royal Academy have gone up significantly. In fact, if we were judged purely on our grades, we would've ended up a rank or two higher," Sylvester continued. The reason we hadn't risen beyond tenth place was apparently because we had yet to accumulate much influence; we had only recently started to spread our trends and weren't sending too many people to the Sovereignty. "If our business with the merchants from other duchies goes well this year, we should be able to get an even higher rank next year. Aside from the obvious necessity of ensuring these transactions go smoothly, we need to make sure our efforts here are established as more than just a temporary trend. The aim is to solidify our current trends and then introduce new ones on top of them."

As Sylvester went on, he actually started to sound a little passionate; he was almost certainly heated because the other duchies had dismissed our trends as temporary and inconsequential. One could hardly blame them, considering that Ehrenfest had produced exactly zero trends before this point, and it was easy to imagine that the duchies we had overtaken were especially eager to bad-mouth us. Rather than dishearten Sylvester, however, it seemed that these insults had only served to motivate him more; he gazed across the meeting room with sharp eyes and then clenched a fist.

"Ehrenfest is inventing new kinds of paper one after another and making

considerable progress in preparing the printing industry. We'll use these as weapons to reach an even higher rank!"

Sylvester's declaration inspired applause throughout the room. After spending decades with a reputation as a backwater duchy, Ehrenfest had gone all the way from rank thirteen to rank ten. The elders who remembered our days at the very bottom of the rankings were elated to say the least.

"And to maintain this momentum, I want our archduke candidates in the Royal Academy to continue helping our students boost their grades," Sylvester said. "Of course, this is an endeavor that'll require hard work from children and adults alike. Ferdinand, explain this to everyone in more detail."

Ferdinand nodded, stood up from his seat, and then gazed across the meeting room. "Based on what the archduke candidates have told us, a great number of professors were replaced after the civil war, and even the classwork has changed a great deal from what it used to be. To our understanding, the biggest change is that the apprentice knights are now tasked with competing in speed rather than treasure-stealing ditter," he began, next going on to describe the poor state the knights graduating from the new Royal Academy were in. "The Knight's Order is currently putting the new recruits and apprentices through special training to make up for what has been lost. A sizable social gap has even developed between the knights and scholars, having no doubt resulted from the lack of treasure-stealing ditter games to cooperate for."

Ferdinand emphasized that things were completely different from the days when duchies would band together to place magic tools and brew rejuvenation potions, and that he wanted officials in every field to train their recruits up to a more proper standard. The scholars had noticed this change themselves and were nodding along. It seemed that treasure-stealing ditter, which had ceased due to the lesser duchies lacking the population to support it, was highly important for training students.

A scholar stepped forward. "I shall now give a report on the newly settled business deals," he said. "As we discussed, it was decided that we will sell our new products to Klassenberg and the Sovereignty."

We had evidently been rather successful at promoting our new trends during

the Archduke Conference. For duchies that hadn't managed to negotiate for hairpins, rinsham, or plant paper, Sylvester had smoothed things over by selling them the pound cake recipe.

"We delivered verification paper, as Lady Rozemyne has so aptly named it, to the two duchies," the scholar continued. "Scholars delivered the other halves to the guildmaster of the Merchant's Guild, such that it may properly handle merchants from other duchies."

Oh yeah... We went with "verification paper" to avoid everyone finding out we make it from nansebs.

"There are many duchies who wish to do business with us next year," the scholar went on. "To that end, we must build as many rinsham workshops as possible before the next Archduke Conference, such that we may take on as many business partners as possible. We will need to discuss this matter with the guildmaster."

Sensing that they were about to place far too great of a burden on the lower city, I immediately interjected. "Rinsham is not especially hard to produce, so it is only a matter of time before other duchies begin making it for themselves. By establishing too many rinsham workshops in Ehrenfest, we are only setting ourselves up for mass unemployment later down the line. We must consider our actions carefully; after all, we have products other than rinsham and hairpins to work on."

"Since we have other trends to capitalize on, can we not just have the workers move on to them after the rinsham trend dies down?" the scholar asked, looking quite perplexed. It was true that we would need to start producing our next products once the other duchies learned to make and consequently stopped purchasing our rinsham, but it was unreasonable to expect workers to change jobs so easily.

"Having someone begin a new job when their old one disappears may sound simple, but it is much harder to put into practice. If we found there was no more work for scholars and asked you to begin doing the work of a knight from tomorrow onward, would you be able to perform adequately from your very first day? You may be able to handle the work done by scholars, but nothing

more, I imagine. Commoners are the same. Please keep this in mind when constructing new workshops."

When it came to the lower city, I intended to be a barrier shielding the commoners from the nobility's unreasonable demands. The scholar, seeing that I would not budge on this matter, responded with a somewhat dissatisfied nod.

"Moving on," Sylvester interjected. "I assume you're all most interested in Wilfried and Rozemyne's engagement. I do have an announcement on that."

The atmosphere of the room sharpened; this decision would affect the strength and influence of the duchy's various factions, so in a sense, this was the most relevant news to all those gathered. I could feel the adults listening more intently now than when the ranking was announced, which came as a huge disappointment; they were still playing faction politics when we needed to unite and work together. This all seemed even more foolish because I had successfully stamped out political infighting in the Royal Academy by distracting the students.

Hmm... I wonder whether I could do the same thing here, uniting Ehrenfest's nobles by making them focus on something outside the duchy...

Sylvester's dark-green eyes scanned the room. Those who hadn't attended the Archduke Conference—approximately half of all the present nobles—watched with bated breath as his mouth opened to speak.

"The king has granted his permission, meaning the engagement now has official backing. Those who would decry it now, know that you will be decrying the king himself."

Now, neither the Leisegang faction nor the remnants of the former Veronica faction could openly protest the engagement. I could sense a change in the eyes of all those gathered; it was better to think of one's next move than bemoan something already set in stone.

Ehrenfest is in no position to endure any infighting right now, but, well... that's just my opinion.

"The king also approved Prince Anastasius's engagement to Lady Eglantine of Klassenberg. As a result, Prince Anastasius will now be politically beneath Prince

Sigiswald.”

Anastasius and Eglantine would apparently be ruling the Sovereignty’s Central District, which had expanded after absorbing the territory of surrounding duchies after the civil war. I understood this as them becoming the giebes of the Sovereignty while retaining their status as royalty to handle the magic devices, which meant Anastasius had finally taken a step away from being the next king... but who knew how much of an impact this would actually have.

I started to ponder the matter, only to realize that nobody else around me was doing the same. In fact, they all wore completely unmoved expressions. They were all a lot more invested in my engagement, perhaps because the lives of royalty had no real direct impact on them.

“There’s more,” Sylvester continued. “At the insistence of Ahrensbach, two more marriages have been settled. Lamprecht and Freuden will each be bringing their brides to Ehrenfest.”

To nobody’s surprise, a stir ran through the meeting hall. Ehrenfest had been minimizing all contact with Ahrensbach ever since Count Bindewald, an archnoble from Ahrensbach, had entered the temple without permission, attacked Ferdinand and me, and allowed his soldiers to be used in an attack on the castle. Sylvester had even outright rejected their marriage on the grounds of our mana shortage and spoken out against marrying Ahrensbach nobles.

“Because so much time has passed since their proposals, the two brides will come to us at the end of summer to take their places here as soon as possible,” Sylvester said. His eyes were leaden, and the lack of celebration in his voice implied that Ahrensbach had forced this matter through. If a greater duchy said they were sending two brides over, a middle duchy like Ehrenfest had no choice but to accept.

Especially since we refused to do business with them this year...

This was no doubt a political maneuver made with next year’s business dealings in mind, plus the women were probably spies sent to infiltrate Ehrenfest. Lamprecht’s wife would be in the perfect position to extract information from her new family: her new father-in-law, Karstedt, was the knight commander; her new mother-in-law, Elvira, was the head of the printing

industry; and her husband's lord, Wilfried, was the son of the archduke. There was also me, her ordinary soon-to-be sister-in-law.

Oof... That explains why Father looked so tired when he got back.

This was quite a serious situation indeed. Karstedt and Elvira didn't look happy at all, despite the fact their son was getting married.

According to Sylvester, these marriages were being performed at Aub Ahrensbach's insistence, and while Freuden's bride was only a mednoble, Lamprecht's was Aub Ahrensbach's own niece. Out of consideration for interduchy politics, the ceremony was going to be a simple one held at the duchy border gate with only the couple's families and the archducal family from each duchy attending.

"Lamprecht and Freuden, their parents and siblings, and the High Bishop and High Priest will need to make their preparations. Take care here."

Lamprecht's expression clouded over at the thought of his coming future, but I saw a few smiles among those gathered. They were from those of the former Veronica faction, who wanted more diplomacy with Ahrensbach. They had been worn down after losing their figurehead and getting excluded from trends and mana compression, but these marriages would surely revitalize them. The faction war within Ehrenfest was no doubt soon to reignite.

I need to get the duchy's rank up ASAP. Pressure from above is a serious pain in the neck.

As I mulled over the situation at hand, I couldn't help but sigh. It was clear that Lamprecht's marriage was going to turn Ehrenfest politics on its head once again.

A More Private Meeting

The meeting ended, and the room began to buzz as people started speaking among themselves again. A lot had happened, and it was clear that Ehrenfest was undergoing great change, so everyone exited with bright expressions.

“Rozemyne, Ferdinand, follow me to my office,” Sylvester said. “I need to speak with the High Bishop and the High Priest.”

Our retainers came with us, and what immediately caught my eye when we arrived was a fancy-looking book with a letter resting atop it. As I gazed upon its magnificence, Sylvester glanced over with a raised eyebrow.

“Those are from Dunkelfelger,” he informed me. “Have an apprentice scholar carry them to your room, but be especially careful with the book.”

AAAH! LADY HANNELORE, I LOVE YOUUU!

As I trembled with excitement, Hartmut and Philine delicately wrapped the book in some cloth given to them by one of Sylvester’s scholars.

“We need to talk about Ehrenfest and the Starbinding to be performed at the border gate. Retainers don’t need to hear about the ceremony, so you can all step outside for a moment,” Sylvester said. He cleared the room of not just my retainers, but his own as well, such that only he, Ferdinand, Karstedt, and I remained. The door shut with a click, and once the footsteps had faded into the distance, Sylvester collapsed forward so suddenly that he smacked his head against his desktop.

“Sylvester?” I asked.

“I’m exhausted, Rozemyne. That was the most exhausting Archduke Conference I’ve ever been to. It was even friggin’ worse than the first one I ever attended.”

He went on to explain that he had maintained the dignified persona of an archduke during the Archduke Conference and even proclaimed to his scholars that he was pleased to be so busy because it meant the duchy was rising

through the ranks. In other words, he had completely hidden his exhaustion. Now that the retainers were gone, however, Sylvester's archduke attitude had vanished. He started grumbling and whining to himself, all the while rubbing his forehead against his desk.

"Ferdinand, telling me to get the king's approval for the marriage before the business talks began was the best advice you've ever given. I thank the gods that I followed it to the letter. Klassenberg's next archduke came asking to take Rozemyne as a second wife, Drewanchel very heavily implied we should deepen our bonds since our daughters and sons are so close, Frenbeltag suggestively mentioned that Rudiger's around Rozemyne's age, and Ahrensbach was apparently trying to wed Wilfried into their duchy. If not for the king having already approved the engagement, I never would have been able to shake them all off."

The situation really did sound tense. Karstedt was working his shoulders and scratching his neck, noting that he was exhausted and sick to his stomach just from watching.

"Klassenberg apparently learned about Rozemyne being the source of the trends and a composer through Lady Eglantine's reports," Sylvester groaned. "I have to admit, greater duchies are just as threatening as I thought. To think they'd pick up on Rozemyne's abnormality and try to suck her into their fold despite having had barely any contact with her... It's crazy. Rozemyne, when the hell did you even socialize with Drewanchel...? Justus barely mentioned them in his report."

"I can't speak for Wilfried, but I hardly socialized with them at all," I replied. "There was an occasion when Lady Eglantine introduced me to Lady Adolphine at a tea party we were hosting. She seems as though she's going to provide her protection moving forward, so I definitely wish to continue socializing with her."

Sylvester slumped his shoulders and let out a heavy sigh. "Even more duchies to deal with, huh...? Drewanchel's scholars are exceptional, and their duchy tends to produce innovative magic tools. Aub Drewanchel and his retainers were pretty interested in our verification paper. Seems like it has a pretty low mana requirement as far as magic items go. They also liked that laynobles can make it and even commoners can use it without issue."

They were highly interested in learning who had invented it and quite insistent about receiving some. That wasn't an option, however, because with enough investigation, they would eventually work out what it was made from. Sylvester had defended it to the death, maintaining that it was created from some rare material and that he only had enough for doing business with Klassenberg and the Sovereignty.

"We didn't give them what they wanted, so I assume Drewanchel are gonna start approaching you a lot more once you return to the Royal Academy," Sylvester concluded.

"Would it be bad for me to become friends with them...?" I asked.

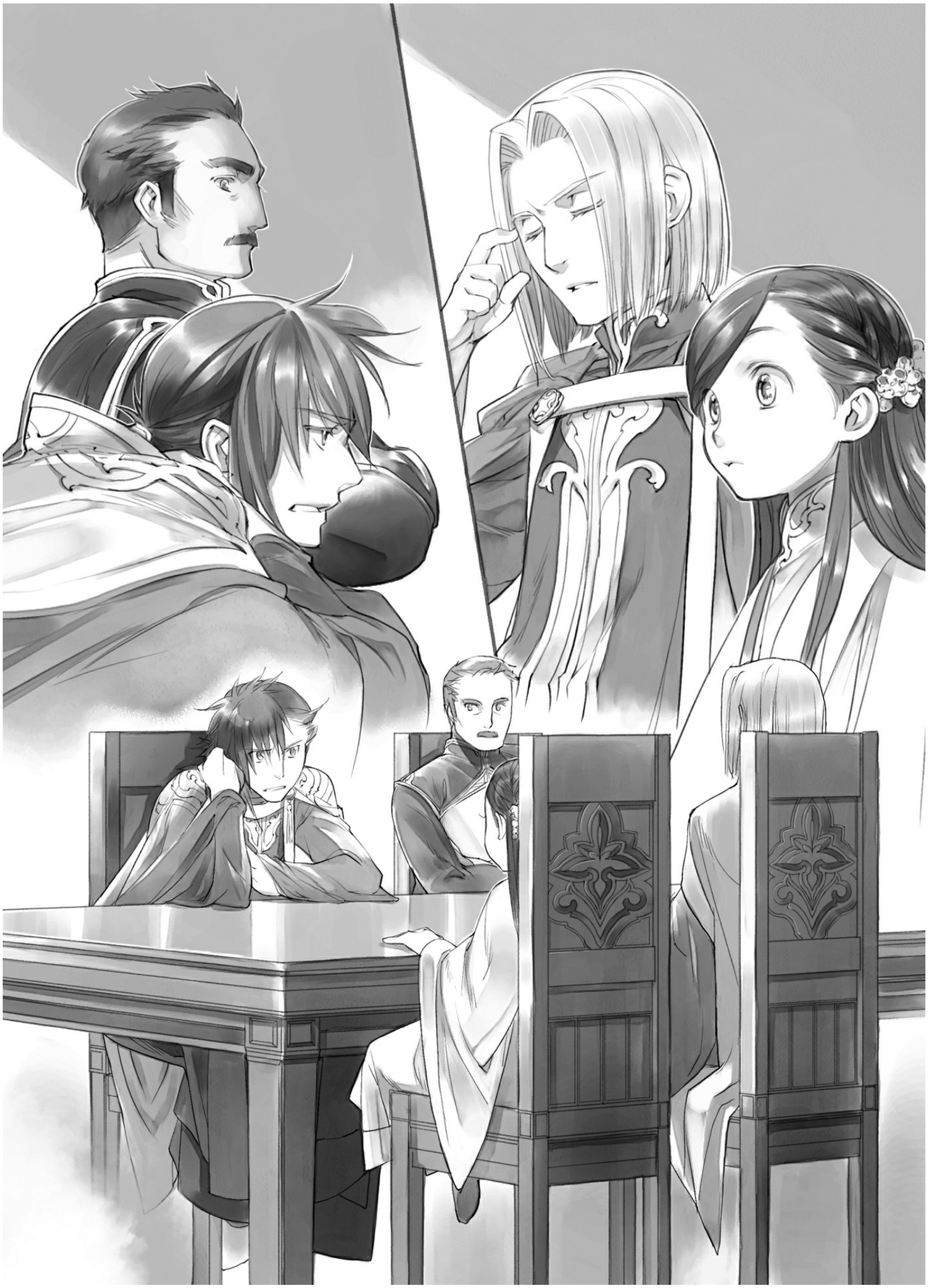
Ferdinand placed a contemplative hand on his chin. "No, it would actually be wise. There is much value in developing friendships with Drewanchel, Dunkelfelger, and Klassenberg. Can you manage that?"

It was a pretty direct question, and considering how many people had made it clear that the sight of me socializing sent chills down their spines, I could hardly respond with a confident yes. But I couldn't say no either, so I remained silent for long enough that Ferdinand began tapping his temple.

"We cannot be certain how Ahrensbach will move once the two brides are here. The more strong allies and sources of information we have, the better. One cannot fully trust their allies, of course, but they will still serve as strong tools," Ferdinand said.

Sylvester nodded in agreement. "What you need to watch out for, Rozemyne, is the fact that Dunkelfelger knows your one weakness: books. Their aub went through the trouble of personally bringing me this expensive book, all so that he can use your friendship with his daughter to his advantage during next year's business negotiations. I expect that this Lady Hannelore is one cunning strategist to have put this in place."

In other words, Sylvester was telling me to remain conscious of my tendency to take any bait that came in the shape of a book. I had no way of knowing whether Hannelore really was forming devious plots beneath her peaceful exterior, but that didn't matter to me; I still wanted to spend more time with her during my next year at the Academy.



“To be clear, Lady Hannelore is my sole bookworm ally and I love her. We’re going to be wearing matching armbands next year and working as fellow Library Committee members. What exactly do I need to be careful about in the process?”

“She already has you in the palm of her hand, huh? Greater duchies... Man, they’re something else...” Sylvester murmured with wide eyes before putting his head in his hands and groaning. I looked around at my other guardians; my intention certainly hadn’t been to upset him like this.

“If you have any advice about whom I need to be careful of and what I need to be careful about saying then I need to hear it now,” I said. Enough people had already told me how much worry my socializing skills caused them, so using this time to prepare felt like a good decision.

Ferdinand gave a light shrug. “In your case, it would be most correct to say that you should remain on guard against all who approach you.”

“I understand that, but is there anyone in particular?”

“We’ve earned the jealousy of the duchies just below us by rising to the tenth rank. They’ll act polite on the surface, since our positions have effectively swapped, but they’re going to be much harsher on the whole,” Sylvester explained. “If you respond too meekly then they’ll get bolder, but if you respond too arrogantly then they’ll seek revenge if we ever drop below them again.”

As it turned out, Ehrenfest had been forced to endure the immense jealousy of the duchies that had lost the civil war, all of whom complained about ending up “beneath Ehrenfest, of all duchies.” In all honesty, one could hardly blame them; Ehrenfest had previously been at the bottom of the rankings, and our rise to the middle was purely down to the civil war rather than any accomplishments on our part.

“Seriously though, I still can’t believe there were *that* many people asking for your hand in marriage. I knew there were going to be some, but it was ridiculous,” Sylvester sighed.

“There weren’t that many at the Interduchy Tournament, were there?” I

asked. I remembered some interest from lower-ranked duchies, but not the top-ranked ones.

“I’m guessing it was because you came first in your class and our duchy’s rank shot up so fast. All I can say is, I’m glad I got the king’s permission before anything else. They also mentioned the library’s tools, but...”

“Did the royals say anything about Schwartz and Weiss? Will they perhaps be assigning more archnobles to take up positions in the Royal Academy library?” I asked, leaning forward over the table. I cared more about this than anything that had been mentioned during the meeting.

Sylvester gave me a look as though he found me entirely unfortunate and then shook his head. “It was archscholars from the Sovereignty who spoke to me, not royals. They asked whether Ehrenfest was making clothes for the library’s magic tools and, nicely enough, told me all sorts of things about them.” He paused for a moment and grinned at Ferdinand. “Seems like the outfits are usually made by the Sovereign archnobles serving as librarians banding together; they were real worried about whether a backwater duchy like us can handle them on our own. They were convinced we wouldn’t even be able to gather the proper materials. In fact, they thought we were gonna dress them in rags. Yeah, they actually said that.”

“Is that so?” Ferdinand asked, his expression morphing into one of apparent amusement. His light-golden eyes were narrowed in a way that was genuinely terrifying. “I certainly look forward to their thoughts next year, then. I truly do. Rozemyne, take extreme care with the embroidering. The magic circles I produced are more than satisfactory, but we must not allow the embroidery or appearance of the clothes to inspire the mockery of others.”

Oof. Looks like he’s entered serious mode...

“Sylvester, which duchies must Rozemyne be most on guard against?” Ferdinand asked. “Elaborate on the propositions she received.”

“Just Drewanchel, Dunkelfelger, and Klassenberg. Every other duchy held a lower rank than us, so we don’t need to worry too much about them.”

“Um, wait... There must be some kind of mistake. I don’t see why Dunkelfelger would consider me a marriage candidate. Lord Lestilaut kept

insulting me and calling me a fake saint," I said, detailing our conversations before and after we had played treasure-stealing ditter.

Ferdinand narrowed his eyes again as he mentally pulled together the pieces. "That game of ditter is likely responsible," he reasoned. "Dunkelfelger's knight commander and his nephew were doubtless pushing hard for your hand; their knights yearn for nothing more than tacticians who can use their talent well."

"That sounds oddly specific... Ferdinand, did you receive similar proposals?" I asked, looking up at him. He gave a brisk nod with a displeased expression.

"The Knight's Order always targets those skilled at ditter, with the aub pushing girls of suitable age upon them. I recall a female archduke candidate who, not wanting to marry a man from a bottom-ranked duchy regardless of whether he was first in his class, fled from Dunkelfelger and entered a romance with royalty. She ended up becoming the third wife of a prince in the middle of the civil war."

"Sh-She sounds like... quite a proactive woman," I replied. "I thought noblewomen generally only married partners their parents chose for them."

"It is common in Dunkelfelger to seize whatever one wants and secure victory no matter the cost. Her parents were unable to protest her decision, since she had secured a wedding with royalty through her own strength and determination."

Wowee. Dunkelfelger women sure seem strong. Lady Hannelore didn't really give me that impression, but maybe she actually fights like a tiger...

Karstedt began stroking his chin, having been listening closely to our discussion. "Lestilaut, was it? If you truly are despised by Dunkelfelger's archduke candidate, I imagine you have nothing to worry about. Those around him are just getting excited. The true threat here seems to be Drewanchel."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"They have an archduke candidate your age, no? And seeing as you're going to be receiving his older sister's protection next year, you won't be able to speak too strongly against them."

I clapped my hands together in realization. It was true that I was going to be

in Adolphine's care when I returned to the Royal Academy.

Sylvester furrowed his brow, pulling a face like he was digging through his memories. "Aub Drewanchel mentioned that his daughter adores you like a little sister, and as I said, they're obsessed with magic tools. They might have their eyes set on you purely as a way of connecting with Ferdinand."

"Like a little sister...?" I repeated. "Lady Adolphine and I certainly aren't *that* close."

"Drewanchel is a top-ranking duchy. Their truth is *the* truth, no matter what your take on the situation is," Sylvester replied flatly.

"Fear not," Ferdinand said, dismissively waving a hand. "Those from Drewanchel know their place; they will not speak against a marriage approved by the king or work in the shadows to have it dissolved. At most, they will antagonize you with questions about magic tools. I imagine they will be satisfied with asking both you and Wilfried about the verification paper, and you will most likely even enjoy speaking with their scholars. They are quite passionate about their research."

Maybe that would be fun for Ferdinand, but I had no interest in research that didn't have to do with books or libraries. They could ask me as many questions about magic tools as they wanted, but they would probably go in one ear and out the other.

"Anyway, a ton of duchies were interested in your recipes too, not just the rinsham," Sylvester explained. "I was invited to dinner meetings from one greater duchy after another, and not inviting them in return just wasn't an option. I think you're gonna have a rough time in the Royal Academy next year."

"I suppose I'll be going through exactly what Wilfried did, then..." I muttered. Ehrenfest's relationship with the greater duchies had been almost nonexistent before now, so we had almost no experience interacting with them. This, coupled with their sudden interest in socializing with us, was a true recipe for disaster.

"I handled it by summoning Norbert and moving a ton of chefs over, but... it might be smart to assign a few more chefs to the Royal Academy. Your recipe book's not out yet, right?"

“Once it begins circulating through Ehrenfest, it will likely find its way to Klassenberg and the Sovereignty through the merchants who come this way in the summer. I’m also planning to use it as a trend in the Royal Academy, or is it still too early to spread printing?” I asked. My intention was to start spreading books with collections of recipes and sheet music, leaving the more educational texts for later, since they were important for our grades.

Sylvester shook his head. “Nah, go ahead. Considering the scale of our printing industry, now’s a good time for you to start spreading it. Plus, you understand how much strain it’ll place on the commoners better than anyone, right?”

I considered the situation carefully. I wanted to do all that in cooperation with the lower city while training scholars, but I needed a bit more time to think things over. “Spreading the market to other duchies is going to be difficult unless we’re able to introduce more printing workshops by next summer,” I said.

“Don’t rush things, Rozemyne.”

“Excessive speed will certainly earn harsher resistance, but if we don’t make changes soon, Ehrenfest will remain a lower-ranked duchy forever. This is a good opportunity for us to learn how Drewanchel, Dunkelfelger, and Klassenberg interact with their commoners and run their governments. We cannot stay in our current mindset forever.”

As was obvious by now, we couldn’t spread trends or specialty products without expertly utilizing the commoners. The problem was, I could sense that Ehrenfest was absolutely incompetent when it came to properly handling them.

“At the very least, I would like for the faction war to settle down,” I said. “It certainly feels as though the feud is going to be revitalized when Lamprecht’s and the other person’s brides arrive in Ehrenfest.”

The political war that Elvira had done such a good job stifling had been rekindled all at once by Georgine’s visit. Things had calmed down again since Wilfried was punished, the former Veronica faction was diminished, the archducal family was attacked, and my mana compression method was used as bait, but it seemed that Ahrensbach was jabbing at us from the side once again.

“Why are those of the former Veronica faction so content with being under Ahrensbach’s thumb?” I asked.

“Because most of them hail from Ahrensbach,” Ferdinand replied. This sudden reveal surprised me so much that I let out a long-lost “Bwuh?” which in turn made him press a palm against his forehead. “How do you not know something this simple? An archduke candidate from Ahrensbach was wed into Ehrenfest; she would never have come alone. I should not have to express something this obvious, but attendants and guard knights accompanied her.”

It seemed that scholars were rarely allowed to accompany brides for fears of spies, but attendants and knights of the same gender would always come to care for and protect their charge. These retainers would naturally end up marrying people in Ehrenfest.

Gabriele’s retainers and their families had started backing Veronica, their lady’s child, soon after their lady’s passing. They had been swallowed into a larger faction when Veronica became the first wife, but it wasn’t long before their descendants established themselves as the faction’s core.

“I see. That explains why Ahrensbach influences them so much.”

“Most of the former Veronica faction wanted my sister Georgine to be the next aub, not me. They’re sticking with me now because I’m the only one still here with Ahrensbach blood, but they’re real glad that Georgine became Ahrensbach’s first wife and is back to influencing Ehrenfest,” Sylvester said.

So Lady Georgine and the former Veronica faction have a lot of troubling and very unwelcome connections...?

“The nobles most starstruck with my sister live in the south. Viscounts Gerlach and Dahldolf are going to love Lamprecht’s and Freuden’s marriages. Georgine and I smiled at each other at the Archduke Conference while discussing it, but man, the look on her face... Gah. Georgine’s smile is as poisonous as ever. Just imagining it sends chills down my spine,” Sylvester groaned, clutching his stomach.

“You couldn’t refuse the marriages, right?” I asked.

“If refusing them was an option then believe me, I would have done it in a

heartbeat. You probably don't appreciate it, but this is a lot better than it could have been."

It seemed that Ahrensbach had tried using their blood relationship with Sylvester to force negotiations their way, implying through noble euphemisms that he needed to support them, since they were both his family and a greater duchy. Sylvester had managed to escape the situation by saying that we had already settled on our business associates and that we would likely be doing business with Drewanchel and Dunkelfelger next year.

"I suppose it's natural to prioritize the first-ranked duchy over the sixth-ranked, even if the latter is family..." I mused aloud. "Speaking of which, what rank did Ahrensbach get this year?"

"They're still sixth. The top ranks didn't change."

And when Sylvester had said that he couldn't hold good feelings for a duchy that had attacked his child, no matter how they were related, Aub Ahrensbach had brought up Lamprecht's and Freuden's marriages.

"The foolish actions of a single noble have cast far too great a shadow over our relationship," Aub Ahrensbach had said. "Ehrenfest is Georgine's home, and we wish to rebuild a close relationship with it. As proof of my good intentions, allow me to not only accept the two marriages in question, but also allow the brides to be wed into your duchy." He had then continued to indirectly say, "All of Yurgenschmidt is facing a mana shortage, and I am giving you both my niece and a mednoble. Suck it up."

"Aub Ahrensbach truly regrets that a chasm has formed between our duchies," Georgine had added. "I am terribly sad that the situation has become so severe that I cannot even visit my home. You must sympathize with my plight, Sylvester."

Sylvester had been unable to reply with the truth of the matter—namely that he didn't want Georgine in Ehrenfest at all. After a moment passed in silence, they began insulting him indirectly, asking whether he was foolish enough not to realize that a top-ranking duchy was being so generously lenient with a much weaker duchy.

From there, Aub Ahrensbach had moved his sharp eyes to Karstedt and said,

“Surely your son has not already found another while my niece still bemoans her lost love.” Again, he was making his duchy’s superior position clear, heavily insinuating that Ahrensbach took priority over anyone else Lamprecht might have fallen for. Having been backed into a corner, Karstedt had no choice but to respond that his son was not so shallow as to have moved on already.

“In all my years as a guard knight, never have I been glared at and directly interrogated by the aub of another duchy,” Karstedt admitted. “Just thinking about it is bringing my headache back...”

Oof. That sure is a lot of pressure.

Incidentally, it seemed that my engagement to Wilfried had resulted in a number of women complaining to Florencia during tea parties. Georgine in particular had bemoaned the development, saying something along the lines of, “Was Lady Rozemyne not raised in the temple? To think you would force Wilfried to marry a girl like that...”

Georgine had gone on to proclaim that she wanted Wilfried to marry Detlinde instead, speaking with a sensual smile that never once faltered. She had claimed that he was a remarkable archduke candidate with Ahrensbach blood, but that he was surely going to face many hardships in actually taking the archduke seat. That clearly meant that she knew about Wilfried being punished for entering the Ivory Tower.

“Just hearing Florencia’s report ticked me off,” Sylvester said. “Georgine kept saying that Wilfried was the closest in age to Detlinde of all the Ehrenfest archduke candidates, and that if we wanted to keep you in Ehrenfest, we could have just married you down to an archnoble!”

Florencia had apparently allowed Georgine’s words to wash over her with a smile, replying only that the engagement was a decision made by Aub Ehrenfest and the king himself. It was very much like her.

“Frenbeltag’s Lord Rudiger has Ahrensbach blood as well, does he not? Is he not of the same age as Lady Detlinde?” I asked, thinking back to the family tree I had memorized.

Sylvester let out a sigh. “Georgine might’ve considered that had Frenbeltag not been on the losing side of the war and subsequently booted down to

fifteenth, but as it stands now, they don't have any chance of marrying into Ahrensbach."

"Ehrenfest doesn't seem to be a particularly high rank either, though..." I said. We were still only tenth place, which put us firmly in the middle and quite some distance from anything that might be considered a high ranking. That said, I did intend to continue growing our power.

"Anyone with eyes and a brain can figure out that we're going to be a higher rank by the time you and Wilfried graduate."

"More like anyone with ears, I'd say. Sylvester, didn't you boldly proclaim that those who think our trends are temporary will soon see how wrong they are for themselves?" Karstedt asked, having been there to witness such a thing firsthand. It seemed that Sylvester, in all his stubbornness, had risen to the challenge when duchies that hadn't risen in the rankings attempted to undermine our progress.

"Sylvester, you often tell me to keep my head down and not cause trouble... but did you not pick a fight in that situation?" I asked.

Sylvester responded with a snort. "I didn't pick it; I accepted it. Archdukes need to be strong so that bottom-ranked duchies don't start getting cocky."

"He is correct," Ferdinand said, looking in my direction. "But as you do not understand politics in the slightest, do not attempt to copy his methods."

"I am, for the most part, a gentle spirit," I replied. "I do not pick or accept fights unless they involve books or family."

"And when they do, you charge ahead with nary a rational thought in your mind. That is the most terrifying thing about you," Ferdinand retorted.

I averted my eyes and backed off. *Sorry, but... I don't think that's ever going to change. Not even dying changed me.*

"Anyway, we need to stay on guard against Ahrensbach more than anyone," Sylvester said. "My sister acts differently when Aub Ahrensbach isn't around, and reports from Wilfried and Justus give the impression that Detlinde's actions are disjointed from what her parents seemingly want. We have no idea what their goals are or what they want to do with Ehrenfest, but it seems like the

three of them have entirely separate aims and motives.”

Ferdinand nodded. “They will most likely use the two brides to force unreasonable demands during next year’s Archduke Conference. Or perhaps their goal was simply to have the two women infiltrate us to begin with. At the moment, we have no way of knowing.”

“It’s unfortunate,” I said. “Lamprecht finally gets to marry the woman he loves, but there’s little reason to be happy in this situation.”

“Lamprecht heard the news with a conflicted expression,” Karstedt noted with a bitter smile. “He fully understands the position he’s in.”

The bride in question was Aub Ahrensbach’s niece; Lamprecht couldn’t simply make her his second wife and shove her into some side building. She was due to become first wife to the man leading Wilfried’s guard detail, *and* she was going to be managing their estate. Her position was perfect for gathering intel.

“Rozemyne, you’ll be attending their Starbind Ceremonies as the High Bishop,” Sylvester said. “I personally don’t want you anywhere near Ahrensbach, but we don’t have a choice. It’s an unspoken rule that when the aubs of two duchies both attend a Starbind Ceremony, the ceremony is performed by whichever of their High Bishops is of a higher rank. As an archduke candidate, that’s you.” He went on to explain that he was assigning Ferdinand to assist me, since there was a reasonable chance I would make some unfortunate mistake on my own.

“You will need to practice giving equal blessings,” Ferdinand said. “Otherwise, your feelings will make the blessing favor one person over the other.”

“Ngh... I’ll do my best,” I replied. Blessing the couples according to my feelings would only end up creating quite the scandal, so I needed to focus and make sure I blessed them equally.

“I’m leaving the ritual to you two,” Sylvester said. “On my end, we’ll need to think about how to guard the castle and try to work out whether there’s likely to be an attack on the way there or at any of our rest stops.”

“An attack?” I asked, blinking in surprise. “But aren’t they marrying into our duchy?”

“Both aubs will be gathered in one place, which means the castle is going to be less defended than usual. We’ll also need guards, what with so many powerful people moving around. Rozemyne... I think you’ll want to make mana armor for this,” Karstedt said out of nowhere.

It seemed that I needed to maximize my defenses in preparation for any sudden attacks, specifically by wearing knight armor made from feystones under my High Bishop robes like a Kevlar vest. I looked up at Ferdinand, wondering whether this really was necessary, but he nodded in agreement.

“You will indeed want mana armor. Of your retainers, we can only bring those with armor; the others must stay behind.”

“Are you saying I need to bring my noble retainers with me, despite the fact I am going to be attending as the High Bishop?” I asked.

“You are also soon to be the bride’s sister-in-law. You must attend such that you can be interpreted as both an archduke candidate and the High Bishop. The same is true for me.”

If we were bringing my temple attendants *and* my castle retainers, we would need to tighten security around Fran and the others. “I suppose I need more feystones again...” I murmured.

“I will give you what you need, so focus on your defenses as much as possible. The barrier is dangerous, and we need to avoid unleashing any attacks of our own. That is why ensuring that you are well-protected is paramount.”

“Right,” Sylvester said. “I don’t want a certain someone suddenly unleashing a huge magic attack like they did during a certain ambush. There’s a limit to the barrier the archducal magic produces, so be extra careful.” He was referring to the ambush that had taken place during a particular Spring Prayer, when he had been accompanying us disguised as a blue priest. Strengthening the barrier with special magic to stop my attack had evidently been quite a tense moment for him.

“I am extremely trepidatious about teaching you any attack magic, but defensive magic that will allow you to protect yourself and those around you seems to be a wise choice. You are not likely to attack if you have means by which to defend yourself,” Ferdinand muttered. And with that, the matter was

settled.

Epilogue

The lengthy meetings and luncheons spent discussing the Archduke Conference had finally come to a close, and the aub of Ahrensbach, Lord Gieselfried, had returned to his duchy for the first time in what felt like an eternity. He sat in his room, sipping the tea prepared for him by his attendant, and sighed. Georgine, on the other hand, showed no exhaustion even in these private quarters; despite how tiring the Archduke Conference had proved, she simply let out a refined laugh. She was from Ehrenfest, and despite having been wed into Ahrensbach as a third wife, she was now its first.

"You seem tired, Lord Gieselfried. But you may rest well knowing that we accomplished much during this year's conference," Georgine said. "It is delightful that Lady Letizia will most likely have a partner soon."

"Indeed. In the next year or so, an archduke candidate who will serve as her groom should be introduced to us," Gieselfried replied. His granddaughter's engagement had concerned him more than any other matter addressed during the conference. He had asked for a royal or an archduke candidate worthy of becoming her groom, and his request had been accepted.

Despite having been on the winning side of the civil war, Ahrensbach had lost its second wife to the great purge, and her children had been spared only on the condition that they would be demoted to archnobles. The second wife had not been directly involved in the civil war, to be clear; she had been implicated purely because she was the little sister of Aub Werkestock, a supporter of the first prince, who was responsible for the civil war, and the fourth prince, who had proceeded to drag out the conflict.

At the time, Gieselfried had prioritized saving the lives of the second wife's children, and since Georgine's son Wolfram was still alive, he hadn't feared for his duchy's future. But the boy soon passed, and all of the daughters except Detlinde were married away.

Gieselfried had contacted Drewanchel, into which his first wife's daughter had

been wed, and sought an adoption with his granddaughter. Letizia had then come to Ahrensbach after they relinquished a youngest daughter (and no better) for the deal. She had already been selected as the next aub and was being trained for that purpose. During the Archduke Conference, Gieselfried had asked for an archduke candidate who would support Letizia as her husband and protect Ahrensbach moving forward. Unless the king gave his order soon, by the time Letizia began attending the Royal Academy, the most ideal older archduke candidates would already be engaged to others. He needed to hurry.

"It seems the king has a child with his third wife, the one from Dunkelfelger," Gieselfried remarked. "I recall Aub Dunkelfelger saying something about it. Hopefully that child is a son and is in the same year as her..."

"Would we not struggle to wed royalty into Ahrensbach?" Georgine asked.

"We are only facing our current predicament because the royals and those from Klassenberg forced their purge upon us. They feel at least somewhat responsible, so we have something of a chance." Slowly but surely, Ahrensbach was crumbling to pieces, and the insufficient size of its archducal family was mostly to blame; there were just too few people available to perform Mana Replenishment.

"Then Lady Letizia is taken care of. What shall we do about Detlinde's groom? I had thought Lord Wilfried would make an excellent choice, but it would seem that his engagement to Lady Rozemyne has removed that possibility."

Finding a groom for Detlinde had thus far proved to be a challenge; Letizia was already set to become the next aub, so they didn't want someone who would stir up discord within the duchy. They needed a groom who wouldn't push Detlinde to take the archduke seat instead, but few men were so meek. Wilfried had apparently been an excellent pick because he had committed an unforgivable crime in Ehrenfest and would therefore be unable to have such high ambitions in another duchy.

"A shame, considering how rare it is for an archduke candidate to have tarnished their reputation," Gieselfried mused. Such information seldom leaked to other duchies; he had acquired it only because Georgine herself was from Ehrenfest.

“According to Detlinde and Professor Fraularm, Lady Rozemyne was raised in the temple. Perhaps it was convenient for them to wed two equally flawed candidates,” Georgine said, her eyes lowered in an expression that made it impossible to tell whether she found this a great inconvenience or of no importance whatsoever.

Gieselfried frowned, recalling the rumors that had been flying around from the Interduchy Tournament all the way to the Archduke Conference. “That reminds me—they say that this archduke candidate, Rozemyne, is responsible for all of the new trends in Ehrenfest. Is this true? Does your camp have any intelligence on Ehrenfest?” he asked.

“We had a feast in the castle when I last returned home, but they did not serve any of the food or sweets they offered during this year’s Archduke Conference. I know that new sweets were provided at tea parties either hosted or attended by Lady Rozemyne’s family, but that is all. And as you know, I have not been allowed to return to Ehrenfest since, so I am not particularly up to date on current affairs. That said, I do have reports from Detlinde’s attendant, Martina, and there is no doubting that Lady Rozemyne is leading these trends herself.”

“The problem with Fraularm is that her reports cannot be trusted. What purpose does she even serve as a dormitory supervisor?”

Despite her being a professor with a supposed specialization in the gathering and control of information, Fraularm’s reports tended to be highly subjective. Those from Ahrensbach had initially taken them at face value, which had greatly warped their understanding of the situation in Ehrenfest. As a result, despite their leaders being connected by blood, they had ended up far behind other duchies in diplomacy. It was quite a terrible situation indeed.

“I shall warn her myself, dear, so take care not to be too harsh with her,” Georgine said. “A direct scolding from the aub would only introduce unnecessary friction.”

There was also the Count Bindewald incident. Gieselfried accepted Georgine’s proposal and instructed her to give Fraularm a harsh warning against providing inaccurate reports.

“I will speak to Professor Fraularm and instruct Detlinde to strengthen relations with Ehrenfest,” Georgine said. “Incidentally... Ladies Aurelia and Bettina also had their marriages settled during the Archduke Conference, and we can trust they will provide us with intelligence going forward. Lord Lamprecht is the second son of the Ehrenfest knight commander, Lord Karstedt, and is Lady Rozemyne’s older brother by blood. He also serves as Lord Wilfried’s guard knight. We are sure to receive much information on Ehrenfest internal affairs.”

Gieselfried’s niece, Aurelia, was being wed to Lamprecht, the son of the Ehrenfest knight commander. Gieselfried saw no issue with this development, but... “Would Aurelia not have been enough?” he asked. “Did we have to force Bettina’s marriage too?”

“A single marriage would have been refused. Considering the market next year and our future relationship with Ehrenfest, wedding them both was the superior move,” Georgine replied. Her gaze then became somewhat distant, as though she had suddenly remembered something. She brought her red lips into a slight pout, as she often did when deep in thought. “Speaking of which, according to an old childhood friend of mine whom I spoke to briefly at the conference, there is a rumor that Ehrenfest’s new trends are in truth coming from Lady Rozemyne’s guardian, Lord Ferdinand.”

“Ferdinand...?” Gieselfried repeated. “I have heard that name before.” It was a distant memory, but from what he could recall, all of the Ehrenfest archduke candidates who had attended the Royal Academy were either eccentric enough to be widely discussed or intelligent enough to have achieved remarkable grades and commendations.

“Lord Ferdinand was taken in by my father soon after I wed, it seems. I met him for the first time during my last visit. My understanding is that he returned to noble society but went to the temple after graduating. He was present only at the beginning and end of my visit, when greetings and farewells were necessary. Do you know anything about him? As you recall, before I became first wife, I was in no real position to hear about the outside world.”

“A first-in-class candidate who entered the temple, hm...?” Gieselfried mused, now piecing it all together. He could picture the highly competent archduke

candidate who had once been forced into the temple, only able to display his talents indirectly through Rozemyne. Such a person would surely be quite a catch. It seemed an unfortunate waste to let such a multitude of demonstrated talents go unused, and with that thought, like electricity sparking from one point to another, Gieselfried had an idea.

“You seem to have thought of something. Might I ask what it is?” Georgine asked, her dark-green eyes sweet and hopeful. Her lips were curled into a more visible smile than usual, as if urging him to answer.

The Miracle of Haldenzel

I looked over my land as the giebe; before me was the spitting image of a new Haldenzel summer. Rocky surfaces were bared to the sky, flowers bloomed in a variety of colors, and short trees clustered together. It was far from how the province usually looked in the middle of spring.

So this is what spring in Haldenzel is truly like, acquired through a proper Spring Prayer...

Upon hearing our song celebrating the coming of spring and the beginning of the hunt, Lady Rozemyne had noted its presence in the High Bishop's bible as a request for the melting of the snow and the coming of the Goddess of Water. I had pushed the women to sing along on a whim, purely for the sake of amusement, and this simple change had caused a magic circle to appear on the Spring Prayer stage. Then again, Lady Rozemyne alone had kept her hands on the stage and offered prayers and gratitude throughout, so perhaps she was the true cause of everything that had happened.

The magic circle had risen into the air before being sucked into the chalices, forming massive pillars of green light. An instant later, the laynoble women on the stage had collapsed and Spring Prayer was thrown into chaos. The province's elites had gathered to discuss what had happened, but as they had never seen the magic circle before, it was impossible for them to determine what effects it might have. Their impromptu meeting had come to an end when the women recovered, and after a night of violent thunderstorms, Haldenzel awoke to find that the once snow-covered province was as green as any early summer's day.

The snow is nowhere to be seen... The feybeasts will most likely become active now.

I mounted my highbeast and took flight, staring down at the shrubs and boulders where feybeasts usually made their nests. I was grateful that the melting of the snow had come early, but the weather was much too different

from usual; we needed to gather information on how far the effects of Spring Prayer had reached, as well as how fast it was accelerating the breeding and growth of the summer feybeasts. Although we would normally seek help from any commoners who were skilled at hunting, there was simply no time. We needed as many knights with highbeasts as possible.

Our knights alone won't be enough...

Thankfully enough, the Knight's Order had accompanied the archducal family to Haldenzel. I requested assistance from Lord Karstedt, the knight commander and my little sister's husband. It seemed a fair trade, since it was inevitable that the archduke and surrounding giebes would ask him about this incident, and I was sure the Knight's Order would appreciate an opportunity to perform an investigation on the province, which was usually closed off and resistant to outside influence. It was also their duty to weaken the Lord of Winter by diminishing the number of feybeasts.

"I wish to investigate the area around the border gate to Klassenberg with the Knight's Order, while at the same time hunting feybeasts," I said. "The events here will no doubt be discussed at the Archduke Conference, for business reasons, so I am sure the aub will find them of much interest."

Lord Karstedt easily accepted the request, and so we divided the labor between ourselves. We did not want the Order to pillage our province's valuable ingredients and cause problems with the commoners, so they and I were going to the north, where fewer people lived. Our own knights would go to the south.

"Kieferdeckes!"

The snow had completely melted even near the border gate on the far northern border, and the nearby feybeasts had begun to move. I let out a shout and readied my bow, while Lord Karstedt immediately equipped a suitable weapon and started shouting orders.

"Scatter! Don't let a single one escape!"

Kieferdeckes weren't particularly strong, but they lived in clumps and would scatter upon noticing a predator. They laid eggs from the end of spring through to the end of summer, and considering the damage they often did to crops,

hunting them now would make autumn much easier for us.

As we advanced our hunt, the border between Haldenzel and Klassenberg came into view. Under normal circumstances, one could not identify the duchy barrier without touching it, but its presence was now blatantly obvious. Klassenberg's side was buried under thick snow, while ours was a lush green.

"So this is the strength of Verdrenna the Goddess of Thunder..." I said, unable to contain my awe, swallowing hard as I sensed an impossible power not visible to the naked eye. I had so often spoken the names of the gods when performing large-scale magic, but the effects of those spells had never given me a feeling of such divine magnificence before. "I was surprised when I saw the expanse of green from the castle, but to think it would reach all the way to the duchy border..."

We landed by the border gate and observed the border, which now stood as proof of the gods' divine powers. Unlike the gates to Frenbeltag or the old Zausengas, the gate to Klassenberg remained firmly shut and there were no knights stationed there. On the Haldenzel side, there was an open space for hunters to set up camp and a small shed that kept firewood.

"Lord Karstedt, shall we rest?" I asked. "We came here without pause, hunting feybeasts along the way, and there is firewood ready."

"Good idea. It's a bit early, but we should have lunch while there aren't any feybeasts around. Men, preparations."

The knights climbed down from their highbeasts and did as they were instructed, lighting fires and boiling water to soften their rations. Lord Karstedt and I sat on nearby rocks and watched them work. Behind them was the closed border gate.

I wonder whether they'll open it now... Some students had mentioned that the aub had received many business requests from other duchies during the Interduchy Tournament, and refusing one from Klassenberg was hardly an option.

"Lord Karstedt." I tossed him a sound-blocking magic tool, which he caught with ease and firmly grasped. "What's the likelihood of this border gate being opened?" He stood guard over the aub at almost all times, so I was sure he

would know something about the matter.

Lord Karstedt glanced over at the gate and then fell into thought for a moment. “We plan to open it as soon as possible. Once that happens and merchants start traveling through, Haldenzel stands to gain much.”

I couldn’t help but furrow my brow; it sounded as though they thought we should be thankful for that. An important aspect of interduchy diplomacy was ensuring that any merchants traveling between the two duchies were completely safe while following up on business deals; it was an entirely different matter from the traveling merchants who wandered around without belonging to any one duchy in particular. Far from bringing wealth to Haldenzel, we would probably be held accountable whenever a merchant fell victim to a feybeast attack.

“This land has many feybeasts,” I commented. “The merchants will surely be under constant threat.”

“That’s why Haldenzel’s hunters are going to be hired as guards,” Lord Karstedt replied. “They may be commoners, but they’re used to dealing with feybeasts. Were you not saying that you needed more work for commoners, to secure more money and food for winter? Surely this is in your best interest.”

His response sounded a lot more like the aub’s words than his own, and they almost certainly were. An indescribable sense of disgust welled up inside of me; did he realize just how long ago I had mentioned our struggles? I had thought that Lord Karstedt and the aub had sent Rozemyne here out of consideration, since they knew about our hardships, but apparently not.

I allowed a troubled smile to reach my face, but nothing more. “It seems to me that your Dregarnuhr no longer weaves, Lord Karstedt.” I had sought help over five years ago, when Lady Veronica was still the dominant political power. Despite the fact that Haldenzel saw smaller-than-average harvests to begin with, she had used every option available to her to sever our connection to Leisegang, the breadbasket of Ehrenfest. The situation had eventually deteriorated to the point that my people faced starvation, and it was then that I requested the aub’s help through Karstedt.

“Please contain Lady Veronica’s tyranny. If that cannot be done, please deliver

mana chalices to us once again. If you cannot manage that, then please, at least send us extra food for the winter. I do not mind if you simply purchase the feybeasts we hunt to weaken the Lord of Winter at a slightly higher price. Just, please. Any help at all."

Haldenzel and Leisegang had formed an inseparable bond over the generations due to the Lord of Winter; Haldenzel played a key part in its defeat each year, and the speed at which it was defeated heavily influenced the next year's harvest. I had thought that Lord Karstedt would understand, since his wife was a Haldenzel and his mother a Leisegang, but it had taken years for my request to be granted.

"Chalices filled with mana to wet the dry ground, food support from Leisegang following the imprisonment of Lady Veronica, money from the printing industry... All of my wishes from back then have been granted by Lady Rozemyne," I said.

Haldenzel had changed dramatically over the past five years or so. If not even Karstedt, who was married to Elvira and closer to Haldenzel than most from the Noble's Quarter, could understand this, suggestions from the archduke would certainly be of zero use to us.

"If the gate is opened and our hunters are assigned to guard the merchants coming through it, I suspect that the next Lord of Winter will be considerably larger than you have grown accustomed to," I remarked. "Do you and the aub think the same?"

Guarding merchants would restrict our hunters' movements to the roads and use up time they normally would have spent hunting feybeasts all throughout Haldenzel. This meant the Lord of Winter would grow in size, which would in turn place a greater burden on the knights whose duty it was to hunt it. To make matters worse, if the coming of spring was delayed as a result, it would impact every harvest in the duchy.

"Guarding the merchants of other duchies or hunting feybeasts in the summer—I would like the archduke to carefully consider which of these takes priority before the border gate is opened. I have faith that he will not blame Haldenzel for the consequences of whatever decision he makes as Lady

Veronica once would have.”

Although I spoke with a smile, there was no truth to my words; I did not have faith in the archduke at all. If whatever choice he made resulted in an inconvenience, he would doubtless push all the blame onto Haldenzel. That was exactly why I needed to emphasize my position ahead of time and come up with a strategy to avoid the worst-case scenario. Such was my duty as the giebe.

“This year, I would like to pour my all into grasping the influence of the ritual. Adding the opening of the gate to this sudden change in weather would only complicate these efforts, but if you know of anyone who might be able to answer our questions at this moment in time, I would greatly like to hear his advice,” I continued. Although I spoke through euphemisms, my point was more than clear: it was impossible to tell whether Haldenzel could handle the workload that would come with opening the border gate, and if the aub thought otherwise, I wanted to hear his reasoning. “I can only pray that the aub’s Dregarnuhr has not likewise kept him five years in the past.”

It was then that a knight came to report that the water had started to boil. Lord Karstedt and I put our rations in our bowls and then handed them over. They were soon returned, the hot water having macerated the food.

It’s a little salty...

My first impression was not a positive one, but I continued eating nonetheless. The food eaten in Haldenzel tended toward slightly different flavors than that of the Noble’s Quarter, and complaining about the simple rations carried by knights had little meaning when there were no alternatives. They were easy to carry and enough to fill one’s stomach, but not something that was eaten for the taste.

As we ate in silence, Lord Karstedt took his sound-blocking magic tool and looked over at me. It seemed that he had something to say, so I gripped my magic tool in the hand I was using to hold my bowl.

“At the moment, the merchants have two safe options: going through old Zausengas’s border gate or through Frenbeltag. I’ll advise the aub not to open this border gate unless Klassenberg demands it. I would guess there’s just as many feybeasts on their side,” he said.

It was known that Klassenberg invested few resources into hunting feybeasts in its border towns, which meant it was relatively common for feybeasts to cross the barrier. At times, the archduke would even send us an emergency warning that an especially strong feybeast had entered our territory.

“Klassenberg will also need to shape up before merchants are allowed to pass through here. I don’t know how fast a greater duchy can act when it comes to a matter like this, but I assume they would not want merchants going through it this summer,” Lord Karstedt continued. He was identifying that the roads had narrowed through lack of use, and that there were few cities or towns along the way for merchants to use as resting spots. “That said, if news of this ritual spreads and you start hastening the coming of spring by yourselves, there should be cities and towns around here in five years’ time.”

Five years’ time? The fact that Lord Karstedt could ignore immediate problems to focus on the far future made him appear quite the optimist, but that was to be expected of someone from the Noble’s Quarter. I had endured this harsh environment all my life and did not share his optimism in the least.

“Thick snow disappeared from all the plains, forests, and mountains over a single night,” I said, “yet there was no flooding. Where did all the water go? Is there a risk that the summer rays might cause a drought? Will the feybeasts breed and grow faster than before? And when will the end of autumn come now that spring has begun so soon? There are too many unanswered questions for me to start planning five years into the future.” His expectations were unreasonable when understanding our current situation would require so much time and observation.

“It was a ritual that melted the snow; I doubt you will encounter any water-related issues,” Karstedt replied. “Have you investigated your province’s past to see how this was handled back when the ritual was done properly?”

“We suspect that the details of the ritual were changed when our ancestor was entrusted with the position of giebe.”

Approximately two hundred years had passed since Eisenreich was crushed for treason against the king. Ehrenfest had been born from its ashes, and once the king had redrawn the barrier lines and replaced the archduke, the new aub

had assigned giebes to oversee the land. Naturally, ruling was done differently from the Eisenreich era, as Aub Ehrenfest worked to avoid any possible associations with the fallen duchy.

My ancestor had been entrusted with the position of giebe when Ehrenfest was founded, and it was reasonable to assume they had tried to distance themselves from Eisenreich in a similar manner. It was even possible that, in a small act of defiance, the commoners had failed to teach their new giebe the proper method for conducting rituals. For those of us in the present, it was impossible to know exactly what had happened; there were records of my ancestor struggling to adapt to Haldenzel but nothing from before that.

“I would like the aub to check the castle for any records from the Eisenreich era, specifically any that might cover the ritual,” I said.

“I’ll ask, but he’s busy preparing for the Archduke Conference, so you’ll most likely have to wait until after that’s done. That said... maybe there are records still in the temple,” Karstedt suggested. It seemed possible, but then I recalled what Lady Rozemyne had said.

“According to Lady Rozemyne, the ritual was described only in the High Bishop’s bible, which contained the correct lyrics and several pictures,” I explained. “That said, the sudden arrival of spring came as a surprise even to her.” She had noticed that our ceremony and the lyrics we sang differed from what was mentioned in the bible, but she did not seem at all informed on the particulars of the ceremony.

“I know. Rozemyne was apparently so afraid of the thunder that she couldn’t sleep. Elvira mentioned receiving such reports from her attendants,” Lord Karstedt said with a chuckle, then asking me to keep this a secret to preserve Lady Rozemyne’s honor. I found this news strange, to say the least; the fact that Elvira and Lord Karstedt had been discussing their child almost made them sound like a normal couple.

When the previous Aub Ehrenfest had fallen ill and Lady Veronica had further secured her hold on power, Lord Karstedt had taken one of her attendants as a second wife and a noble of the Veronica faction as his third. As his first wife, Elvira had found it quite distressful that Lord Karstedt was neglecting her as he

became wholly devoted to his new wife, and soon enough, she stopped speaking about him entirely when we visited the Noble's Quarter for winter socializing and the summer Starbinding. It was apparent that he was not a prominent figure in her daily life, since she would speak of her growing children and nothing more.

Since when did this change...?

I looked at Lord Karstedt, who was finishing the last of his rations. There was only one possible explanation: Elvira had found a new lease on life while looking after Lady Rozemyne as her own child. This change hadn't come about simply because she had found a new hobby in writing books or because she was putting on airs for the formal event that was Spring Prayer; my little sister's relationship with her husband had improved in the real sense.

"Speaking of which, Lord Karstedt... I heard you were bragging about your wife to Lady Rozemyne."

"Nguh...!" Something flew from Karstedt's mouth as he went into a sudden coughing fit. The guards around us looked over in surprise as he tried to compose himself with a hand over his mouth.

Hm... I suppose it's true, then.

He had told Lady Rozemyne to be quiet about it at Spring Prayer but hadn't denied the words themselves. This had taken even Elvira by surprise; although she had teased him with the most composed expression she could muster, she had been blinking much faster than usual.

"Lord Claudio," Lord Karstedt said once his coughing had subsided, fixing me with a glare as he sipped from his water flask. He was thrown off more than I expected; how long had it been since he had last called me by my name? As the knight commander, he normally stood behind the archduke during both winter socializing and the summer Starbind Ceremony. Our family exchanges of information were generally done through Elvira, meaning we rarely spoke directly like this.

"Should you not deliver your words of praise directly to Elvira, not to Lady Rozemyne?" I asked.

“I appreciate your considerate advice,” Lord Karstedt shot back. There was a slight defiance in his ice-blue eyes that reminded me of days long past, back when he had grumbled about the engagement arranged by his parents.

“I realize it has been quite some time since you and I have spoken as ourselves, unburdened by our respective positions as knight commander and giebe. Is there anything that you wish to say to or ask me, Lord Karstedt? I am sure that an opportunity like this will not come again any time soon.”

I had stated my requests as Giebe Haldenzel and given my advice as Elvira’s brother; there was nothing more I wanted to say. Lord Karstedt, however, had not raised anything himself. He started to ponder my question. The hard frown on his face told me that he was going to take a while, so I cleansed my bowl and such in the meantime. Once I was done, I glanced over to see that he was slowly stroking his mustache.

“Well... What do you think of Rozemyne’s engagement?” he asked. “I’m curious, since you were softer on Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte than I expected.”

“Are you asking for my thoughts as Giebe Haldenzel or my personal opinion as Claudio?” I replied with a grin, returning his question with one of my own.

Again, Lord Karstedt paused for a moment, pondering an answer. “This will be our only opportunity to talk, so I want to hear your opinion as both,” he said. “You don’t need to worry about being polite; I want to hear your true thoughts.”

“As a giebe, I want the most competent candidate to become the next aub. I would be even more grateful were that aub to be family. It is my honest opinion that Lady Rozemyne is the most suitable choice, considering that she came first in her class in the Royal Academy despite being occupied with her High Bishop duties and introducing various profitable industries to the duchy.”

To attend the Royal Academy, one needed to store mana in feystones which they would then use during classes. And yet, Lady Rozemyne had participated in religious ceremonies between terms and even lent feystones filled with her mana to blue priests. Even Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte were using feystones she had given them for Spring Prayer, so it was easy to see that she

was unique among all the archduke candidates.

“And thus, I am exceedingly disappointed that this engagement will prevent her from becoming the next aub,” I continued. “I assume this thought is shared by the Leisegangs and all the nobles who support Lady Rozemyne.”

“The most competent candidate, hm...? Well, I suppose you would think that if you looked at her grades in isolation,” Lord Karstedt murmured, nodding in a way that suggested he didn’t entirely agree with what he had just heard. I raised an eyebrow, prompting him to continue, but he provided no further explanation.

“I find it unfortunate,” I said, “but as Giebe Haldenzel, I also understand it was a natural result.”

“Oh?”

“I know that Rozemyne is not Elvira’s own daughter. Truth be told, when I heard that my little sister would be performing the baptism, I doubted my ears. The thought of your infidelity enraged me.”

As Elvira’s older brother by blood, I had seen Cornelius and all her sons while they were still infants. The fact that I had not seen Lady Rozemyne once before her baptism was enough for me to know she was not my little sister’s daughter. It was possible that she was the daughter of Lord Karstedt’s third wife, considering her age, but her true origins were completely unknown.

“Trying to establish an aub who does not have relatives of the same mother is exceedingly dangerous,” I explained. “Still, were Lady Rozemyne healthier, I would have agreed with Leisegang’s position that she should be the next archduke with Wilfried as her groom.”

Lady Rozemyne was so weak and sickly that it wasn’t even known if she could birth children. A ruling archduchess in such a situation was commonly succeeded by a male sibling of the same mother or his children due to their similar mana capacities, and that was the issue—this archducal family did not come from the same mother. Nobles of the Leisegang faction thought that Lady Rozemyne was Elvira’s daughter and that Bonifatius’s children could therefore provide support if necessary, but that was not the case. If she was indeed the daughter of the third wife, then her blood relatives were instead the Joisontaks

—that is, the house that had already been destroyed and its members executed for assaulting the archducal family.

“In the sense that he lacks relatives of the same mother, I consider Lord Ferdinand to be similar,” I continued. “Old Man Leisegang is supporting him purely to expunge Ehrenfest of Ahrensbach blood, but having Lord Ferdinand and Lady Rozemyne as the archducal couple would introduce too great a risk. They would eventually need to choose their successor, and if she ultimately cannot bear a child, there would be inevitable tragedy and even war.”

For those reasons, it was not a mistake to make Lord Wilfried the next archduke with Lady Rozemyne as his first wife.

“In that case, Lord Claudio, what are your personal thoughts?”

“I think it depends on Lady Rozemyne. What matters to me as an individual is what she thinks of this engagement and whether the archduke is forcing her into it.”

How was her sibling relationship with Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte? Did she intend to stand above Lord Wilfried? Was she opposed to the engagement? Those were the questions that had played on my mind. I had made a few probing remarks while guiding her to her seat, but she had indicated her intention to support her future husband. Furthermore, while I had thought the archduke had forced temple work exclusively onto his adopted daughter, in reality, his children by blood were participating in Spring Prayer as well. I had seen Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte display clear respect for their sister.

“On that note,” I continued, “I saw no indication that she disapproves of or has any distaste for Lord Wilfried. Lord Wilfried was also not as foolish as I was led to believe. He understands that mana and religious ceremonies are linked to the harvest. As long as he continues to embrace Lady Rozemyne’s uncanny nature and mana quantity and continues to be supportive, I imagine he will do just fine as the next archduke.”

Of course, because Lord Wilfried already had a black mark on his reputation, it would require great effort on his part to be accepted as the next archduke. It was a task that would take him quite some time, but I didn’t consider it impossible.

“Rozemyne’s uncanny nature...? Hm. Few others seem to comment on that. Instead, they focus only on how surprisingly competent she is,” Lord Karstedt said, sounding a bit surprised.

“It must be because she was raised in the temple. I could sense her feelings for the gods, and her approach to rituals is quite uncanny indeed. It is almost as if she holds a perspective that is fundamentally different from our own.”

After seeing all the snow vanish overnight, she had just commented that the goddesses had done a good job, as if nothing extraordinary had happened at all. Whether this nonchalance had come from some iron spirit or her extreme faith in the gods, I could not tell, but there was no denying that she was abnormal.

“If we are to continue summoning spring early by performing this Spring Prayer each year, Lady Rozemyne’s perspective is going to be essential,” I went on. “The culture may shift to focus more directly on the temple and its ceremonies that have thus far been scorned and looked down upon. Lord Wilfried will need to show the strength of character required to embrace the vast changes Lady Rozemyne will establish.”

“So you are not inherently opposed to their engagement... That is good to know.”

“I am not entirely happy with it either, but if the aub made this decision to keep Lady Rozemyne in Ehrenfest then he has taken the right course of action. Her wisdom and skill are beyond her years; she would have been stolen by a top-ranking duchy in the blink of an eye.”

Lord Karstedt nodded and then stood up. “I’ll make sure the archduke hears your thoughts. I’m sure they’ll enhearten him.”

“I appreciate that, but I must warn you, tensions in Ehrenfest will not ease for some time. Old Man Leisegang and his lot will never agree to the aub’s will and actions here. You have a Leisegang mother; do you think you could strengthen your bonds with your family and contain them?” I asked, watching Lord Karstedt as he used waschen to clean his bowl and such. He searched for words before eventually shaking his head.

“I am the knight commander. My duty is to protect the archduke, not manage faction politics. And as Rozemyne’s father, I will not be so foolish as to

personally approach the Leisegang faction during this sensitive time."

"I see. So this is a hardship that Elvira will face alone."

"Protecting the duchy and the aub are my top priorities. Family must come second. Elvira understands this, and as a woman of Haldenzel, she is more than capable of enduring these fights alone when necessary. She has rare qualities that make her better suited to being the first wife of a knight commander than any other... although I only realized this after Rozemyne pointed it out."

"Oh...? And it was after this sudden realization that you began to brag about your wife to Lady Rozemyne, I presume."

Lord Karstedt shot me a glare before tossing back the sound-blocking magic tool. It seemed that our rest was over. I couldn't help but chuckle as I placed the magic tools back into my leather pouch, reflecting that this time had proved more productive than I expected. It was good to see that my little sister's marriage had evolved into something so heartwarming.

"I shall now gather the blenrus fruits," I said. "They are valuable enough that only the people of Haldenzel are allowed to gather them, and for that reason, any of you who attempt to poach some will be killed on sight. You knights may rest here and wait for the gathering to be completed." After confirming that my threat was understood, I summoned my highbeast. My plan was to give fruit to Lady Rozemyne, to express that Haldenzel was in her debt, and to Lord Wilfried and Lady Charlotte, to express our respect for the current archducal family. "Now then, Lord Karstedt. Shall we go?"

"Oh? Am I considered to be a Haldenzel?" Lord Karstedt asked. He had gone to sit back down on the rock where he had eaten lunch but was now frozen in a slight squat, staring at me in complete surprise.

I returned a similar look of surprise. "Are you not Elvira's husband and Lady Rozemyne's father?" I asked, urging him on with a smile.

"It would be an honor." Lord Karstedt formed and then mounted his own highbeast, and together we headed to the nearest blenrus feyplant. "What are you planning, Lord Claudio? Given how I've been treated in Haldenzel, I hardly thought I was considered family."

“We simply disliked you for ignoring Elvira. You are still family. I would not have permitted you to come otherwise.”

“So you say, but your actual reasoning is that you need some assistance, since gathering fruit for three people is too much for you to do on your own. Am I correct in that assumption? You’re making the same face that Elvira always does when her true reasoning differs from what she’s saying.”

He was indeed correct; it seemed that Lord Karstedt actually did pay attention to Elvira. It was a surprising development that made me reevaluate how I saw him, but only slightly. He had spent many years overlooking my little sister. I wanted him to continue treating her better.

“Just on the other side of this boulder,” I said. “We’ll set our highbeasts down here. Also, hold this.”

We protected the few precious blenrus trees we had using barriers, which saved them from being destroyed by feybeasts or looted by outsiders. Only those who held the seal of my people were capable of passing through. I gave one such seal to Lord Karstedt, passed through the barrier myself, and then circled the boulder. There stood a golden, glowing blenrus tree, with a dozen or so fruits hanging from its branches. And at its base, I saw something unbelievable.

“Blenrus sprouts...?”

Before my very eyes were several sprouts, all gleaming a similar bright gold. I swallowed hard, unable to believe what I was seeing. It was impossible. Never before had I seen a blenrus sprout, despite having been born and raised in Haldenzel. It was precisely because new blenrus feyplants never grew that we protected them with such strong barriers. We had tried burying their fruit in the earth, scattering seeds, and even grafting, but our efforts had all been in vain. And yet, the golden sprouts before me were those of new blenrus trees, as their colors and the shapes of their leaves confirmed. This, too, was doubtless a miracle from the goddess, brought forth by Spring Prayer.

“Lord Claudio, is something wrong?”

“A miracle has occurred in Haldenzel...”

I could feel a warmth rising in my chest. A gentle breeze informed me of the beginning of a new era, and my heart quivered with emotion as I realized that I was experiencing the very moment in history when Haldenzel would be changed forever. I swallowed again, but this time, overjoyed tears began to well up in my eyes.

We will continue to perform Spring Prayer.

It was a mana-intensive ceremony that placed a heavy burden on the women of our province, but Lady Rozemyne had informed me that there was a way for men to help as well. As the giebe, I needed to ensure that the miracle-spawning Spring Prayer would continue. I needed to bring true wealth back to Haldenzel.

I reached out for the blenrus fruit, taking great care not to step on the sprouts. My initial plan had been to pick one for each of the three children, but I decided on two instead. I wanted to give my thanks to Lady Rozemyne, who had given life to such a wondrous miracle.

“Praise be to the gods. Glory be to the gods...”

It was on that day that I did something I had never done before—I prayed to the gods from the very bottom of my heart.

Preventing Destructive Reconstruction

“Heya, Gunther. Welcome back,” a soldier I recognized said as we passed through the east gate. “How was Hasse this year?”

“The job’s not done ’til we reach the temple, and we ain’t there yet. Let’s pray there aren’t any problems on the way,” I replied. As we led the carriages into the city, I scanned the stalls lined up on the main street for something to eat. “Hey, Leckle. Go buy some of those sandwiches.”

“Commander. We’re not at the temple yet. Maybe we should wait until after our guard duty is over. That way, we won’t have to rush our food.”

“You lot might be able to take your time, but I need to tell the other commanders and the guild heads about what Lady Rozemyne told me. I don’t have time to waste on a slow lunch,” I declared, fixing the man with a glare. He pretty much leapt out of our formation and rushed over to the stall, soon coming back with two sandwiches. Several thin slices of meat had been slapped between the bread.

“You’re not the only one Lady Rozemyne informed of the danger, commander. I want to help too,” Leckle said, handing one sandwich to me while taking a big bite out of the other.

“Glad to hear it.” I gave him enough coin to pay for both sandwiches, and the next thing I knew, all the other soldiers returning from Hasse had rushed off to buy lunch too.

“Trying to get a head start, eh, Leckle?”

“We’re gonna earn points with the High Bishop too!”

“Commander, I’m the fastest guy outta any of these losers! Please, trust me with your messages!”

It was exciting to finally be back in town, sure, but it was poor discipline for them all to rush away at once. I glanced around cautiously with my sandwich in hand.

“Commander, what should we do?” Leckle asked. “Now might not be the time to just go and tell everyone...”

“We’ll tell the Plantin Company when we drop the priests off at the temple and give the carriages back. They should pass that on to the guildmaster.” I knew plenty of people in the Plantin Company and the Merchant’s Guild through Myne. The merchants would probably do something once I made it clear this was a direct warning from her. “As for the head craftsmen and the commanders at the other gates... I want you all to split up and tell ’em that I’m holding a meeting tomorrow. I’ll make it all clear then.”

“Tomorrow will be too late, commander. How about fifth bell today?”

“They’ll gather in no time if we tell ’em their houses are potentially bein’ destroyed because of noble business.”

“Maybe, but the foremen are gonna hear about this before you know it, and they’re not gonna wait until tomorrow for an explanation.”

My soldiers tapped their chests and volunteered to deliver the messages, not showing any exhaustion from their journey back from Hasse. It was a sight that warmed my heart. Myne was fighting alone in noble society, keeping her connection to us a secret while still making sure we stayed safe. I needed to make sure the lower city stayed clean after the remodeling was done. What kind of a father would I be otherwise?

“Alright. Fifth bell. You lot divide the city among yourselves. Good luck.”

“Yes, sir!”

I bit into my sandwich. The meat was tough and salty, a far cry from the fancy dinner I had eaten at the monastery last night, but that thought was quickly blown away as a bunch of warnings Myne had given me popped back into my head.

“I’m not gonna let them cast that big-ass magic that’d flip the lower city upside down,” Leckle muttered to himself beside me, his words matching my thoughts exactly.

I gave a hard nod. “Right. We’re damn lucky Lady Rozemyne fought for us, otherwise we would’ve lost our homes without even knowing what was

happening. Just thinking about it sends a chill down my spine. We can't let her warnings go to waste. I'm gonna protect this city no matter what." It was the promise I had made to Myne, but as I steeled my resolve once again, Leckle pointed at himself with his thumb.

"I'm gonna protect it too, commander."

"You're not the only one who gets to show off, sir!" added another soldier. "I'm gonna be the one to protect the city!" More and more voices called out after him, all young men boasting that they were going to keep our homes safe. It was impossible for us to lose now.

"Okay," I said with a grin. "Let's do this."

"Yeah!"

The temple gate came into view, as did the people waiting there for us. "Is that... Lutz?" I said to myself. Unless my eyes were fooling me, he had come as the Plantin Company representative—the person who took back the carriages and gave us our payment. I was used to him staying in Hasse after our trips to do business, so this was my first time seeing him wait by the temple. Still, I was lucky to have someone I could actually sit down with and talk to properly here.

"Thank you, honorable soldiers. I accept these carriages in the name of the Plantin Company and wish to express how grateful we are that you completed your guard duty successfully. Here is your payment from Lady Rozemyne," Lutz said. He was wearing the kind of expression and speaking as politely as you'd normally expect from a boy born into riches, holding out a bag of money as the gray priests climbed down from the carriages.

Nobody would ever believe this kid's from the south side of the city...

I accepted our compensation as the commander of the north gate. Since the Plantin Company were the ones who had hired us to guard the priests, they were the ones who paid us too. It wasn't as simple as dividing the coins between ourselves, though—the money was instead added to the gate's finances, where any expenses were subtracted, and then whatever remained would get added to our wages. Only the money that Myne gave us in Hasse went straight into our pockets. It was a nice little bonus we could keep secret from our families, which was exactly why the soldiers loved taking up this job so

much.

“We got an important warning from Lady Rozemyne at the monastery,” I said. It was only a small reaction, but Lutz’s merchant smile became more defensive when I spoke Myne’s name. “You and the Merchant’s Guild probably know about this already, but...”

After listening to my explanation of what the nobles were planning and the warnings Myne had given me, Lutz went pale. “Seriously...?” he murmured in a quiet voice that only I was able to hear. “The Merchant’s Guild informed all the merchants in the city of the scholars’ message that large-scale remodeling is going to be done, but we didn’t know that even the southern side needed to be clean, nor that everything is going to be flipped upside down...”

Seems like Myne didn’t use the temple to tell them everything...

According to Tuuli, Myne couldn’t use her hidden room in the temple anymore, which meant she couldn’t speak to the Plantin Company as freely as she’d used to. That probably explained things.

“Lady Rozemyne probably thought the Plantin Company wouldn’t be able to keep an eye on the south side of the city too,” I guessed. “How many people have the Merchant’s Guild told already?”

“Northern citizens with connections to the Othmar Company, the western market, the eastern stores, and all the merchants with permission to open stands on the main street.”

“Right. If they’re able to handle all that, we can focus on the south. Oh, and there’s another message that you lot from the Plantin Company need to pass on to the Merchant’s Guild: keeping the stores clean ain’t enough; they’ve gotta keep the streets around their homes clean too.”

Lutz didn’t say anything in response. He just nodded, clearly tense.

“We’re planning on getting the gate commanders and the heads of all the guilds together at fifth bell to pass Lady Rozemyne’s warning on. It’s gonna be in a conference room in the middle of the city. You can come along with the Merchant’s Guild if you wanna know the details.”

“Understood. You have my sincere gratitude for this valuable warning.”

After telling Lutz our plans, we left the temple. We barely had any time if we wanted to make sure everyone knew about this.

“Listen up, everyone. Once you’ve finished spreading the word, come back to the gate, then head home for the day. Pass the info on to anyone you bump into on your way back. ’Course, you can drop by any taverns you come across too.”

The soldiers scattered from the central plaza. It wouldn’t take them too long to get the word out, since most craftsman guilds were in the middle of the city anyway. In the meantime, I headed to the central soldier building to deliver our payment to a clerk and then used my authority as commander to reserve a meeting room.

“Hey! Your soldiers are spreading some sick as hell rumors! What’s going on here?!” a burly foreman demanded.

“Yeah, explain!” another shouted. “I don’t have a clue what this is about!”

As expected, the foremen who had overheard the message were getting here before anyone else. Getting the clerk to send them over here had clearly been the right move.

“I told the heads of the guilds to come here, not you lot,” I said.

“You really think we’re gonna sit around when nobles want to break all our houses down?!”

“Yeah, no way! Now get talkin’ already!”

More and more foremen were gathering, and they were pushier than ever. The problem was, the important people hadn’t arrived yet. “I scheduled this meeting for fifth bell so the city’s higher-ups can all come at once. I don’t have time to do this whole thing twice. Either shut up and wait or get back to work.”

“Like hell we’re gonna wait, moron! I wanna get this over and done with so I can figure out what to do!” an older man yelled. “C’mon! Spit out what you know!” He stepped forward and furiously moved to grab my shoulders, so I gave him a hard elbow to the chest before flinging him over me and onto the ground. The conference room fell silent in an instant.

“Last chance,” I said to the forming crowd. “If you don’t keep quiet, I’ll kick you all out and you won’t learn a thing. I’m the soldier here, and you best remember that.”

By fifth bell, the heads of the guilds and other gate commanders had all arrived. I recognized some of the people from the Merchant’s Guild, who had come even though they must have been real busy. Freida, Myne’s old friend, was among them, looking all around with curious eyes. She had grown up to be a real beauty. I hadn’t seen her in a while, but she must’ve remembered me because she smiled when we made eye contact.

As expected, there were also a ton of uninvited craftsmen. Some were stuck outside the conference room, but that wasn’t my problem; they could ask their bosses to explain the situation to them later. I relayed everything Myne had told me, approaching this under the assumption that the nobles had misled everyone with their half-assed warning. I made sure they knew that, while our homes and our lives were going to be safe this time, they would seriously upend the entire city if we didn’t keep things clean.

“Huh? Whaddaya mean, ‘upend the entire city’?” someone asked.

“I mean exactly what I said. They’ll come back and start changing the two ivory floors made with the archduke’s magic, which means all the wooden extensions we live in will vanish for good.”

“Hold on a moment! Are those nobles insane?!”

“They can’t do that! That’s going way too far! You’ve gotta be lying to us! Burn you!”

The foulmouthed foremen spat swears at me, calling me a liar, but those who had actual experience with nobles—the commanders and the employees of the Merchant’s Guild—had gone completely rigid. I glowered at the foremen and puffed out my chest.

“That’s enough! If you’re here to whine, do it outside! You’re getting in the way of us talking! I know a lotta you live in the south and don’t know how terrifying nobles and their mana really are, but this is the kinda crap they’d pull without a second thought!”

The men barked laughs, still not convinced. Freida stood up and turned to look over them. “I am the daughter of the Othmar Company, and I work for the Merchant’s Guild,” she said. “This man is not lying to you. I have been taught that this entire city was built long ago with archducal magic. I believe it would be simple for the archduke to reconstruct this city or make it disappear entirely, with a bit of preparation. Such large-scale magic may happen without us knowing it, and in the blink of an eye, our homes might disappear forever and we along with them.”

A visibly rich girl explaining the origins of the city in such polite language was enough to get the foremen, who were uneducated and ignorant, to shut up.

“And to be clear,” I added, “nobles think of us like stray dogs; they wouldn’t give two craps if we all died. We’re nothing to them.”

The foremen must have finally started to feel the danger, as they were now giving each other uneasy looks.

“But we were lucky this time,” I went on. “Rozemyne, the High Bishop, knows us soldiers from our trips to Hasse. It was out of concern for us that she explained how we can keep the city clean.”

“Really? How?” the foremen asked, leaning forward. The heads of the guilds all did the same.

“What I’m about to say needs to be told to everyone. Commanders, tell your soldiers. Guilds, tell your foremen. Foremen, tell your craftsmen. And everyone, tell your family and neighbors too—especially older folks who babysit and don’t go outside much, or those who are sickly and stuck in their beds all the time.”

I went on to list all the instructions Myne had given me. On the day of the reconstruction, we either had to stay inside our buildings or leave the city entirely to avoid getting wrapped up in things. That was easy enough.

“What’s important is what comes next,” I continued. “There’re gonna be places to get rid of garbage and waste so the city doesn’t get dirty again. We soldiers are gonna keep watch, but the best thing here would be for neighbors to keep each other on track.”

The south gate commander crossed his arms and fell into thought. “We’ll

need to discuss the details, but it seems like we might want to criminalize disobeying these orders. If someone refuses to listen, we should capture ’em, take their citizenship, and kick ’em out of the city.”

“What?! Citizenship?!” a foreman exclaimed.

“Whoa now! You’re gonna label people as criminals just for tossing out their trash?!”

The southern commander eyed the outraged voices in silence and then nodded. “Unlike before, tossing out trash now runs the risk of destroying homes. Families, tens of thousands of ’em, are gonna be on the line here. Right, Gunther?”

“Yeah. North, south... It’s all the same to them.”

The southern commander looked over everyone in the room. “If we want to protect this city’s peace, we need to kick out dangerous people and make sure nobody follows their example. What’s the point in letting people play with fire when the nobles are clearly ready to turn everything we know on its head at a moment’s notice?” He waited for anyone to protest, but nobody did. “Alright. Once the city’s been reconstructed, tell everyone that tossing trash out the old way is a crime punishable by expulsion now.”

Once the meeting was over, the foremen were the first ones to rush out. The heads of the guilds and the Merchant’s Guild promised to be thorough about telling everyone too. The commanders and some soldiers ended up staying behind, and we had dinner at a nearby tavern, where we ironed out the details on boosting our patrols and getting rid of criminals.

We split up at seventh bell. I hadn’t signed out for the day, so instead of making my way home, I started down the pitch-black road to the north gate. A night guard saw me a short while later and ran over.

“Commander, we heard everything from Leckle and the others. This certainly is something. They signed out and then left right away. You should get home too. Tomorrow you can... come in late, and patrol your neighborhood on the way.”

They had all done their jobs properly, then. I asked the night guard to spread

word on what we had decided in the meeting before turning around and making my way home.

“Oh, Gunther. I expected you home earlier. You usually return from Hasse around noon,” Effa said once I was finally back. She glanced toward the bedroom. “Kamil’s already fast asleep.”

I crept into the bedroom to see his sleeping face. He was in a deep enough slumber that I wasn’t worried about my shuffling waking him up.

“How was Lady Rozemyne? You saw her up close, right? Did she say anything?” Effa asked from the kitchen. I could tell from her voice that she had gotten real impatient; I was blessed to get to speak to Myne, but she could only look at her from the temple doors.

Guess the work stuff can wait...

I set my things down and went back to the kitchen. “It was just like Tuuli said and what we saw outside the temple. She doesn’t look any different from before she went into that long sleep. She’s still... our little Myne.”

“Gunther.” Effa shot me a reproachful glare, but I didn’t see the issue. Kamil was out like a light; he wasn’t going to overhear us.

“She had the same look in her eyes too,” I said. “Not only has she not forgotten us, she’s still working hard in noble society to protect us in any way she can. It’s just like she promised.”

“Did something happen to... Lady Rozemyne?” Effa asked. She had fumbled over her words after a quick glance toward the bedroom, since she was fiercely upholding her own promise not to refer to Myne by her real name at home. She was just as stubborn as her daughters.

I gave her the details. “Myne opened a way for us to protect the city. What kinda father would I be if I didn’t make use of that?”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Yeah. Make sure Kamil and all our neighbors know about Myne’s warnings.” We needed to stay on guard as a family and as neighbors.

Effa nodded in response, her face pale. She knew better than most people

just how brutal nobles could be.

The same warnings and advice passed through the city, with commanders telling their soldiers, the Merchant's Guild telling all the merchants, and the guilds telling all the foremen, craftsmen, and apprentices. Everyone then spread this information to their family and neighbors, while we soldiers went out of our way to inform the sick and elderly, who weren't always made aware of such goings-on.

Myne's warning was spreading faster than I expected. As it turned out, the knowledge that messing up would result in everyone's homes being destroyed and that refusing to properly throw away waste was being criminalized was all the threat we needed to convince people to pay attention.

"The remodeling's gonna happen at fifth bell, three days from now. The knights just got word from the knight commander. Seems like he wants us to tell all the residents," I said. The knights staying at the north gate had given us the specific date a few days after Effa had told me the Gutenbergs were back from their trip.

"We know what to do," one soldier said. "We'll tell the commanders, the Merchant's Guild, and the craftsman guilds. Then we'll tell people we see on patrol."

"Right. I'm counting on you all."

The soldiers all dispersed. Unlike the nobles, we didn't have any tools for long-distance communication; instead, we had to run around to deliver messages. Thankfully enough, we didn't need to call a meeting this time. People just needed to know the date and time.

On the day of the remodeling, we started closing the gates at fourth bell, not wanting any outsiders to wander in and pay the ultimate price.

I started making my way home from the north gate with the morning-duty soldiers. We warned everyone we saw on the way to get back inside before fifth bell. The stands on the main streets connecting the west and east gates were all packed away, making the roads feel a lot wider than normal. The workshops

and stores were empty too; they had apparently all decided to close at noon. An air of tension and stress had spread through the city. The residents still on the streets were rushing home in such a panic that you'd think sixth bell had already rung and marked the end of the workday.

"We'll come and tell everyone when it's safe to go outside again," I said. "We don't know how long this'll take, but keep your windows shut and don't go outside until we say so, no matter what. Seems like even humans'll disappear if they get caught in this spell."

Once we had finished spreading the word, we returned to the north gate. Fifth bell rang not long after. We all gathered around the windows and gazed down at the city, wanting to see the archduke's magic. We waited with bated breath for who knows how long. None of us knew when the remodeling was going to happen or what it was going to look like.

Eventually, Myne appeared in the sky above the city with some knights. It was definitely her; there was no mistaking that weird-looking animal, and as soon as I saw it, I pressed my face against the tiny window to get a better look. That was definitely the archduke and his guards coming out to cast the wide-range spell. They flew from the temple to the sky far above the central plaza, which made them harder to see from the north gate.

"They're so far away, I can't recognize anyone but Lady Rozemyne..." I muttered.

"You can tell which one's Lady Rozemyne, commander?" a soldier asked.

Leckle snorted. "Anyone who's been to Hasse would recognize her. She's the only one with the weird ride," he said, proudly pointing at Rozemyne through a different window, where two other soldiers were pushing and shoving each other to get a better view. As the commander, I was lucky enough to get my own window.

"The archduke's adopted daughter's here, so... it must be about to start."

"Might be that Lady Rozemyne asked them to wait a little longer after fifth bell to give everyone time to get home."

So much time had passed since fifth bell that I couldn't blame the soldiers for

thinking that. As we stared up in the sky there came a sudden flash, and a huge burst of something fell down from Myne's ride.

"Something fell...?"

"Hard to tell from here, but it was pretty big. Anyone caught up in that would probably die in an instant."

Getting everyone inside really had been important. A chill ran through me as I watched on, and it was then that I saw someone who wasn't Rozemyne start drawing some kind of pattern in the air.

"It's the archduke! That must be the archduke! It's starting!"

"He can draw in the air?! Look! It's shining!"

We didn't know what the drawing was, but even from here, we could tell it was intricately crafted from a bunch of fine patterns. Once it seemed to be done, the glowing pattern duplicated until thirteen identical circles filled the sky above the city. They moved as though they were alive, which made the soldiers shriek in a combination of surprise and awe. As commoners, we would normally go our entire lives without seeing a noble use magic. This was completely beyond our understanding.

"Whoa!"

A flood of softly glowing water exploded from all thirteen of the mysterious patterns at once, so massive that I was convinced it would sweep away the entire city. It smashed down from above, and a huge wave crashed against the north gate and the windows we were gawking through, completely blocking our view for several moments.

By the time we were able to see again, the entire city was drowned in a storm of swirling water. It reminded me of when I would play around as a kid, pouring buckets of water over bug nests and watching them flood. It was just like that. We were bugs to the archduke. He could flood all of our homes and make the whole city disappear on a whim, with no more effort than someone just playing around. There was that much of a gap between us. I could feel his power on my skin, and goosebumps popped up all over me.

Is this gonna be alright...?

A lot of people used their first floors to store things they didn't usually take outside. Wasn't it bad that they were now all underwater? The moment I thought that, however, the water disappeared all at once.

"What the heck was that?!"

We had no idea what had just happened, but the water made by magic disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared. The once ash-gray bottom two floors were now pure white, and the city glittered so brightly in the sun that it was almost hard to look at.

"Did the city used to be this clean...?" I said to nobody in particular. That magic was something else.

"Can't believe nobles can actually do this kinda thing. What the heck...?"

"Yeah. Makes sense they'd get ticked if we messed up their city right after they used magic like that to clean it..." someone noted. Everyone agreed on the spot: we had to protect this clean city.

As we kept staring out the windows, a soldier rushed in. "Commander, the knight is calling for you," he said.

"Alright. I'll be there right away."

The knight posted at the north gate informed us that the remodeling was complete. There were now holes for disposing of waste on the street, which we were to throw all our waste and garbage into from now on. We just needed to keep the citizens on track.

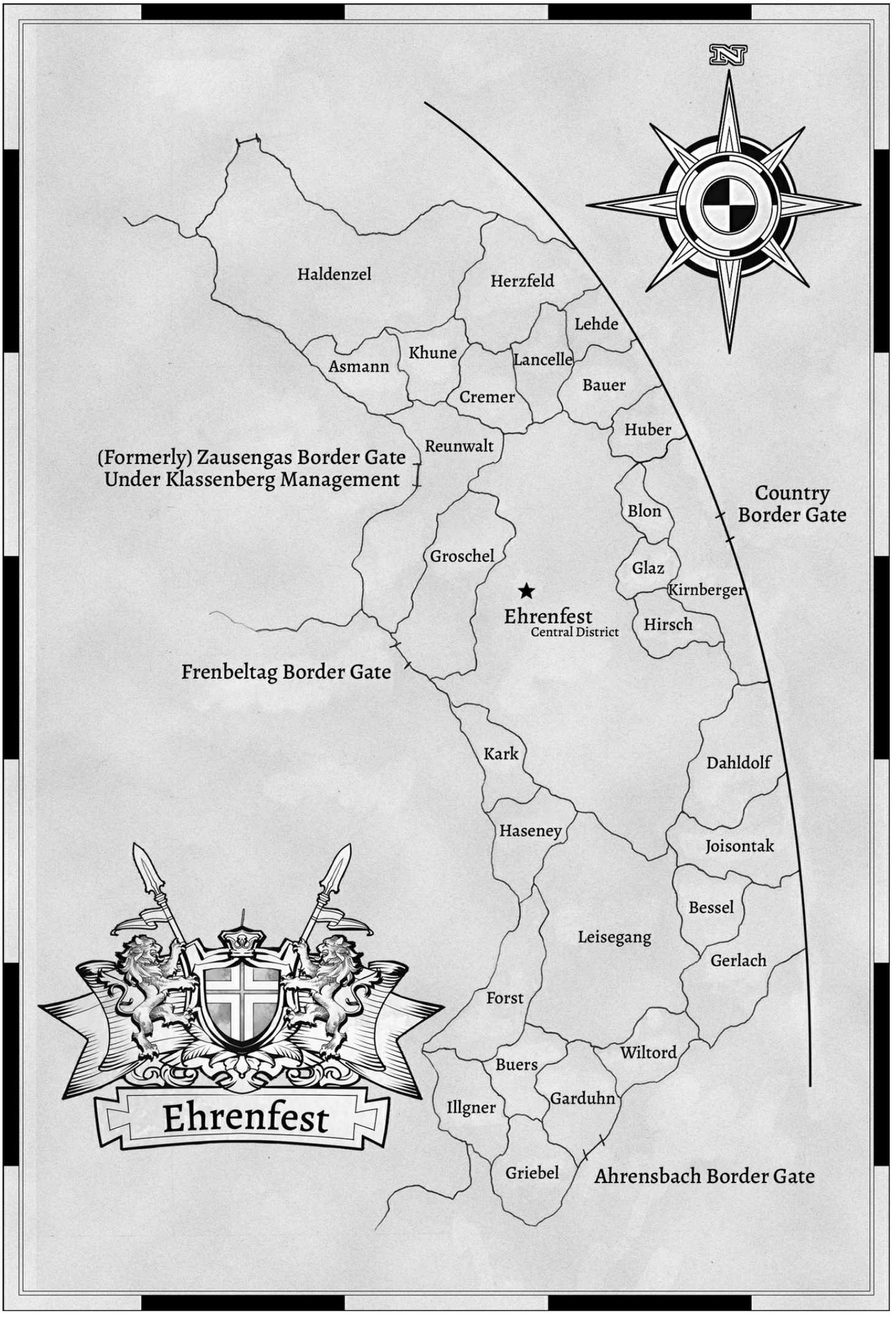
"Understood."

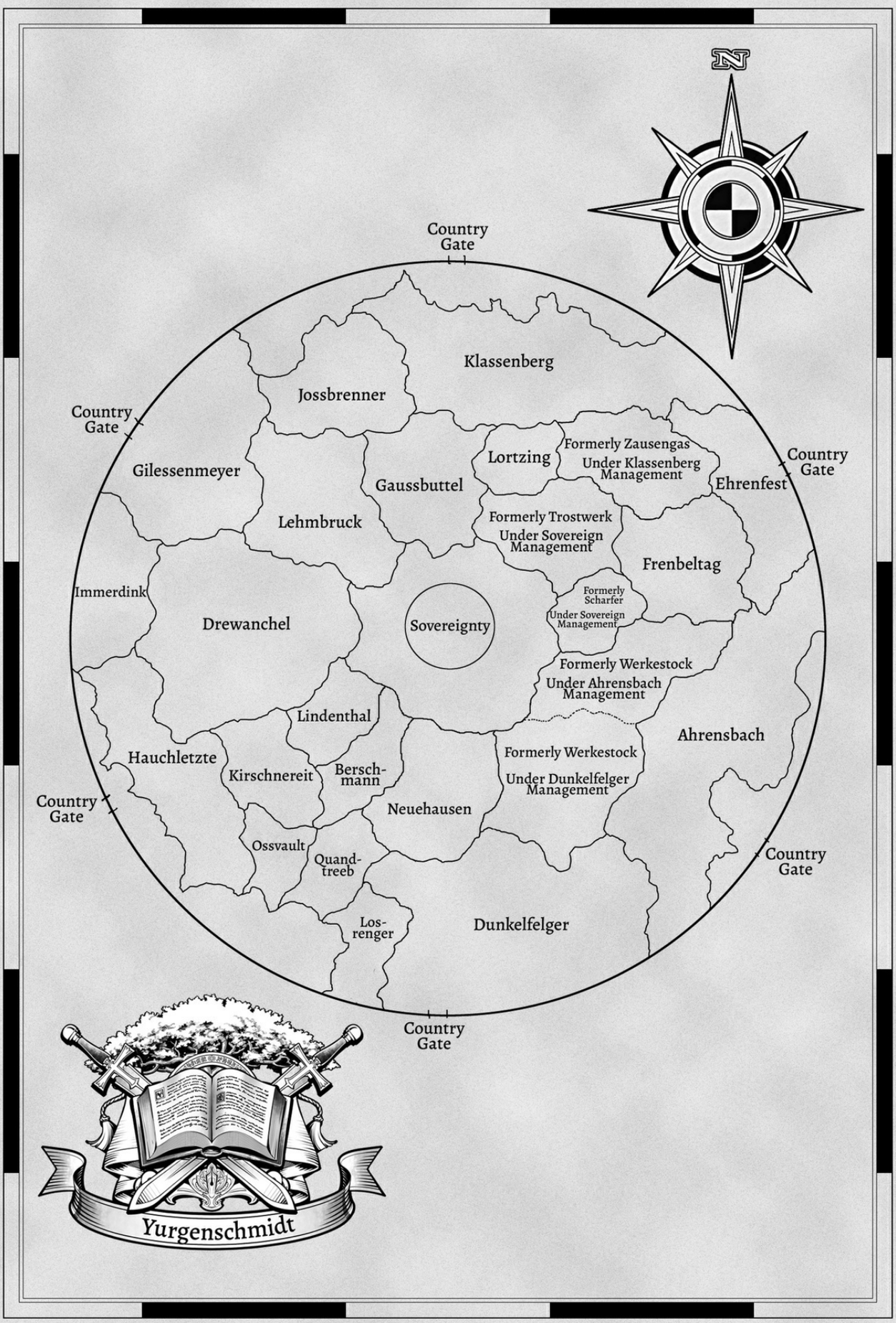
I opened the door leading out of the north gate with some subordinates. The gleaming white street that spread out before us smelled clean, like the water had even washed away the foul-smelling air. The moment I stepped outside, I glanced down and saw that I had left a dirty footprint on the street. I looked back on instinct and had everyone wipe the bottoms of their shoes right away.

From there, we rushed around the city and called out to everyone.

"It's over! You can come out now! Find the garbage hole nearest to your house and start helping us protect this clean city!"

Windows opened one by one as people heard our shouts. Children cheered and rushed out so quickly that I could guess they had been waiting by their doors. It felt as though everyone, every single person, was looking at the reborn city with a hopeful smile on their face.


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 4*.

Amid many complicated feelings, Wilfried and Rozemyne's engagement gets formally recognized. I wrote the prologue to show how Wilfried feels about this, which is something many people wanted to see during the web novel. What did people say to him, and what was he thinking when he agreed to the marriage? All is revealed.

This volume is about spring in Ehrenfest. Rozemyne wants to relax and read at her leisure for the first time in ages, but such a luxury is not so easy to acquire. She still needs to deal with her engagement being announced at the spring feast, performing religious ceremonies for the first time in two years, making clothes for Schwartz and Weiss, and much, much more.

So much has taken place. Rozemyne made ink (at Ferdinand's instruction) to avoid having to embroider and accidentally ended up inventing a strange new type; she pointed out that Haldenzel's Spring Prayer differed from the one mentioned in the bible and unintentionally revived an ancient ceremony; she felt that the city wasn't clean enough from the entwickeln and tried to use waschen to clean it (although, in the end, Ferdinand used wide-ranged area magic to do the job); and she encountered gruns while gathering in the castle's forest with Bonifatius!

Although quite a few out-of-the-ordinary things have happened, things are quite peaceful for the most part. That is, until Ahrensbach makes its move during the Archduke Conference and forces Ehrenfest to be on guard.

This volume's short stories are told from Giebe Haldenzel's and Gunther's perspectives.

In Giebe Haldenzel's story, I wrote about how the changes brought about by Spring Prayer were seen by someone actually living in the province. The weather changed dramatically due to a decision he made on a whim. Rozemyne

won't see this, since she goes straight back to the Noble's Quarter, but the weather in Haldenzel is quite different now. The people there will struggle quite a bit as they are forced to deal with something they have never had to face before. And in the midst of all that, they discover something that is unmistakably a miracle.

In Gunther's story, I wrote about the lower city's perspective on the entwickeln and the wide-range waschen. Cleaning the lower city was a pressing matter for the nobles concerned with their reputation among other duchies, and they wanted it finished before the merchants from said duchies came. But only merchants knew about the upcoming business; for everyone else in the lower city, it came out of nowhere. I hope you enjoyed the soldiers heroically making use of Rozemyne's warning and the city getting cleaned up.

Giebe Haldenzel was given a character design by Shiina-sama for this volume. I think her art conveyed the rugged edges he developed ruling a cold, harsh northern province. There are also designs for grown-up Delia and Dirk! Delia certainly has grown into a beauty, while Dirk looks a bit cheeky while still being cute, which makes him feel just like Delia's little brother.

And finally, it has begun! Four *Bookworm* publications released back-to-back! There's Part 4 Volume 4, *Royal Academy Stories: First Year*, the third fanbook, and then Part 4 Volume 5.

Royal Academy Stories: First Year is a book I've made to compile some short stories I published online. That said, over two-thirds of the volume is original content. It contains stories written from the perspectives of Wilfried, Cornelius, Angelica, Hartmut, Judithe, Traugott, Roderick, Hannelore, Rauffen, Ortwin, and Solange. The volume shows many things that occurred outside Rozemyne's line of sight, and many illustrations were drawn for characters with only a small presence. This is something to be celebrated.

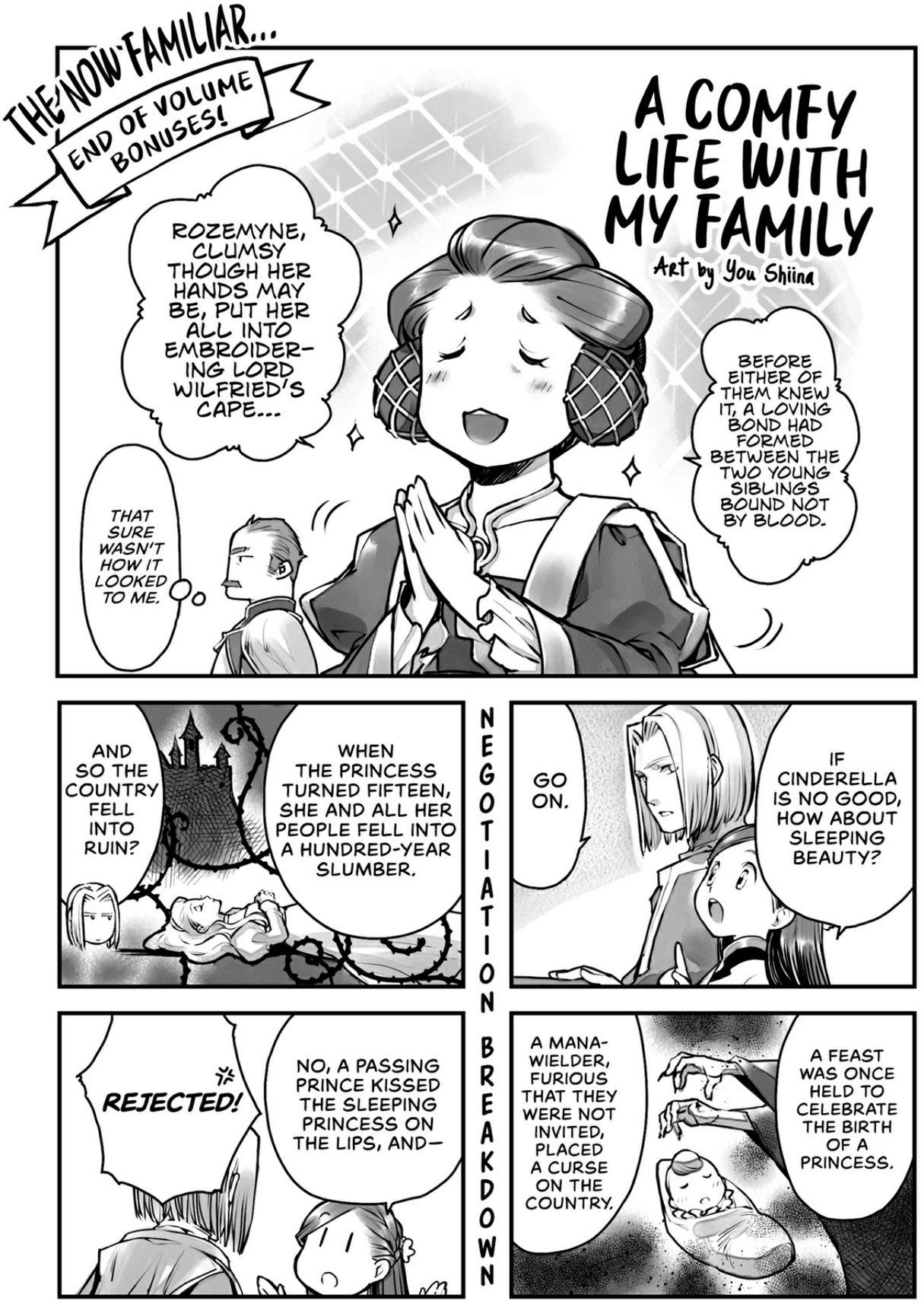
The third fanbook is similar in structure to the first and is filled with Shiina-sama's illustrations. I also answered a bunch of questions, as per usual. The original short story I write will come with a map of the Royal Academy's library; I'm currently debating whether to write it from Solange's, Hartmut's, or Philine's perspective...

I have my hands full right now tackling the deadlines that keep coming one after another, all so that you may enjoy the fruits of my labor.

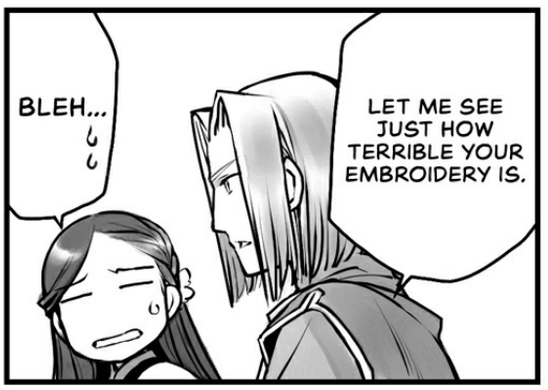
This cover art for this volume is based on Haldenzel's Spring Prayer and the entwickeln. Rozemyne is covered in spring flowers and wearing her ceremonial High Bishop robes, while Sylvester and Ferdinand perform the lower city reconstruction and cleansing, respectively. It's a joy to see, since it's been a long time since either of them have appeared on a cover. Thank you very much, Shiina-sama.

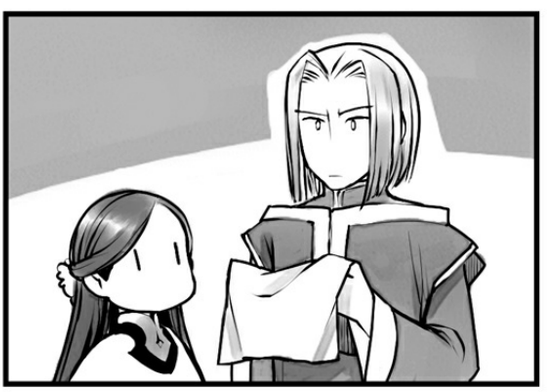
And finally, I offer up my highest thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 4 Volume 5.

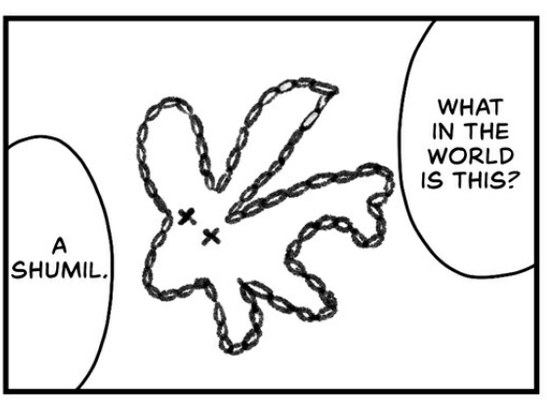
August 2018, Miya Kazuki

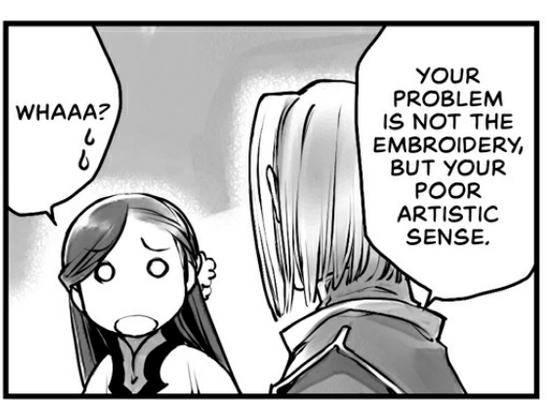

THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME BONUSES!
A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY
Art by You Shiina
ROZEMYNE, CLUMSY THOUGH HER HANDS MAY BE, PUT HER ALL INTO EMBROIDERING LORD WILFRIED'S CAPE...
BEFORE EITHER OF THEM KNEW IT, A LOVING BOND HAD FORMED BETWEEN THE TWO YOUNG SIBLINGS BOUND NOT BY BLOOD.
THAT SURE WASN'T HOW IT LOOKED TO ME.
AND SO THE COUNTRY FELL INTO RUIN?
WHEN THE PRINCESS TURNED FIFTEEN, SHE AND ALL HER PEOPLE FELL INTO A HUNDRED-YEAR SLUMBER.
GO ON.
IF CINDERELLA IS NO GOOD, HOW ABOUT SLEEPING BEAUTY?
REJECTED!
NO, A PASSING PRINCE KISSED THE SLEEPING PRINCESS ON THE LIPS, AND—
A MANA-WIELDER, FURIOUS THAT THEY WERE NOT INVITED, PLACED A CURSE ON THE COUNTRY.
A FEAST WAS ONCE HELD TO CELEBRATE THE BIRTH OF A PRINCESS.
NEGOTIATION BREAKDOWN

NO EYE FOR ART

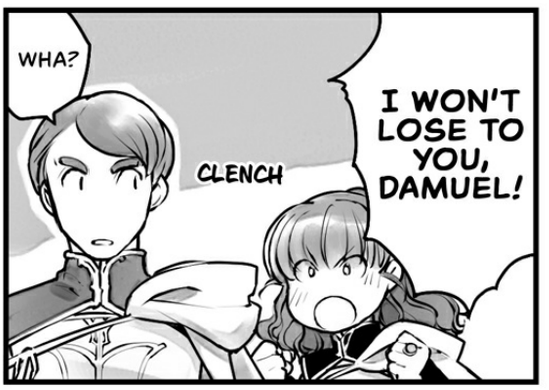


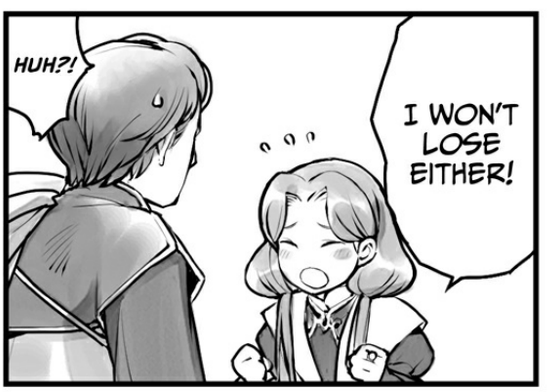


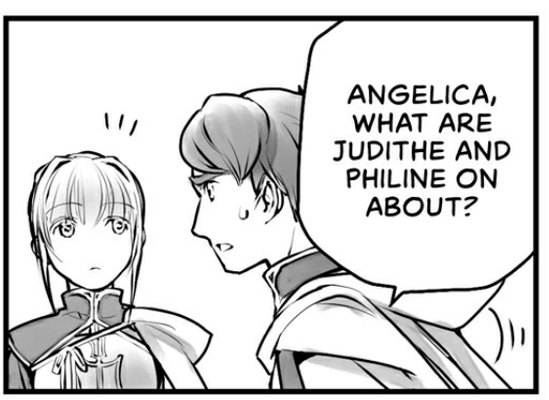


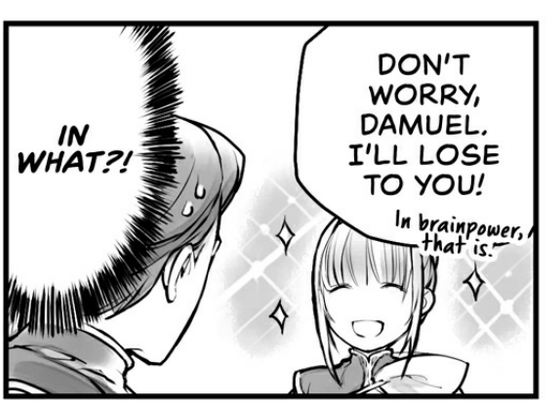


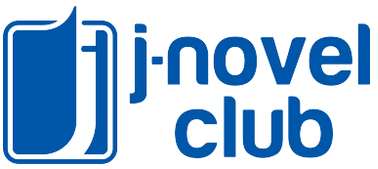
AFTER THE GIRLS' MEETING











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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 4 Founder of the Royal Academy's So-Called Library Committee Volume 4

by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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